

# Harvey brings Athens and Rockport churches together

April 16, 2018

ROCKPORT—Charles McKnight has seen plenty of highs and lows in Rockport during his 35 years as pastor of St. Paul Baptist Church.

One of the toughest times occurred last August when Hurricane Harvey blew the roof off his church's sanctuary and destroyed its fellowship hall. One of the highlights is the ongoing relationship First Baptist Church in Athens has established with the Rockport congregation in the storm's aftermath.



A volunteer from First Baptist Church in Athens works on St. Paul Baptist Church in Rockport. (Photo courtesy of Steve Akin, First Baptist Athens)

“It’s one thing for people to associate with you when things are good. It’s another thing for people to come all the way down here when you really need help,” McKnight said.

In recent months, construction crews from First Baptist in Athens have installed a new metal roof on the Rockport church building and replaced damaged paneling with drywall.

## **Ministering to ‘the faithful remnant’**

St. Paul Baptist Church—and Rockport in general—had endured hardship even before Hurricane Harvey struck last year, McKnight noted.

“It used to be that my men here were Gulf shrimpers,” the 76-year-old pastor recalled.

When much of the shrimping industry moved elsewhere, Rockport’s economy suffered, and church members moved to Corpus Christi and other cities in the region to find work, he noted.

Even so, McKnight and what he calls “the faithful remnant” continued to keep the church going. Attendance at St. Paul ranges from 35 to 50 on any given Sunday—“sometimes more, sometimes less” he said.

“At a small church like this, you build relationships with people, and you know all their children,” he said. “I’ve preached a lot of funerals, but the remnant that’s here are their children and grandchildren. I’m the oldest thing that there is around here.”

## **Hurricane ‘kind of rearranged things’**

When Harvey made landfall last August as a Category 4 hurricane, it devastated the community, McKnight noted.

“Harvey came in and kind of rearranged things,” he said. “I didn’t know we had that much stuff here in Rockport, until you’d look at all the debris that ended up piled by the side of the road.”

St. Paul Baptist Church was “down a couple of Sundays,” but once electricity was restored and a tarp installed to keep out rain, the congregation continued to worship in its damaged building, McKnight said. The church adjusted its Sunday schedule accordingly.

“We cut out a lot from the services. They’re only an hour to an hour and 20 minutes now,” he said.

## **‘The right fit’**

In the immediate aftermath of Hurricane Harvey, disaster relief volunteers from First Baptist in Athens served in Houston, Wharton and Orange, helping residents and churches, Minister of Missions Steve Akin noted. Members who were unable to volunteer contributed financially to the relief efforts.

“When we had done as much as we felt we should do in Orange, we still had money to spend, because our people had given so generously,” he said. “We wanted to invest it in helping a church get back to place where it could minister.”

So, Akin contacted Fred Ater, South Texas regional representative for the Baptist General Convention of Texas, to inquire about needs. Ater took Akin on a tour of some of the hardest-hit areas to show him churches that had sustained varying levels of damage.

“We wanted to help a church where we could have the greatest impact that was about the right size for us,” Akin said.

Ater noted St. Paul Church is the only African-American Baptist congregation in Rockport, and he pointed to its potential if the congregation’s facilities were repaired.

When Akin met McKnight and saw St. Paul Baptist Church, he recognized it

as “the right fit”—not only in terms of his congregation’s ability to meet its immediate needs, but also as far as having the potential to establish an ongoing partnership.

## **Desire for ongoing relationship**

In 2005, after Hurricane Katrina struck South Louisiana, First Baptist in Athens developed a relationship with Galilee Baptist Church in the 9<sup>th</sup> Ward of New Orleans. Volunteers from the Athens congregation helped renovate the New Orleans church after the hurricane, and they have returned multiple times in the years since then to partner in ministry activities.

“At Rockport, we believed we might develop a similar relationship to do ministry together,” Akin said.

In January, a dozen members of First Baptist in Athens made the 350-mile trip to Rockport to install a metal roof on the St. Paul Baptist church building.

“The work was done by volunteers with professional oversight,” Akin said.

In early April, nine volunteers from Athens removed warped paneling and damaged insulation, installed drywall and began the process of taping and bedding the walls. First Baptist Church in Corpus Christi providing housing and showers for the volunteer workers.

Within a few weeks, Akin will lead another crew from Athens to work on texturing and painting the walls of the Rockport church building. Volunteers also will replace seven windows in the church’s sanctuary.

This summer, a youth group from First Baptist in Athens will help St. Paul Baptist conduct a Vacation Bible School.

“I know there’s a better tomorrow coming,” McKnight said. “As others are

sharing ministry with us, seeds are being planted. ... We can learn from them. And I think they can learn from us, after everything we've gone through."