

CommonCall: Coastal Bend adjusts to the ‘new normal’

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ROCKPORT—Two years after Hurricane Harvey, Coastal Bend communities and the churches that serve them continue to adjust to what they call the “new normal.”

While some homes in rural areas remain semi-covered with tattered blue tarps bearing the faded logos of the non-profit agencies that donated them, much of the region no longer acutely resembles a disaster area.

The huge piles of debris that lined highway medians and curbsides for months have disappeared. Many homes have bright new siding, and lawns are bordered by perfectly straight fences—clear signs of recent reconstruction.

But ride through the area with a pastor who lived through Harvey, and a visitor gains a different perspective. The pastor will point to the vacant treeless lots, describing buildings that once stood there surrounded by long-gone majestic old-growth oak trees. Outside the city limits, he will note the “pop-up” RV parks where some displaced local residents continue to live.

“It’s not only the community and the church property that have changed,” said Scott Jones, pastor of First Baptist Church in Rockport. “But I’ve realized through the process of all this that I was changing, and the church—the people—have been changing. ... The members of our church found out they can do hard, painful things and survive.”

‘It looked like a war zone’

Jones and his family evacuated to the home of friends in Kerrville when Hurricane Harvey—originally expected to be a Category 1 storm—rapidly escalated to a deadly Category 4 hurricane with 130 mph winds.

He and Jeff Lanningham, executive pastor at First Baptist, initially returned to Rockport three days after the storm made landfall and “camped out at the church”—in the section of the building that still had a roof—for a week.

“It looked like a war zone. The National Guard was here, and first responders throughout the area were here. There were not a lot of citizens out and about. There was a 7 p.m. curfew in effect. It was dark and quiet,” Jones recalled.

After returning to their families and moving them closer to Rockport, the ministers began doing whatever was possible to aid the disaster relief efforts.

Decided to say ‘yes’



Trailers that belong to various disaster-assistance agencies and ministries continue to fill much of

the parking lot at First Baptist Church in Rockport. (Photo / Ken Camp)

“We made the decision early on: We would say ‘yes’ to everything we could,” Jones said.

First Baptist sustained \$1.5 million in damage to its facility. Lanningham took responsibility for dealing with insurance issues and with the restoration company that handled reconstruction, allowing Jones to focus on ministry to church members and the community.

First Baptist made its parking lot—and indoor facilities, as soon as possible—available to a variety of agencies and nonprofit ministries, including Texas Baptist Men, who worked in the area several months.

Nearly two years later, trailers from various agencies and ministries continue to consume much of the church parking lot.

Donated items poured in



Hallways filled with supplies

became a fixture at First Baptist Church in Rockport in the two years since Hurricane Harvey. (Photo / Ken Camp)

Within days after the hurricane hit, First Baptist in Rockport began receiving donated cleaning supplies, food, toiletries, baby items and bottled water. For about six months, the church made available donated items at its facility and delivered them to unreached areas of the community.

“We distributed what would fill between four and five 50-foot semis,” said Cyndi Powell, who worked to coordinate the efforts.

At the request of Texas State Emergency Management, First Baptist also housed a volunteer reception center seven days a week.

“We couldn’t have operated the volunteer reception center without the Winter Texans,” Jones said, pointing to retirees from northern states who spend winter months in South Texas. “They didn’t have to do it, but they came because they wanted to help, while our members who live here were busy taking care of their own homes.”

Rockport Hands of Hope created



Cyndi Powell, a member of First Baptist Church in Rockport and executive director of Rockport Hands of Hope, works in the kitchen preparing meatloaf for 70 disaster recovery and rebuilding volunteers. (Photo / Ken Camp)

About a year after Harvey, members of First Baptist recognized case management as a full-time job demanding more than church staff with other responsibilities could handle. They were instrumental in developing Rockport Hands of Hope as a separate nonprofit organization to meet needs and coordinate volunteers, with Powell as executive director. In that role, she coordinates volunteers—about 10,000 since the process began.

She also applies for grants and oversees compliance. In the past year, Rockport Hands of Hope has received about \$3 million in grants, primarily through the Rebuild Texas Fund and American Red Cross. Powell also solicits and receives individual donations, particularly to help individuals and families who might not qualify for grants for a variety of reasons.

“The Winter Texans have given generously,” Powell said. “It’s gratifying when we can help the people no one else will help.”

Building a base of operations

In the months after the immediate disaster, as recovery and rebuilding efforts began, First Baptist housed volunteer groups in Sunday school rooms, office space, hallways—anywhere possible. Then the facilities had to be restored to some semblance of normalcy for Sunday, when Bible study classes met and members gathered to worship.

Samaritan’s Purse offered to build a permanent facility on the church’s property as a base of operations for volunteers, complete with shower facilities and other amenities.

When Samaritan’s Purse eventually completes its work in the Coastal Bend area, the international ministry will give the \$1.3 million facility to First Baptist. The church plans to use it as a family life center most of the time and as a base for visiting mission groups that serve in South Texas.

‘We’ve turned the corner’

A neighboring congregation in Rockport—Coastal Oaks Baptist—has not fared as well. Initially, the church used its gymnasium as a drop-off point for donated goods and as a distribution center. The church also housed Southern Baptist disaster relief teams and other volunteers there for about six weeks.

