

Harvey blows breezes of Baptist cooperation

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ROCKPORT—Although Hurricane Harvey blew apart communities along the Texas Gulf Coast, a gentle breeze of intra-Baptist cooperation followed in its wake.

Coastal Oaks Baptist Church, a Southern Baptists of Texas congregation in Rockport, endured Harvey's 130 mile-per-hour fury. The next weekend, a team of students from Baptist University of the Americas, a Baptist General Convention of Texas school, arrived to help. Jorge Zapata, a field worker with Cooperative Baptist Fellowship of Texas, led the trip, which he arranged in cooperation with Jesse Rincones, executive director of Convencion, the Hispanic Baptist Convention of Texas.

"As you can imagine, things are pretty chaotic here—limited cell service, no power, displaced staff and church members," reported Coastal Oaks Pastor Kevin Muilenberg. He divided his time between ministry to the congregation's members, helping staff and volunteers coordinate a donation center at the church, and digging out from debris at his own home.

BUA students serve



Baptist University of the Americas students joined Jorge Zapata (third from left) and Rosa Zapata (fifth from left) of Cooperative Baptist Fellowship of Texas and Luis Juarez (center) of BUA before departing for a disaster recovery trip to Coastal Oaks Baptist Church in Rockport. (BUA Photo)

“We were able to get 11 BUA students down there to help Coastal Oaks Church,” Zapata said. The congregation is located a little more than 150 miles from the university’s campus in San Antonio.

“One of the purposes of the missions program here at BUA is that we want to be a missions presence—not only across the world but across the street and across the state of Texas,” explained Luis Juarez, director of missions and spiritual life at the university.

“We were mindful of the needs throughout the Gulf Coast,” he added. “We wanted to provide the opportunity for our students to be servants—to use what they learn in the classroom in practical ways—and this was one of them. ... We’re aware that through our service, there always is the opportunity to share the greatest need, the need for Christ.”

Because of limits on transportation, the size of the BUA team capped at 11 students, and the group filled in a matter of hours, Juarez said, noting many more students wanted to participate.

Sorting clothes, clearing debris

Seven female students worked in the church's gymnasium, sorting clothes, said Coastal Oaks member Mimi Castilleja.



Baptist University of the Américas students helped remove debris and clean up fallen trees from the campus of Coastal Oaks Baptist Church in Rockport and also helped clear property of homeowners. (BUA Photo)

“We had literally tons of clothing donated to the church,” she noted. “Some of the young ladies spent hours sorting. We’re still sorting, and they were a huge help.”

Four male students removed fallen trees and other debris from the church property and then helped others.

“They helped some friends of ours who lost 75 percent of their trees,” Castilleja said. “We’re so grateful they came to help.”

‘It looked like a war zone’

“We also worked in the community. It looked like a war zone,” Zapata said. “We helped three other families with debris removal. We also handed out bottled water and food” on behalf of the church.

“This was the first time these students experienced a hurricane,” he noted. “They were overwhelmed by the destruction.”

And with good reason, he added: “There’s a lot of destruction down there. Mobile homes were totally destroyed—some flipped over; some with their roofs ripped open. Some houses were blown apart, down to the foundation. Some were dragged about 200 feet by the wind. Some small houses’ roofs blew off. There’s a lot of debris all over the place. It will take months to remove.”

Congregations or other volunteers who wish to help Coastal Oaks Church can contact Castilleja at (816) 377-7585 or rsqdme@yahoo.com. “We appreciate anybody who can come,” she said, noting the church will be involved in recovery from Harvey’s devastation “for months and years.”

“We still have quite a list of work orders—particularly the elderly who need help with brush and tree removal,” she said.

CBF-Texas and Fellowship Southwest

The Cooperative Baptist Fellowship and CBF-Texas also plan to be involved in Harvey recovery for many months, Zapata said. Along the Coastal Bend—between Corpus Christi and the southern suburbs of Houston—they will focus their efforts mostly in the Rockport area, where the eye of the hurricane passed, so they can be effective and not stretch themselves too thin.

“At First Baptist Church in Rockport, the front of the sanctuary is gone,” he said. “At First Baptist Church in Refugio, the roof is gone. Their communities were hit hard, and the surrounding communities were affected.”

“CBF-Texas is working closely with Convencion” throughout the area, he added. “Hispanic Baptist churches already have responded.”

The week after the hurricane, three Convencion churches sent teams to provide disaster recovery. The following weekend, seven more churches responded, working in Rockport, Aransas Pass and Victoria.

At least three other Convencion or CBF congregations—Calvary Baptist Church in McAllen, Woodland Baptist Church in San Antonio and First Baptist Church in Norman, Okla.—are preparing to send recovery teams to the Coastal Bend in the coming weeks, Zapata said.

BUA plans to send a team of students to Houston for hurricane recovery the third weekend of September. The Houston trip filled up as rapidly as the Rockport trip, Juarez said.

To volunteer individually or as a church team for hurricane recovery, or to support the effort, visit the Hurricane Harvey Response page on the CBF website: <http://www.cbf.net/harveyvolunteer/>.