

TBM teams with NC in response to Hurricane Idalia

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LIVE OAK, Fla.—Emma Jean Jordan of Wellborn, Fla., huddled in the bathtub of her trailer home as a tornado spawned by Hurricane Idalia swept over her roof.

Jordan, who lives alone on her rural property, mostly recalls “being scared. I came back to the bathroom and stayed there because it literally felt like my whole house vibrated up when I heard the choo-choo sound” of the tornado.

She acknowledged she wasn’t quite alone. Huddled with her in the tub were her two prized Belgian Malinois.

“I had my girls with me,” she said.

She said God also was with her during the harrowing event.

“The only thing I could do was I called out to the Lord and trusted him,” she said.

When the storm cleared, she and her dogs emerged from their shelter to find a tree piercing the roof of her guest bedroom and water pouring in the hole.

“I realize it could have taken my whole house,” she said. “It could have taken the room I was hiding in. I was grateful because I knew other people had it worse. I said, ‘Thank you, Lord, that I survived this.’”

Like many area residents, Jordan doesn’t carry home insurance or have the funds to pay for tree-clearing or roof repair services. With no means to pay

for removal of the tree from her home or to repair her roof, she relied on the only resource she had: “I prayed.”

The answer came a few days later in the form of Texas Baptist Men’s Collin County Chainsaw Unit, an experienced team of volunteer chainsaw and skid-steer operators.



Emma Jean Jordan thanks TBM chainsaw team member Adelina Lewis, a member of Antioch Church in Dallas, for providing tree-removal services at her home. (TBM Photo / Russ Dilday)

“These folks were an answer to prayer,” she said, pointing to the team of 13 pulling the tree free of her home in pieces and providing a temporary cover on her roof. “I saw a phone number (on a sign) ... near First Baptist Church offering to help. Something told me to call it.”

Jordan called the TBM volunteers an answer to her prayers. “They are the difference of me not dying of black mold (from further water damage). I can’t afford to pay, so this means a lot to me.”

TBM arrived to help

When Idalia had passed, officials rated it as the most powerful hurricane to hit Florida's Big Bend region since the 1896 Cedar Keys hurricane. Four people died in Idalia-related incidents in Florida and Georgia. Early estimates placed insured losses at \$2.2 to \$5 billion.

Assessors from North Carolina's Baptists on Missions had been staged just north of the affected area as Idalia roared through and were early on the scene to assess and coordinate with Florida and federal officials.



Members of TBM's Collin County Chainsaw Unit are briefed on the day's docket of clearing fallen trees surrounding—or on—homes in the aftermath of Hurricane Idalia. The group joined members of North Carolina's Baptists on Mission to offer help, hope and healing to the small northern Florida town of around 7,000. (TBM Photo / Russ Dilday)

After assessing the on-ground needs, they called TBM disaster relief leaders for assistance. TBM responded with chainsaw teams, man-lift

towers, heavy machinery, an asset protection team and chaplains.

The North Carolina team brought chainsaws, a feeding team, chaplains, children's workers and a laundry/shower unit.

Art Brandenburg served as team leader for TBM's Collin County chainsaw team. Brandenburg, a member of Hunters Glen Baptist Church in Plano, said the biggest need for his team was the removal "of the tops of trees where the limbs are broken."

"Around here (Live Oak, Fla.), those trees are pretty high, and they cannot get to them. They're over their houses or their cars, their entryways, and they just need help getting those down," he said.

But in addition to making residents' homes safe, Brandenburg and his team noticed a pattern in the survivors they'd helped that reflected the economics of the area they were serving.

"This lady we're helping now and the last lady where we were just seemed to be in the vulnerable set," he observed. "This lady is widowed. The last one was divorced and alone.

"There are a lot of elderly people we've worked with that don't have a lot of money. They can't hire people to come out and fix their homes. They will try to hire people, but they just can't afford them. They have nobody else to call on to help, and the people they do call either can't or won't."

He called the Collin County team members "a really experienced team."

