

# Baptists minister to survivors of East Texas tornadoes

May 3, 2017

CANTON—Nine tornadoes cut a 51-mile swath through East Texas April 29, destroying homes, splintering trees and claiming at least four lives. As soon as local officials allowed volunteers into the area, Baptists swept in to help survivors pick up the pieces.

Texas Baptist Men disaster relief volunteers established headquarters at First Baptist Church in Canton and Lake Fork Baptist Church in Alba, and they delivered a truckload of bottled water and other emergency supplies to Eustace.

 A chainsaw crew from Kauf-Van Baptist Association removes a fallen tree from the home of an elderly widow in Canton. (Photos/Ken Camp)TBM provided chainsaw crews and heavy equipment operators, distributed boxes to enable residents to pack scattered possessions, covered open roofs with tarps, and provided access to showers and laundry facilities.

At each site where TBM teams worked, volunteer chaplains maintained a ministry of presence, listening to residents who wanted to talk about their experiences and praying with them.

Pastor Mike Roberson and Youth Minister Mickey Matlock from First Baptist in Canton spent most of the day May 1 checking on church members and their neighbors. The storms directly affected about 10 member families, and at least two—perhaps as many as four—sustained a total loss, Roberson noted.

Primera Iglesia Bautista in Canton suffered significant damage to its facility, Pastor Raul Quezada said.

“We put up a tarp, but it’s still an open ceiling,” Quezada said, wondering whether the temporary covering would be adequate to keep out rain that was in the forecast for the next day. “My books are gone. That’s what hurts the most.”

First Baptist Church in Canton will make its facilities available to Primera for worship services, once timing and logistics are worked out, said John Bell, minister of music and pastoral care at First Baptist.

☒ Neal Vinson and Gabriel Key from First Baptist Church in Henderson deliver bottled water and other supplies to First Baptist Church in Canton. Bell and Roberson noted calls from ministers of churches in other communities that had experienced similar disasters, pledging their support. Before noon on May 2, volunteers from First Baptist Church in Henderson arrived in Canton with a pickup truck and trailer loaded with bottled water and disposable diapers.

Bell also noted Lake Pointe Church in Rockwall sent a \$10,000 check to a disaster assistance fund established at First State Bank in Ben Wheeler.

A TBM team from Ellis Baptist Association set up a trailer in the parking lot at First Baptist in Canton to distribute about 1,000 boxes in their first few hours of operation. The volunteers enabled residents to recover and pack their belongings, and they visited several members of the church who needed help.

☒ A Canton resident picks up boxes at the Ellis Baptist Association trailer outside First Baptist Church in Canton. A chainsaw crew from Kauf-Van Baptist Association, together with the operator of a skid-steer loader, started work in the Canton area around noon May 2 to remove trees that had fallen on homes.

At one rural residence, the homeowner described how he and his family

rode out the tornado in a closet.

“It wasn’t the closet that saved us. It was God,” he said, noting while every other closet in the house was damaged or destroyed, the one where his family found shelter was unscathed.

✘ A mobile laundry and shower unit from Green Acres Baptist Church in Tyler set up at First Baptist Church in Canton. By late afternoon that same day, a mobile shower and laundry unit from Green Acres Baptist Church in Tyler arrived at First Baptist in Canton, and another shower and laundry unit from Ellis Baptist Association arrived soon after.

A TBM crew from Denton Baptist Association distributed boxes from Lake Fork Baptist Church in Alba. A blue-tarp team from Soda Lake Baptist Association covered the tornado-damaged roofs of two homes in the Emory area, working alongside a chainsaw crew from Harmony-Pittsburg Baptist Association.

By May 3, chainsaw crews from First Baptist Church in Athens and Lake Pointe Church in Rockwall also were at work in East Texas.

✘ Gaylon Mahan from Kauf-Van Baptist Association uses a polesaw to remove hazardous fallen trees at a home in Van Zandt County. Disaster relief volunteers with the Southern Baptists of Texas Convention also worked at multiple sites in East Texas. Several Baptist state disaster relief teams responded to tornadoes and floods that extended into Arkansas, Missouri and Illinois, as well as a separate storm in Mississippi. TBM mobilized a crew to serve at the incident command center in Missouri.

To contribute to TBM disaster relief, click [here](#) or send a check designated “disaster relief” to Texas Baptist Men, 5351 Catron, Dallas 75227.

The account number for the Van Zandt County Tornado Relief Fund

established at the Canton branch of the First State Bank in Ben Wheeler is 4413270.