

Hurricanes' damage, rebuilding left lasting mark

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BEAUMONT—Five years ago, a Category 3 hurricane made landfall along the Gulf Coast, displacing thousands of people and causing billions of dollars in property damage. But many outside the region fail to recall the disaster, because it occurred less than a month after an even larger catastrophe.

Hurricane Rita hit Southeast Texas Sept. 23, 2005—three and a half weeks after Hurricane Katrina struck south Louisiana and the levees failed in New Orleans.

Sabine Pass bore much of the brunt of Hurricane Rita when it hit Southeast Texas five years ago. (FILE PHOTOS)

“Our association was still housing and helping Katrina evacuees when we had to evacuate because of Rita,” Dion Ainsworth, director of ministry and evangelism in [Golden Triangle Baptist Association](#), recalled.

Hurricane Rita was one in a series of calamities that tested the faith and resilience of area churches. Hurricane Ike in 2008 and ongoing economic struggles in the region also offered significant challenges, Ainsworth noted.

“A lot of people became burned out and overwhelmed by it all,” he said, noting the continuing cycle of relief, recovery and re-building followed by an-other disaster—and the ever-present threat of an-other hurricane—took an emotional toll on Christians in the area.

“We’ve seen some pastors leave, at least in part because they did not want to endure another hurricane,” Ainsworth said.

Some churches lost members—particularly senior adults whose children insisted they move upstate, away from the threat of hurricanes, he noted. Due at least in part to losses from Rita and Ike, more than one congregation found itself unable to provide full salary for its pastor. Bivocational ministers now serve several of those churches.



East Texas Baptist University Tiger baseball team members, (left to right) Trevor Stagner of White Oak, Lane Ellzey of Kountze, Michael Ross of Tyler, Hunter Howard of Lake Dallas and Joey Cross of Celina, tear down a ceiling in a home damaged by Hurricane Rita in Sabine Pass. Like other groups from around the state, the ETBU baseball team and the Pi Sigma fraternity spent time in Southeast Texas assisting in recovery efforts after Hurricane Rita.
(PHOTO/Courtesy of ETBU)

On the positive side, Ainsworth pointed to the cooperation among churches that grew out of relief, recovery and rebuilding efforts, as well as the birth of the [Nehemiah's Vision](#) ministry and the hands-on involvement it helped

facilitate.

After Hurricane Rita, some areas went without electricity six weeks. But power was restored at [Woodland Baptist Church](#) in Beaumont within about a week, enabling the church to be used by incoming disaster relief teams. Similarly, Westgate Memorial and Calvary Baptist churches in Beaumont housed multiple teams.

“Our church was not hit hard, but a quarter of a mile away, the steeple fell off a church, leaving a hole big enough to drive a bus through,” Pastor Jim Sliger of Woodland Baptist said.

He recalled becoming disoriented in his own neighborhood at night when he returned after the hurricane.

“It looked like the end of a Godzilla movie,” he said.

But the presence of [Texas Baptist Men](#) disaster relief volunteers and other Christians who served the area provided a calming influence, Sliger noted.

“The people in our community asked who these people were, and they couldn’t believe some of them had come so far to help—at no expense to the people here,” he said. “To see them extend a helping hand was so beautiful.”



Residents of Bridge City who spraypainted “Need Help” on piles of trash outside their homes found much-appreciated assistance from Mid-county Kindness, an areawide initiative launched by First Baptist Church of Groves.
(PHOTO/Courtesy of First Baptist Church of Groves)

Three years later, when Hurricane Ike devastated Bridge City, churches on the opposite side of the flood-swollen Neches River offered a helping hand to a neighboring community.

“We had some wind damage here, but nothing extensive. But across the bridge, 95 percent of the homes were flooded,” Pastor Joe Worley of [First Baptist Church](#) in Groves recalled.

Churches sent small teams to Bridge City to assist with immediate relief and some early recovery efforts.

After one workday, a layman at First Baptist in Groves approached Worley with the idea of a more concentrated mobilized response—a one-day effort to involve residents of Nederland, Port Neches and Groves in hands-on service to the people of Bridge City.

“It went from his vision to execution in 13 days,” Worley said.

Organizers spun their “Mid-county Kindness” event off the traditional “Mid-county Madness” football rivalry between Port Neches-Groves High School and Nederland High School.



Some Bridge City residents publicly expressed their appreciation to their neighbors across the river who helped them as part of Mid-county Kindness, an initiative birthed in the heart of a layman at First Baptist Church of Groves. (PHOTO/Courtesy of First Baptist Church of Groves)

The game—scheduled for a Saturday that year—became the platform to promote a Sun-day of service the next day.

“Fans on both sides of the stadium wore Bridge City red that night,” Worley said.

Those red T-shirts became the uniform to help Bridge City residents recognize volunteers the next day.

“A lot of churches scheduled early services on Sunday, and then people left to work a six-hour time slot in Bridge City,” he said.

Volunteers from First Baptist Church in Groves provided maps, directions and general oversight to the project, but organizers tried to simplify the operation as much as possible.

“We tried to cut through the red tape,” Worley said.

“The process for requesting help was simple. We told people to gather up their trash—everybody had plenty of trash—put it in front of their houses and spray paint on it, ‘Need help.’”

The daylong effort involved churches across denominational lines, local businesses and other community groups.

“We even had a group of Buddhist businessmen who showed up, and we put them to work,” Worley said.

Volunteers made an estimated \$1 million impact on the community.

“But there’s no way to measure the full impact,” Worley added, recalling the spirit of cooperation created.

“It was a God thing.”

