EarthBeat
Justice

The Swannanoa Christian Church holds its first Sunday service since Hurricane Helene. (Grist/*Katie Myers)*

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On the second weekend after Hurricane Helene, Swannanoa Christian Church held its first Sunday service since the storm battered western North Carolina. The sanctuary was piled high with clothes, water, and food, so everyone gathered outdoors. Out in the yard, beneath a clear blue sky and uphill from devastation wrought by the flood, the congregation interspersed prayer with the testimonies of congregants who had pulled people from the water or been pulled from it themselves.

After the service, as congregants lingered to chat or sort donations, Elder Gordon Dasher recounted his church's mission following the storm. "Our goal is to be the kingdom of God here on Earth," the pastor said. "We're getting into the filth, getting dirty, getting sewage and mud on our feet and hands and helping people in the darkest moment of their life. That's number one.

"And number two, what we want to see come out of that is we want people to see at least a glimmer of a light to come on that says God is real, because here are his people right here, side by side with us in our suffering."

Gordon Dasher bows his head during a service at Swannanoa Christian Church. (Grist/Katie Myers)

Dasher and his ministry in Swannanoa are part of a teeming community of faith-based organizations using their deep roots, vast networks of the faithful, and financial means to help in whatever way they can. Beyond the local congregations, Presbyterians, Catholics, Baptists, and many other other denominations rushed in to help, as they so often do after floods and hurricanes and wildfires everywhere. Almost three months later, the sight of church volunteers clearing away rubble, handing out water, or gathering in prayer remains as common as the sight of damaged homes and washed-out roads.

Those who descend on such places are eager to help, and many hope to realize their dreams of a different, better world. They often glimpse a chance to create from the wreckage an ideal based on their aspirations or ideologies. Right-wing militias see in

post-disaster chaos ripe opportunities to recruit and fulfill their goal of undermining trust in the state. Those on the other end of the political spectrum often see a chance to build a more egalitarian society. Dozens have gathered each week at the anarchist bookstore in Asheville to read A Paradise Built in Hell, which explores how communities restructure and establish small utopias in the wake of disaster.

But none of them match the people of faith in scale, ambition, or determination to do good. Churches, synagogues, mosques, and other houses of worship are well positioned to gather resources and mobilize quickly. In rural communities in particular, local churches are natural communal focal points, providing social structure and a trusted information network.

Many denominations, especially within Christianity, also feel divinely called to this work — they undertake it with the belief that they are building the Kingdom of God, a world they're working toward in both the act of disaster relief and, for many, the act of proselytizing. This belief is particularly strong among the evangelically-driven Protestantism of the American South, where, in the aftermath of Helene, faith organizations have been on the ground doing both.

"Strangers, complete strangers, just showing up to help because they love Jesus has been really inspiring," Dasher's daughter Jessica said.

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Churches and faith-based organizations can be nimble responders. As roads throughout the region became passable, churches opened their doors to receive donations and organized volunteers, some of whom came from as far as California, to deliver them.

Their efforts have expanded beyond serving immediate needs like providing food and water and clothing to more ambitious efforts like repairing homes, donating campers and tiny cabins, and providing a bit of financial assistance. The decline in tourism has hit the city of Asheville hard, leaving Buncombe County with the highest unemployment in the state. Even before the county's rent relief program got started, Grace Covenant Presbyterian Church was cutting thousand-dollar checks for residents desperate to avoid eviction.

They're so nimble, in fact, that federal and state relief agencies, mired in the bureaucracy of their work — and whose jobs do not include mucking out or repairing houses, but rather providing the money needed to do so — have come to lean on them. The Federal Emergency Management Agency directs disaster survivors to, and works alongside, long-term recovery groups, which is the government's name for the churches, nonprofits, and businesses that provide the backbone of relief efforts. They are marshaled by what are called voluntary organizations active in disasters. In addition to providing and coordinating boots on the ground, they play key roles in long-term planning and recovery. Churches are so central to this work that the Obama administration established the Office of Faith-Based and Neighborhood Partnerships to train and prepare emergency management officials and congregants to collaborate in the field. (President Trump shuttered the program in 2017; President Biden resurrected it in 2021.)

The Swannanoa First Baptist Church collects donations of food, water, and clothing for the community after Hurricane Helene. (Grist/The Washington Post/Getty Images/Marvin Joseph)

Although most everyone in western North Carolina is grateful for the help, several people expressed reservations about depending so heavily upon the faithful. Others recalled being surprised when volunteers showed up eager to help but wanted to give thanks to God first.

"They started out by holding a prayer circle, and I guess it made me uncomfortable," said one resident of Zionville, which is about 100 miles from Asheville. This person, who did not want to give their name for fear of antagonizing those helping the community, is not opposed to prayer, but felt uncomfortable doing something so intimate with strangers. Still, they relented. "I was worried they weren't gonna fill my driveway if I didn't participate."

The emphasis on faith and conversion can sometimes feel out of sync with people's real needs. Mikaela Curry, a storm survivor and volunteer in Watauga County, North Carolina, recalled church groups offering to cook meals for flood victims and leaving stacks of Bibles behind. "Generally people aren't taking them," she said. "It's kind of this weird dynamic."

