

# CommonCall: Hope restored in Refugio

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REFUGIO—Joann Moya’s house on First Street in Refugio is the same one where her grandmother lived many years. The house holds many fond memories—and one terrifying one.

“Every time I hear the wind blow, I get real emotional,” she said.

Moya was at her mother’s house, about a mile away, when Hurricane Harvey hit their town last August.

“The hurricane stayed right on top of us all night,” she recalled.

When she returned to her home, she found it uninhabitable.

“I gave up hope when all this happened,” she confessed.



Roy Joe Ham, minister of administration at First Baptist Church in Norman, Okla., talks with Joann Moya about the work his crew is doing on her storm-

damaged home in Refugio. (Photo / Ken Camp)

But in the months that followed, volunteers—particularly Christian groups, such as a mission team from First Baptist Church in Norman, Okla.—slowly but surely restored her hope.

## **‘They must love me’**

With assistance, Moya secured a travel trailer and parked it in her carport. She has lived in its cramped quarters seven months, while volunteers have worked to restore her home.

A crew from Chicago put a tarp on the roof, volunteers from San Antonio removed debris from the home’s interior, and a church group from Waco tore out damaged drywall.

Most recently, she has benefited from the labor of volunteers from First Baptist Church in Norman.

“God sent them to me,” she said. “If it weren’t for these people, I wouldn’t have a place to stay. They must love me.”

## **Remembering how Texans served in Oklahoma**

When Hurricane Harvey hit Port Aransas and made full landfall at Rockport, the hearts of people at First Baptist Church in Norman broke, said Roy Joe Ham, minister of administration. They remembered how Texas Baptist Men volunteers and other Texans traveled to their area to help with relief, recovery and rebuilding after a tornado hit Moore in 2013.

“We housed many church groups from Texas at our family life center as they came to work,” Ham said.



Make Dollard, a volunteer from First Baptist Church in Norman, Okla., works on a storm-damaged home in Refugio. (Photo / Ken Camp)

The church immediately launched its Hands for Harvey ministry and began seeking out people to assist who either had no insurance or were dramatically underinsured.

The 5<sup>th</sup> Ward Community Development Corporation in Houston helped the congregation discover homeowners who needed assistance.

So, 22 members of First Baptist Church traveled from Norman to Houston in late October to install sheetrock and insulation in the homes of a single senior adult woman and a senior adult couple in the 5<sup>th</sup> Ward. The Hands for Harvey volunteers from Norman worked in partnership with South Main Baptist Church and Willow Meadows Baptist Church in Houston.

## **‘Go to a place that had been forgotten’**

Ham, who grew up in Uvalde and lived 10 years in Corpus Christi, recognized small communities in South Texas had been damaged, but they didn’t garner the same media attention as Houston.

“My goal was for us to go to a place that had been forgotten,” he said.



Steve Carter from First Baptist Church in Norman, Okla., installs drywall on the interior ceiling of a storm-damaged home in Refugio. (Photo / Ken Camp)

Ham called friends in the area, and several mentioned Refugio. So, he contacted T. Wayne Price, pastor of First Baptist Church in Refugio.

First Baptist Church sustained \$2 million in damage to its facility after winds blew the roof off its sanctuary, Price said. However, First Baptist Church was insured, but a small African-American congregation that Harvey destroyed—Saints Memorial Church of God in Christ—was not.

In December, Ham traveled to Refugio to survey the damage and talk with local leaders.

Price introduced Ham to Darius Robertson, the pastor of that congregation,

and he learned Saints Memorial had just completed a long-awaited remodeling project on its facility a short time before the hurricane hit.

Ham promised volunteers from his church would complete the interior demolition of Robertson's church building and install insulation and drywall.

## Introduced to families in need

Price also told Ham about 95 percent of the members of First Baptist Church were affected by the storm, but they were blessed to have insurance.

However, Price knew who would be aware of families in greatest need. Sheriff "Pinky" Gonzales, a member of First Baptist, was coordinating relief and recovery in the county. His wife, Melissa, superintendent for the Refugio school district, would be aware not only of students in need, but also school employees, like Joann Moya.

Gonzales directed Ham to Bayside, a Refugio County community of 325 on the west side of Copano Bay.



"I'd say 90 percent of the residents of the county were affected by the storm. It was close to 100 percent in Bayside," he said.

Months after the hurricane swept through Bayside, plywood still covers

windows, blue tarps remain on roofs and debris still is piled up on roadsides, but red, white and blue “Bayside Strong, Texas Proud” banners fly all over town.

Price also connected Ham to another member of his congregation, Coach Jason Herring, athletic director for the school district and high school football coach.

“This man led the football team to four state championships, but that’s not the most important thing about him. The greatest thing about him is that he loves people,” Price said later.

In the immediate aftermath of the hurricane, Herring worked around the clock to locate students and ensure their safety. He also organized the distribution of donated supplies and helped coordinate rebuilding efforts.

Herring pointed Ham to a single mother with five children who was working hard but struggling financially even before the storm devastated her home.

## **Return trips from Norman to Refugio County**

In mid-January, a crew from First Baptist in Norman journeyed to South Texas to work at Saints Memorial church and begin working on two homes in Refugio. First Baptist Church in Corpus Christi provided lodging for the volunteer group, and the crew worked in close cooperation with Carpenter’s Helpers, a Christian group from Wimberley.

In mid-March, three-dozen volunteers from Norman returned to Refugio County. A Texas couple from Utopia—Bill and Lanell Kellner—who were classmates of Ham’s wife, Lydia, read about the mission trip on Facebook and also volunteered to work with the crew.

In one week, the Oklahoma Baptist volunteers completed five projects, and they delivered supplies to their partners in Refugio.

They gave Robertson more than a dozen boxes of nonperishable food to distribute to members of his congregation and others in need.

They delivered boxes of school supplies for students in the Refugio school district, collected by children in the TeamKID discipleship program at First Baptist in Norman—including a few who helped the crew in Refugio County.



T. Wayne Price (3rd from left), pastor of First Baptist Church in Refugio, and Sheriff “Pinky” Gonzales (2nd from left) react with joy when they receive a new communion set to replace the one destroyed by Hurricane Harvey. (Photo / Ken Camp)

They also presented a set of communion trays and offering plates to First Baptist Church in Refugio to replace the ones destroyed by the hurricane. Price noted the congregation had planned to observe the Lord’s Supper the

Sunday after the Norman crew was due to return home, and the church would put the new set of supplies to use.

Turning to Herring—the chief usher at his church—Price also expressed particular delight at the offering plates.

“They’re deep,” he said, with a smile.

## **‘God has opened the doors’**

First Baptist in Norman most likely will return to South Texas for another rebuilding project in the fall after the worst of the summer heat is past.

“I’m looking out for my senior adults,” Ham said. “They’re not used to the humidity down here.”

Assuming a group from the Norman church returns for a third mission trip to Refugio, Ham—who entered vocational ministry at age 42 and “grew up swinging a hammer”—remains confident God will provide the workers.

“They come from all walks of life,” he said, noting the crew in March included retired attorneys, nurses, students and homemakers, as well as a petroleum engineer, a former police officer and a grocery store clerk.

“God has opened up the doors. Every trip, we have enough skilled people to teach those who have never done this kind of work before. Some of the people who had no experience on the first trip are teaching others now,” Ham said.

Most importantly, God has connected the people in Norman with brothers and sisters in Christ whom they never had met before.

“Our people have fallen in love with Refugio,” he said.

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