

Sutherland Springs expresses accountability to donors

April 17, 2018

SUTHERLAND SPRINGS (BP)—Donors supporting First Baptist Church in Sutherland Springs after the mass murder of 26 worshippers there can be assured of the church's integrity in handling donations, the church said in an April 12 open letter.

A network composed of First Baptist Sutherland Springs leaders and members, community representatives, banking officials, the North American Mission Board and the Southern Baptists of Texas Convention has assisted the church in handling funds and in-kind donations honorably, the church's restoration committee chaired by First Baptist member Pat Dziuk said in the letter and an attached factsheet.

Donations for families separate from church operating funds

"The committee has been deliberate and prayerful, and has coordinated with other groups offering support, to respond to needs and exercise good stewardship and honor the intent of various donors," the letter said. "Donations received for victim needs are kept in accounts separate from church operating funds and will only be used for that purpose.

"We are committed to integrity in the allocation of this money."

The [Dallas Morning News](#) reported some victims' families had raised questions about how the church was handling donations.

The church meets three times weekly in a temporary facility on church

property, is growing in membership and remains grateful for support that has come from many sources, the letter said.

"Our church has been richly blessed in the months since the tragedy of last November. Prayers, comfort, counseling and material assistance have come to us from our neighbors and from congregations around the world," the letter noted. "God has used all these people to help bring us through a terrible ordeal. ... We are grateful."

NAMB is accepting donations toward a two-phase rebuilding project First Baptist Pastor Frank Pomeroy announced March 27, with plans to start construction on a sanctuary and education building in May. NAMB has committed to provide funds to cover any construction costs not covered by donations being accepted at restoresutherlandsprings.com and namb.net.

Restoration committee separate from rebuilding project

Separate from building project donations, the restoration committee is charged with receiving and distributing funds and services to church members affected by the tragedy when 26-year-old Devin Kelley, now deceased, barged into worship services Nov. 5, shot to death 26 people and wounded 20 others.

"The restoration committee has been working to serve the individuals and families personally impacted," the letter said. "Money and in-kind assistance have been received to provide counseling and to meet tangible needs such as handicap access for wounded members, medical supplies, living expenses and legal fees related to probate issues for those with losses. These gifts received to alleviate the needs of victims are being disbursed to directly pay for the needs of the victims."

The committee enjoys a diverse membership including longtime and new church members, community residents, and retired executives with experience in financial, insurance, real estate, charitable and governmental matters, according to the April 12 factsheet. Pomeroy is a non-voting member of the committee.

"We believe God has sustained us during difficult days," the letter said. "He has used people from all around the world to encourage us and to provide material support we very much needed.

"Our prayer and intent is to continue to serve our Lord and our neighbors here in Sutherland Springs," the letter noted. "We pray that God will continue to comfort and bless many, even in the wake of grief and loss."

The committee also noted:

- The church has no authority to collect or distribute GoFundMe accounts set up in individual names, as GoFundMe distributes those funds to designated beneficiaries.
- The church opened a bank account for victim assistance separate from normal church offerings and expenses.
- The church established a second specialized lockbox account with another bank to process donations through a professional, independent third party, establishing an independent data record.
- The church's insurance company, Church Mutual, has paid all costs associated with leasing a temporary sanctuary the church is using, and it also has paid all legal costs the church has incurred.