Curry has preferred to work with those who don't place so great an emphasis on faith and proselytizing, and has made a particular point of avoiding Samaritan's Purse. The organization, founded by the Reverend Billy Graham, makes clear in its foundational statement of faith, "we believe that marriage is exclusively the union of one genetic male and one genetic female." That leaves Curry and others wondering if the group is truly interested in helping everyone.

Such a question can be fraught, because in some rural counties, Samaritan's Purse is essentially the only charitable organization providing vital help like rent relief assistance.

Shannon Daley, who leads U.S. disaster relief for the international organization, conceded that its volunteers must sign that statement of faith, but said they do not discriminate against anyone needing help. Still, they are, she said, "always wanting to share that message, and about how we can have a personal relationship with the Creator of the universe through his Son."

Helpers may be told not to pass judgement, but that's not to say they don't, said Valentine Reilly. She helps coordinate volunteer efforts in Trade, a small town in the easternmost corner of Tennessee, and recalled instances in which she felt

volunteers questioned the morality of some victims, or set to work without finding out what was needed. "These people are all coming out here to help," she said. "They're all coming out here to do good work. And that's a valuable thing. But some groups do more good work than others."

On a blustery afternoon in November, Sarah Ogletree made tea and reflected on her experience coordinating relief efforts among churches with different social values and priorities. Ogletree lives in Bakersville and has spent more than a decade working at the intersection of faith and environment — a role that has included bringing congregations throughout the region into the fight for climate justice.

Ministries and churches have many reasons to feel called to serving others in times of crisis, she said. She pointed out that the Bible commands it in Matthew 25: "For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me." It's a verse that many denominations take as an instruction from Christ to help the poor and oppressed.

Sarah Ogletree stands in front of downed trees by her house in Bakersville, North Carolina. (Grist/Katie Myers)

"It's that identification with those who are marginalized or who are in need. And I think different traditions within Christianity understand that passage differently," she said. While some see their role as filling this directive through volunteering and community service, others see it as a way of bringing people to God. Some of the more evangelically minded organizations take the lessons a step further, believing that people are more reachable and more receptive to hearing the Gospel during a disaster — a point Fritz Wilson, the former executive director of Southern Baptist Disaster Relief, has made in the past. "Meeting a family's physical needs with practical help starts their healing process, which leads to a sense of hope that things will be better," he has said. "This gives us the opportunity to share a different type of hope that is only found in a relationship with Jesus."

Ogletree has been working with Baptists, Methodists, Presbyterians, Mennonites and other denominations to secure money, building supplies, and other necessities for her neighbors while following her vision of Christian service that overcomes ideological and denominational boundaries in times of crisis. She sometimes worries that faith-based organizations focus too much on "the pitch" — evangelizing and converting — to their detriment, alienating survivors who just want a roof over their head. "I wish more churches showed up in communities simply to be a loving presence," she said.

Even as a religious person, she's not always sure how to navigate that post-disaster dynamic, recalling an instance in which an organization that arrived from out of town with supplies asked to pray before delivering them. "It felt like it was the currency with which this transaction was allowed … like, it's free, but you gotta pray with me. And that felt unfair." The prayer, she said, was sweet, but she found the encounter difficult to process because she knew the prayer was meant to comfort flood survivors, not surprise or shock them.

"Helpers that come into crisis situations, whether you are faith based or religious or not, you have a lot of power in that situation," Ogletree said. "And you are dealing with people that have just been through something super traumatic."

A volunteer packs lunches October 4, 2024, at Clyde First Baptist Church in Clyde, North Carolina. (Grist/Getty Images/Melissa Sue Gerrits)

Not all interactions are transactional, of course, and some people truly are there only to help. For many people in the region, the support of church volunteers and local parishes has anchored them in these hard times.

Ogletree's experiences working with churches in the wake of Helene has been largely positive. In helping people through their trauma, she's found the kind of community she's long dreamed of building, one that overcomes political fractures to assist people in need and meet them where they are. In the South and Appalachia, the church is not only an essential part of many peoples' social life, but a trusted source of information and direction, making it particularly effective at disaster response. "They're at the front lines," Ogletree said. "People know where they are." She dreams of ensuring churches have backup generators, solar power, even Expo markers and whiteboards, to be better prepared for next time. Because there's always a next time.

That's a point Zach Dasher, pastor Gordon's son, made back in September as he preached to congregants still reeling from the devastation Helene brought. It is not unusual in such times for people to struggle with faith, and he clearly hoped to set their minds at ease. "Why all the evil in the world," he asked. "Why all the natural catastrophes and devastation. Where is God in that?"

His answer provided congregants with a framework for understanding what had happened to them. "The kingdom of God is here," he said. "Everything we build can be washed away. Everything can be gone, wind and water can wash it away, picking up whole houses and soil. But the kingdom is far more durable and eternal than that. The Kingdom of God cannot be shaken."

Before ending his sermon, he asked his flock to please treat volunteers from out of state with kindness and respect, and expressed hope that those with damaged homes would take time to rest and let the helpers do their work.

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