

Updates on the Aftereffects of Hurricanes Katrina and Rita

From Andy Burnett, pastor of New Orleans and Covington, Louisiana, and Laurel, Mississippi, congregations:

From southeast Louisiana and southern Mississippi areas:

We just found out this week that one of our “missing” brethren was located and is doing fine. She had evacuated from New Orleans prior to Hurricane Katrina and is presently staying with her son in San Antonio, Texas. Unfortunately, her home flooded and a determination has yet to be made whether it is salvageable. This brings the total number of members’ homes that were flooded to six. There is only one member from New Orleans with whom we have not made contact. Please continue to pray that we may establish contact and set our minds at ease.

We just returned last night (Wednesday) from evacuating again because of Rita. Even though we live significantly east of where Rita was expected to make landfall, we only live about four miles from Lake Pontchartrain where forecasters were predicting another storm surge and potential flooding. So, to be safe, we evacuated. Thankfully, other than a few wind-related incidents and temporary power outages, the brethren here were not affected by Rita.

A few of the members have temporarily relocated (some permanently) to other areas due to job transfers as a result of Katrina. The funds donated by the Church have helped immensely with relocation costs. Concerning the rest of the brethren, with the exception of those whose homes were flooded, all have returned to their homes and all have power. We still have a few brethren who are waiting to have trees removed from their houses. Many still have debris to be removed from their property. Some community leaders have predicted that it will take five to 10 years to clean up the “mess” from Katrina in the Louisiana/Mississippi region, and after seeing the devastation, I believe them. Locally, we have mobilized work crews to help brethren with their needs and will continue to do so while there’s work to be done.

The brethren continue to be of good cheer and are appreciative of the outpouring of love by God’s people worldwide.

From Harold Rhodes, pastor of the Mobile and Geneva, Alabama, and Pensacola, Florida, congregations:

From Alabama and Florida areas:

The family we helped move from Biloxi, Mississippi, arrived safely in Augusta, Georgia. The lady’s brother is helping them get into a house there. The Red Cross is helping them with a motel room until they can get settled. We helped move another family and her mother from the Mobile, Alabama, area to Chattanooga, Tennessee. The pastors in those areas, Don Waterhouse and Roy Holladay, have already been in contact with these brethren and all seems to be going well presently.

Most of the members had some damage to their homes and property in this part of the Gulf. All considered, God was very merciful again and spared our lives. All of the brethren who have received help through the Church's "Katrina Relief Fund" wish to express their heartfelt thanks to their brothers and sisters in Christ!

From Jim Franks, pastor of the Houston North, Texas, congregation:

From Texas areas:

In Houston we probably have the largest concentration of members anywhere in the world. We have over 600 members of United living within a small area of south Texas. We have contacted everyone in the congregations that I pastor (Houston North and a Bible study group in Huntsville, Texas) and no one experienced any wind damage or water damage to their properties and there were no personal injuries. The greatest problem has been lack of electricity. While it was sad to see Louisiana once again hit by a storm and also to see Beaumont, Texas, and Port Arthur, Louisiana, devastated, we had no members in that area during the storm. We have one elderly lady in Beaumont who is unable to attend Sabbath services, and we confirmed that she was with family and everything is OK with her. Instead of striking an area where many members live, the storm hit an area where there are no Church members. One news reporter commented that the area where the storm hit is the least populated area of the whole Gulf Coast (with the exception of Beaumont and Port Arthur).

As we watched the dire predictions for a direct hit on the Houston area or just west of Houston (which would have made things quite bad in Houston, since that would put us on the "dirty side" of the storm), we didn't know quite what to expect. We prayed for God's mercy and intervention as well. Whenever there is a hurricane along the Gulf Coast, the location of the strike is critical as far as the damage done. As we saw with this hurricane, just a few miles either way completely changes the impact on a given area. When we went to bed on Friday night, the storm was due to strike just east of Houston. This was good news for Houston but there were still predictions of great destruction for the city (especially in the area of Galveston). When we awakened on Sabbath morning we discovered that the storm had tracked even further to the east and that Houston was clear of any serious damage. Since we were on the "clean side" of the storm, there was little rain to cope with. We received only about an inch of rain in the Houston area. It was incredible that we escaped both wind and water damage in the Houston area—some would call that a miracle, given the potential.

I guess you can say that Rita was a nonevent for the Houston area and that the evacuation was the really big story. The governor made reference to the Exodus from Egypt and referred to this as the largest evacuation of people since biblical days! Considering the magnitude of the evacuation, things went fairly well (easy for me to say since we did not evacuate).

Our area is now back to normal—food in the stores and gas at the stations—and we are getting ready for the Holy Days, back on schedule after a few days of interruption.

From Ken Giese, regional pastor and pastor of the Houston South, Texas, congregation:

From Texas areas:

Many Houstonians (including Kathy and me) joined with approximately 2.5 million others and evacuated. At one point Rita was a category 5 hurricane with sustained winds of over 170 miles an hour and a predicted landfall at or near Galveston/Houston! Those living in parts of Houston prone to flooding were under mandatory evacuation orders and thousands of others left as a precautionary measure.

It took us over 20 hours to travel from our home in Sugar Land, Texas, to Dallas—a trip that normally would take about 4.5 hours! Being part of that massive evacuation was a surreal experience. Cats, dogs, horses, RVs, boats, motorcycles; young and old, healthy and infirmed—all took part in this modern “exodus.” Overall, the mood of the evacuees was remarkably calm and, for the most part, folks were more than willing to help each other out along the way. At one point in our journey we joined a line of about 100 cars lined up to get fuel at a gas station—quite a scene! It was an experience we will NEVER forget!

We returned home to a few leaves and twigs on the ground and evidence of a light sprinkle of rain—we never even lost power! Aside from power outages in various parts of the city, Houston essentially escaped the storm unscathed! Our members had exciting tales to tell about their evacuations and reported little or no impact from the storm.

We are thankful we were spared the destruction Rita brought to other parts of our state and Louisiana as well. Houston got back on its feet quickly and things seem to be, for the most part, back in order. Our thanks to everyone for their prayers and concern!