

Houston church, Hooters waitresses help hurricane victims

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HOUSTON—Members of Rice Temple Baptist Church come from about 35 countries and speak 27 languages. But the predominant language is love.

That spirit of openness and loving acceptance enabled the congregation to partner with a group of Hooters waitresses to meet the needs of the people of Oak Island, a Galveston Bay coastal community almost completely wiped out by Hurricane Ike. Oak Island Baptist Church is the only building in use on the island.

The church's connection to Hooters—a restaurant best known for waitresses in skimpy orange shorts and tight tank tops—goes back more than nine years to a time when Pastor Clint Reiff was serving the congregation as associate pastor.

Waitresses from Hooters join members of Rice Temple Baptist Church in serving meals to Oak Island residents.
(PHOTO/Darron Brown)

"I met a waitress while we were both pumping gas at the Shell station. We started talking. She mentioned that she was exhausted after waiting tables, and it made it hard for her to come to church," Reiff recalled.

He gave her his business card and told her to call if she ever felt the need. Two days later, the restaurant's manager called to invite the church staff and their spouses to dinner.

When Reiff said he'd check with the pastor and get back with him, the manager responded, "We're just looking for answers like anyone else."

"I didn't know if he said it flippantly or not, but I said, 'We'll be there,'" Reiff said.

"I'm not sure our pastor at the time really knew what he was saying 'yes' to, but he was supportive, and a few evenings later, we were there. As I recall, most of us sat with our heads down trying not to look up, but we survived that first meal," he said.

Reiff kept going back, bringing his Bible along. The workers started talking to him about concerns in their lives, asking spiritual questions and giving him prayer requests.

The congregation also has become involved. A group of women organized a baby shower for one of the waitresses.

Reiff admits he was concerned at the beginning how some church members might accept the ministry to the restaurant's employees, but they generally have demonstrated support.

"At the beginning, I tried to always take a gift, and my ladies who are 70 years old plus made so many cookies I couldn't begin to say how many. I had thought that they might have a problem with it, but that hasn't been the case. I don't know if they saw the waitresses as granddaughters, or if some of them thought, 'That was me 50 years ago, and I wished someone would have reached out to me,'" he said.

"As you get to know these girls, you realize: They are just like me. They're hoping to find their way. They are real people with real needs.

"We've had a couple who have joined, and several others have visited. But most of them can't afford to live in this area. So, we try to steer them

toward a church closer to where they live so that they have a greater chance of really plugging in."

Over the years, the church has found additional ways to develop the relationship. The church has been a sponsor of an annual Hooters golf tournament, giving away Bibles. They also have worked with the restaurant's employees on Habitat for Humanity building projects.

"My thought has always been to try to include non-Christians in ministerial work, because then they get to see the church doing something," Reiff said.

The waitresses even joined with the congregation in walking through the neighborhood singing Christmas carols.

"You could tell they hadn't gone Christmas caroling before, because they all showed up in high heels," he recalled.

Heather Suggitt, the restaurant's marketing director for the greater Houston area, initiated the ministry to Oak Island residents.

"She called me because she had heard of Oak Island and that the church was only building left standing. They wanted to go and feed the people there and take the kids bikes and toys for Christmas, and wanted me to contact the church to pave the way," Rieff said.

Rieff called Pastor Eddie Shauerberger to explain his church sponsored a Bible study for waitresses from Hooters, and the restaurant wanted to serve the people of Oak Island from his church.

After checking with a few of his members, Shauerberger accepted the offer.

Four days before Christ-mas, about 45 members of Rice Temple Baptist Church and the employees from Hooters served the people of Oak Island.

More than 400 people were on hand to eat hamburgers and chicken wings, and volunteers dispersed more than \$20,000 in gifts from the church and restaurant. Hooters restaurants from as far away as Dallas and San Antonio held bake sales and toy drives to raise money for Oak Island. Many Houston-area businesses also donated goods and cash.

The day began with a worship service at Oak Island Baptist Church. After the meal that followed, teenagers received gift cards, the Houston nonprofit Elves and More distributed 75 bicycles, and Oak Island Baptist Church received a new sound system to replaced the one lost when Hurricane Ike flooded its building.

The project at Oak Island marks one more reason why Rieff is glad his congregation has reached out in ministry to the Hooters waitresses.

"I frankly feel that God would walk in there and sit down, maybe more quickly than he would in some of our churches," he said. "We are to take the gospel to the world, and that's the whole world—not just the part of the world that works the way we think it should work."

Other Christians might want to consider looking around their communities to see who is being overlooked, he suggested.

"I'd really love for other churches to do this. I think of all the ladies in seminary and think, 'If they want a ministry, go to these places.' It takes longer for a guy, because we're already suspect: Are we there because we care, or are we there just to look?" Reiff said.

He noted a remark by the Hooters' marketing director regarding the outpouring of support for Oak Island.

"I could not believe everyone's generosity. It just really came from God," Suggitt said.

"If she can see that God can plan this, maybe she can start to see God has a plan for her own life," Reiff said.