

# CommonCall: Caregivers need care after a disaster

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CORPUS CHRISTI—If Hurricane Harvey had hit Corpus Christi directly as a Category 4 storm, First Baptist Church—both the people and the building where they worship—could have been devastated.

Instead, the storm unleashed its fury on communities north of the city—Rockport, Fulton, Aransas Pass, Port Aransas and Refugio.

“We could have been right in the midst of it,” Senior Pastor Brian Hill said. “Instead, we were spared—for whatever reason. So, our job became doing what we could to support others.”

Volunteers from the congregation helped their neighbors to the northeast clear debris. The church received and distributed donated supplies. First Baptist School allowed the children of church staff in affected communities to attend classes at no cost until local schools reopened.

Not long after the hurricane, a layperson at First Baptist asked Hill about Proyecto Fortaleza/The Strengthening Project—a marriage enrichment and spiritual formation retreat offered for pastors in Juarez, Mexico. He had been involved with The Strengthening Project since its beginning, and he served on its board of directors.

“She asked me, ‘Don’t you think pastors here could use that?’” Hill recalled.

# Ministry of hospitality



David Crosby

About that same time, he received a resource from Ron Cook, who directed the Center for Ministry Effectiveness at Baylor University's Truett Theological Seminary. Cook forwarded to Hill a paper by David Crosby, who was pastor of First Baptist Church in New Orleans when Hurricane Katrina hit.

Crosby described the church's "ministry of hospitality," as it housed and fed American Red Cross volunteers in the weeks immediately after the hurricane and visiting volunteer groups for about a year thereafter.

Hill contacted Crosby, telling him about a proposed retreat in Corpus Christi for ministers and their spouses who served in Coastal Bend communities affected by Hurricane Harvey.

"He told me, 'If I could have done it after Katrina, you don't know what it would have meant,'" Hill recalled.

He asked Crosby how soon after the hurricane he would have "allowed

himself to go” to a retreat away from New Orleans, and the pair agreed six weeks to two months would be the best time.

## **First time ‘across the bridge’ since the storm**

So, Hill contacted a hotel on the bay that agreed to offer discounted guest rooms and a meeting room at no cost for the retreat. The Baptist General Convention of Texas provided some funding, along with money raised by Corpus Christi’s mayor.

Twenty-two couples attended the retreat in late October 2017. Jana Pinson, executive director of Pregnancy Center of the Coastal Bend, asked Hill if she could provide gift baskets for each couple, which were placed in their rooms before they arrived.

“Couples came to dinner that night in tears. They were so touched by the love they felt,” Hill said.

The first night, a Christian comedian provided dinner entertainment. The next day, Crosby spoke to the ministers and their spouses.

“He explained a lot of what they were going through and told them what to expect in the future,” Hill said. “He had 10 years to put it into perspective.”

For many of the ministers who attended the retreat, it marked the first time they had “been across the bridge” spanning the bay since Hurricane Harvey, he noted.

“They had not left the field a single day for two months,” Hill said. “Some had not eaten a meal at a table alone with their spouse since the hurricane hit.”

# 'Do not waste your hurricane'



Scott Jones, pastor of First Baptist Church in Rockport, attended the Strengthening Project retreat in Corpus Christi with his wife Kim and other ministerial staff and spouses from his congregation. (Photo / Ken Camp)

Scott Jones, pastor of First Baptist Church in Rockport, attended the retreat with his wife, Kim, and the other ministerial staff and spouses from his church.

"It got us out of the disaster recovery zone for a little while. It allowed us to relax for a bit and just spend some time with our spouses," he said.

Nearly two years later, Jones reflected on Crosby's presentation.

"He contributed to my understanding of what God could do in the midst of a disaster. Something he said stuck with me: 'Do not waste your hurricane,'" Jones said.

Kevin Muilenburg, pastor of Coastal Oaks Baptist Church in Rockport, attended with his wife, Kelley.

“Just to get away for a little while meant a lot,” he said. “Living with the disaster was kind of like a perpetual youth camp. You’re out of your routine. You stay up late and sleep in an uncomfortable bed. Your feet hurt. Your back hurts. You don’t eat right. But the difference is that Friday never gets here.”

## Change in demeanor

Hill observed a noticeable difference in demeanor of the ministerial couples when they arrived and when they left the retreat.

“The longer they were together, the more they relaxed around each other,” he said. “You could hear them laughing together. Some were crying together.”

One year after the first retreat, Hill and The Strengthening Project offered a follow-up retreat that drew 15 couples. Scott Floyd with the B.H. Carroll Theological Institute, a licensed professional counselor and licensed marriage and family therapist, spoke on ministry in times of crisis.

“He talked about how to deal with people in crisis and how to know when you are in crisis yourself,” Hill said.

All of the ministers who participated received copies of Floyd’s books.

“We wanted to give them tools to help people,” Hill said.

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