"We have multiple people that can operate in the lift, several trained climbers and really good ground people, experienced on chainsaws. They're very efficient and they all work well together, so we're able to get a lot of things accomplished," he said.

By Sept. 15, the team and another TBM relief chainsaw team had

completed 2,500 hours of service for 32 homes and led two people to Christ.

Sharing hope, sharing Christ

Team member Gary Monroe, a member of Bounds Baptist Church in Powderly, said the group is “probably one of the premier chainsaw teams in Texas. Most of us have worked together for many, many years. I started in 2013 and met most of these people not too long after that.”

The team witnessed—and witnessed to—survivors with amazing stories.

“They appreciate (our work) so much. There was a lady a couple days ago who we’d taken some trees out of her backyard, and so Art went to hand her a Bible,” Monroe said.

“She said, ‘I got plenty of Bibles so I don’t need that Bible.’ And Art says no, this is a special Bible, and he flipped it open and showed her the signatures from the team who had served her and she fell apart. It was just something to see. It was a very moving moment. It was incredible.”

Adelina Lewis and her husband Jim served as part of the chainsaw ground team. The couple, members of Antioch Community Church in Dallas, are veteran TBM chainsaw team members.

Lewis agreed with Monroe. Many chainsaw stories become stories of faith shared.

At one home, she said, the team had followed their GPS to a rural home that had called for help.

“As we drove in, we could start to see immediately there’s a lot of damage to trees, a lot of big limbs, tops of the trees bent down, broken, lots of hangers. We call them widow-makers,” she said.

“The house was OK, but they had two young daughters. They were very excited to see us because all these hangers and trees were over their playground equipment. The girls couldn’t come out and play because it was so dangerous.

“They were really needing a lot of help. They’d already had two teams come out and say: ‘We can’t do it. We don’t have the equipment for this type of work. It’s too high for us.’”

The family had little hope anyone could do what was required, and the father of the family was out of work after hurting his knee.

Lewis said the team told the young family “that we came all the way from Texas because God brought us here and God led us to come specifically to your house today.”

Taking care of Georgia Baptist volunteers

While the TBM chainsaw teams served in Florida, members of the TBM asset protection and electronic support team deployed just over the state line to hard-hit Valdosta, Ga., protecting equipment and teams working in an unsafe area of town there.

Fred Stover, who led the asset protection team of three, said his group’s “mission here is to be the hands and feet of God” and “to keep our people and our equipment safe.”

“We’re taking care of Georgia Baptist Disaster Relief volunteers, and we are watching over them as they sleep at night and their equipment is sitting in the parking lots,” he said.



Ed Dameron, left, and Doug Smith, members of the TBM Electronic Support unit, test the camera monitors inside the unit's electronic security trailer, which contains Wi-Fi, a camera bank and connectivity to remote cameras located around the trailer. The unit provided the system to monitor a parking area for responders from multiple Baptist state conventions responding to damage from Hurricane Idalia. (TBM Photo / Russ Dilday)

Stover, a member of Taylor Valley Baptist Church in Temple, has a background in law enforcement. He said the TBM team was called in "because there has been some looting, and there has been some individuals who've not been law-abiding citizens and taking advantage of a bad situation. So, they're really concerned for the safety of the people here."

The asset protection team was assisted by the TBM electronic support unit. Members Doug Smith and Ed Dameron set up the electronic support trailer that houses a built-in video tower and monitoring station, provides high-speed Wi-Fi to responders, and can broadcast video to Asset Protection

team members.

“We’re setting up security cameras for Asset Protection so they can keep an eye on the site at night,” said Smith, a member of Lake Pointe Church’s White Rock campus in Dallas. “They’ve had some issues in the area, and the Georgia team doesn’t have a system like this, so we came over to set this one up and let them use it.”

Fellow unit member Ed Dameron, a member of Prestonwood Baptist Church in Plano, said the value in providing asset protection to other Baptist men’s groups is often “peace of mind for deployed teams.”

“They commented last night how relieved they are that we’re here to provide them asset protection. This camera system provides the asset protection team the opportunity to see what targets or what threats are out there before (the target) can even see it,” he said.