

Hill Country churches mobilize to minister after flood

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Texas Baptists churches in the Hill Country continue mobilizing members to aid in relief and recovery efforts after the flooding of the Guadalupe River.

Using their mission center as a headquarters for their response efforts, First Baptist Church in Marble Falls has led in flood recovery for Burnet and Llano counties, mobilizing a network of local pastoral teams to act as chaplains as volunteers serve families and offer counseling services.

‘Deeply invested in the community’

Tucker Edwards, family discipleship pastor at First Baptist in Marble Falls, said each morning, volunteers come to the mission center to receive training for the mud-out process, as well as emotional and spiritual training to offer support while serving families.

Five days after the flood, the church hosted a community-wide night of prayer and worship with more than 300 in attendance.

“We had a lot of our congregation and people that I’d never seen before fill up a lot of our worship space and our staff put together a full hour of prayer and worship,” Edwards said.

“We set up our entire counseling team to be [in the] back [of the worship center] and there were people that were counseled throughout [the evening].”

“We’re deeply invested in the community, and the community is deeply

invested in us, and so our heart is to always respond not only with the immediate needs, ... but we realize that the greatest need, even beyond that, is the ministry of presence and to be with the people and to show them the love of God in the midst of the tragedy and heartache that they're going through," Edwards said.

'Readily available to just love on people'

Alamo Heights Baptist Church in San Antonio opened its building on the mornings of July 7 and 8 to provide counseling for the community. Alamo Heights and Northside Independent School District counselors provided services, as well as the Alamo Heights Fire and Police Critical Incident Stress Management team.

"It's a team effort, knowing that this would just be kind of an immediate response, but it would also provide an opportunity to build relationships," said Bobby Contreras, pastor of Alamo Heights.

Contreras said providing counseling was "the best way that we knew how to respond immediately" as he started receiving text messages from community members who were affected by the flooding of the Guadalupe River.

"We knew we weren't going to be a part of the immediate search efforts, but our goal has always been to, whether it's on campus or within our home here in the Alamo Heights community, that we just want to be readily available to just love on people ... [and in this case] to be in communication and connecting with people that we knew who were in that area, affected," Contreras said.

Helping with search and rescue efforts

First Baptist Church in Boerne responded by mobilizing members to aid in search and rescue efforts in Center Point with the volunteer fire department, setting up a volunteer portal.

“We started telling people how we could help. We mobilized about 250 people Sunday to go out to the river banks and aid in the search and recovery efforts,” said Chad Mason, missions and evangelism pastor at First Baptist in Boerne.

“At the end of [the day], they said that they had received an overwhelming number of volunteers ... somewhere between 1,500 and 2,000.”

Even after military resources became available and local authorities “asked for no more volunteers,” Mason said, the calls still poured in from other churches and organizations from around the country wanting to volunteer.

“So, we’ve been working really hard to try to build a coalition of churches here in Kendall County that are responding,” he said.

“A lot of the conversations right now are [surrounding] training and developing the right people so that as volunteer opportunities emerge in the coming weeks, we’ll be prepared to meet and to work in the long-term recovery effort.”

‘Opportunity to give grace to others’

First Baptist Church in Center Point partnered with the volunteer fire department by volunteering with the volunteer fire department’s donation center.

Pastor Mike Watson said he and his church members helped unload,

organize and distribute donated supplies to families in need. Supplies include toiletries, canned goods, gasoline, tools and even “unusual donations” such as ropes requested by the fire department, he said.

As his church stepped up to volunteer in relief efforts, Watson said his eyes were opened to how compassionate his congregation really is.

“We’re a small church, but I found out through this [that] we’re a compassionate church, and I think sometimes hard things happen so that we know just how compassionate we are,” Watson said. “It’s an opportunity to give grace to others ... [and it] speaks [to] people who will go out of their way to help total strangers.”

Open doors to share the gospel

Matt Travis, pastor of Comfort Baptist Church in Comfort, said, “God is using [our church] in a support role.”

While helping coordinate incoming support for relief efforts, the church hosted “a church from San Antonio that set up in our parking lot to just provide barbecue” for the community, Travis said. The church also hosted a food truck “from another state in order to serve breakfast each day.”

Comfort Baptist supported people financially by providing Visa gift cards to those who don’t want to disclose specific needs. The church also raised funds to provide scholarships for people needing equipment rental for area cleanup.

Those ministries “open[ed] the door for us to be able to share the gospel with people,” Travis said.

“Baptists all over have been very faithful. Our phone has been ringing off the hook with people saying: ‘We want to help. How can we help? What is the best way for us to help?’” Travis said. “So, we are very thankful for

Texas Baptists, and Baptists from all over the U.S., who have stepped in to help.”

Texas Baptists Counseling Services Director Olga Harris said she is “looking for ways to lock arms with our local churches to provide grief support” for those affected.

Harris’ department offers counseling resources for Texas Baptists ministers and their families. Services include no-cost consultations and referrals, and financial assistance based on certain criteria is available.

To initiate a request, visit txb.org/counseling or contact Olga Harris at counselingservices@texasbaptists.org.