



Alabama Baptists respond to Wilma's devastation

November 3, 2005

Alabama Baptists have once again answered the call to action, sending teams to help in the Southern Baptist disaster relief response to Hurricane Wilma.

At press time, a feeding team of volunteers from Baldwin and Birmingham Baptist associations was stationed with the Alabama Baptist State Board of Missions' (SBOM) feeding unit at First Baptist Church, Clewiston, Fla.

They served 9,000 meals Oct. 26 and 13,000 meals Oct. 27. Two shower units from Baldwin and Morgan Baptist associations and the SBOM communications unit, staffed by volunteers from Calhoun Baptist Association, are also at Clewiston, according to SBOM.

According to Joe Conway, Southern Baptist disaster relief spokesman, at press time, 16 ministry sites with 16 mobile kitchens had been established in response to Wilma. These included teams from Florida, Illinois, North Carolina, South Carolina, Kentucky, Michigan, Ohio, Virginia, Tennessee, Texas, California and New York in addition to Alabama. An estimated 500 disaster relief volunteers are serving in south Florida.

A Category 3 hurricane, Wilma first struck Florida just south of Naples with 125-mph winds early Oct. 24 and moved across the state within seven hours — the state's eighth bout with a hurricane in the past 14 months. The storm, called the worst to hit Broward County since Hurricane King in 1950, is responsible for at least five deaths in Florida, 6 million people without electricity and damage estimated between \$6 and \$10 billion in south Florida, according to The Associated Press.

"People from around the U.S. don't realize this is Florida's most heavily populated area — with as many as 6 million citizens affected," said Ed Blackmon, associate director for the Baptist men's department of the Florida Baptist Convention (FBC).

At least two Florida Baptist churches reportedly were destroyed and at least 23 others damaged as Wilma cut a diagonal swath across the southern tip of the state.

The sanctuary of Graham Baptist Church, Miami, was destroyed, and Westside Baptist



Church, Boynton Beach, had severe damage, according to reports. Both churches are on Florida's east coast, where damage was worse than expected as Wilma exited the peninsula into the Atlantic Ocean.

Wayside Baptist Church, Miami, which was left with a huge gaping hole after Hurricane Andrew in 1992, was again pummeled when Wilma seriously damaged the sanctuary roof.

Two churches in the Florida Keys have reported destruction, said Sonny Pritchett, director of missions for the Florida Keys. First Baptist Church, Big Coppitt, was flooded. Sugarloaf Baptist Church on Summerland Key experienced steeple and water damage.

Preliminary reports from church officials and FBC staff list the following churches as also having suffered extensive damage: First Baptist Church, Belle Glade; Boca Glades Baptist Church, Boca Raton; First Baptist Church, Cooper City; East Naples Baptist Church, Naples; First Baptist Church, Naples; First Baptist Church, Fort Lauderdale; First Baptist Church, Hallandale; First Baptist Church, Lake Worth; McGregor Baptist Church, Fort Myers; and First Baptist Church, Plantation.

Jim Burton, director of volunteer mobilization for the North American Mission Board (NAMB), said it's too early to estimate how many volunteers will be deployed to the hurricane-affected areas.

"The reality is that there is a fatigue factor in dealing with these hurricanes," Burton said. "The disaster operations center is now in its 60th day of operation. We've had three major hurricanes — Katrina, Rita and now Wilma."

Officials in Miami-Dade and Broward counties have imposed a curfew on residents while cleanup efforts continue and at least 10 people were arrested for looting. Traffic lights were down throughout south Florida. Florida Power & Light reported the worst outage in its history and said power restoration could take up to four weeks because of serious infrastructure damage.

Meanwhile the Southern Baptist disaster relief response to hurricanes Katrina and Rita continues, with Alabama teams working in Texas and New Orleans, SBOM reported.

The massive damage resulting from those two hurricanes is still being assessed, according to news reports, but a tally of churches damaged has been finalized. Religion News Service reported that more than 900 houses of worship were destroyed, heavily damaged or forced to suspend services because of hurricanes Katrina and Rita. Of those, 460 were Southern Baptist churches.

NAMB's Adopt a Church is aimed at helping these congregations, encouraging churches nationwide to adopt a damaged church and provide supplies, care and volunteer labor. Visit www.namb.net for more information.

Since Katrina struck the Gulf Coast nine weeks ago, NAMB's disaster operations center has been in operation 24 hours a day for more than 63 consecutive days, according to Mickey Caison, center manager.

The center has coordinated the work of more than 7,000 volunteers representing 41 state Baptist conventions.

According to NAMB estimates at press time, the work of these 7,000 volunteers in the aftermath of Katrina and Rita translates into 104,000 "volunteer work days" valued at more than \$14 million.

Through the deployment of 360 disaster relief units in response to the two hurricanes — more than half of the Southern Baptists' fleet of 600 — these volunteers have prepared more than 9 million meals for hurricane victims and workers; completed more than 12,000 cleanup jobs; cared for 7,300 children; and provided nearly 60,000 showers for victims and workers along the

hard-hit Gulf Coast.

“Having prepared more than 9 million meals in the hurricanes Katrina and Rita aftermath, the response to Hurricane Wilma is sure to push us well beyond the 10 million meal count for this year,” Burton said. “That is clearly unprecedented, and reason for each of us to pause and give thanks to God for the amazing opportunity given to Southern Baptists through disaster relief ministry.”

With the official hurricane season continuing until the end of November, monetary contributions are still needed, Burton said. (BP, ABP, TAB)

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