However, when the church’s contractor began looking at the building, he questioned its structural integrity—or at least whether it could be upgraded to comply with windstorm code standards. So, it remains unused and covered by blue tarps.

Although Pastor Kevin Muilenburg noted the church lost about 25 families who relocated, the congregation has gained new families since Hurricane Harvey.

“God has provided,” he said. “In some ways, I feel like we’ve turned the corner. People know we are still here, we’re going to stay, and we’re going to get through this.”

‘It’s been a grind’



T. Wayne Price, pastor of First Baptist Church in Refugio, shows the final stages of reconstruction taking place in his congregation’s sanctuary. (Photo / Ken Camp)

In Refugio, 24 miles inland, another congregation also has only recently begun to feel as if it has “turned the corner.”

First Baptist Church in Refugio lost its facility’s roof to Hurricane Harvey, destroying its sanctuary and virtually all of its contents, along with about three-fourths of the church’s education space.

The first month after the storm, the congregation met in a funeral home chapel. Since then, the church has gathered on Sunday at a local

elementary school cafetorium for Bible study and worship.

After multiple delays, the church move back into its facility and held its first worship service in the renovated sanctuary in late July.

“It has been a grind, but it’s been a grind for everyone,” Pastor T. Wayne Price said. “The greatest challenge has been to communicate with our people and keep the fellowship strong when we’re only together on Sunday morning.”

Still, Price noted God has blessed the church throughout the experience. On the church’s second Sunday in the remodeled sanctuary, he planned to baptize two adults and two preteens who had made professions of faith in Christ.

First Baptist in Refugio plans to hold its formal dedication service for its rebuilt and renovated facility on Aug. 25—the second anniversary of Hurricane Harvey.

Streamlining operations

During the past two years, Jones, Muilenburg and Price noted each of their congregations had to streamline operations—not only cutting back on scheduled activities but also granting a small group of leaders the authority to make decisions for the congregation at a point when committee meetings were impossible.

“The trust level is good,” Price said. “That’s why it has worked.”

First Baptist Church in Aransas Pass suffered extensive damage due to Hurricane Harvey, but Pastor William Campbell noted one silver lining. The storm enabled the congregation to accelerate a process of refocusing on disciple-making it already had started, based on Thom Rainer’s book, *Simple Church*.

“Our members have developed a servant mentality,” Campbell said.

Even so, he acknowledged the difficulty in coping with all the changes the storm caused.

“I don’t know if I can honestly say we’ve completely recovered,” Campbell said.

High anxiety



Some parts of the Coastal Bend still bear the physical signs of destruction caused by Hurricane Harvey two years ago. But the more prevalent lasting evidence of change created by the hurricane is in the lives of area residents and in the churches that serve them. (Photo / Ken Camp)

Churches in the area that led the way in relief and recovery efforts in the immediate wake of the hurricane continue to deal with the human toll.

With the arrival of another hurricane season in the Gulf of Mexico, the

anxiety level rises among residents of some Coastal Bend towns two years after Hurricane Harvey. Pastors who minister in the region recognize the signs.

Otherwise mild-mannered men display short tempers. Generally good-natured women are irritable. Adults who accompany children and youth to summer camp notice an unusually high percentage of kids who take prescription anti-anxiety and anti-depressant medication.

“We’ve seen trauma-related stress in marriages. People who know better have made dumb decisions—the kind of choices that hurt themselves and their families,” Jones said.

Lack of ‘emotional energy’

Caregivers pay a price in that kind of environment. The pastors talked about “not having the emotional energy” to implement all the ministries they would have liked or failing to meet all the needs in their communities.

“I finally gave myself a pass,” Muilenburg said. “I can’t be the pastor who rescues everybody.”

Campbell still recalls how emotional he and his wife became every time they passed the “Harvey piles” where debris—including recognizable furniture and personal items from homes—accumulated before it eventually was taken to a landfill.

Muilenburg acknowledged it gave him a new less-judgmental perspective on the attitude people have toward material things.

“I’ve always said: ‘It’s just stuff. It doesn’t really matter.’ But when it’s your stuff piled out in the front yard, it’s not just stuff. It’s memories,” he said. “And it’s there for everyone to see. There’s a real vulnerability in that.”

Greater empathy



Maps in the foyer at First Baptist Church in Rockport display red dots showing all of the places from which volunteers traveled to help the Rockport/Fulton area—throughout Texas, all 50 states and seven foreign countries. (Photo / Ken Camp)

Muilenburg also noted how different it felt to be on the receiving end of ministry.

“People would set up grills and smokers and cook, giving away food. Some of those were hardened people our church had tried to reach and couldn’t. And there they were, ministering to me,” he said.

The pastors noted their experiences gave them a greater sense of empathy and provided a genuine point of connection with people who were—and are—hurting.

“I’ve started a lot of conversations by saying: ‘This is what I’m feeling. Do you ever feel like that?’” Jones said.

Neither First Baptist in Rockport nor Coastal Oaks plans to mark Hurricane

Harvey's second anniversary with any kind of special service.

Jones wonders how long it's appropriate to continue to display maps in the church's foyer that show the home locations of volunteer groups that have served their community—red dots in all 50 states and seven foreign countries.

"It's not so much about moving on," he said. "It's about moving forward."

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