

Together we focus on four things: praising God and resting in His presence; trying to be like Jesus; developing deep friendships with others; and joining God's work in putting the world back together.

— Second Baptist Little Rock Vision Statement

Little Rock church sets example for disaster response ministry

By Emily Holladay

When Roy Peterson and Robert Sproles stepped out of their car in Hattiesburg, Miss., devastation surrounded them. Houses along the road were flattened or covered in debris, fallen trees lined roof-tops — the searing pain of loss was palpable.

Peterson and Sproles, members of Second Baptist Church, a Cooperative Baptist Fellowship partner church in Little Rock, Ark., felt compelled to travel to Hattiesburg after the town was overwhelmed by one of the largest disasters in recent history. Nine days after Hurricane Katrina hit Louisiana and Mississippi, the men drove from Little Rock to Hattiesburg with a truck full of tools to help however they could.

Finding a house covered in fallen trees and a homeowner unable to clean the damage by herself, Peterson and Sproles took out their chainsaw and began cutting. As they removed the trees, piece by piece, a neighbor walked up to the house.

“How much are you charging this lady to take down those trees?” the neighbor asked.

When they told the man that they were doing the work for free, the man picked up a few tools lying on the ground and said, “Well, if you're working for free, then I can too!”

The actions of Peterson and Sproles were not only contagious to others in the community who saw their good service. Back home in Little Rock, their fellow church members at Second Baptist were planning ways to further extend response

efforts to the varied needs of the victims of Hurricane Katrina.

“Our efforts were deep, wide and heartfelt, but a bit unorganized at the start,” Peterson explained. “When we got home, we found that the church had developed a disaster response task force to organize our response, and I was named the leader!”

Peterson and his newly-created team received substantial gifts from church members and the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship of Arkansas for relief efforts, and returned to Hattiesburg four times after his initial trip with Sproles.

“When Hurricane Katrina hit, I had been the coordinator of CBF of Arkansas for eight months,” Ray Higgins recalled. “In order for us to respond to our Louisiana neighbors, we needed a disaster response coordinator, and we needed a lead church. Charles Ray became our coordinator, working initially as a volunteer. Second Baptist Little Rock became our lead church. The church is a creative, committed and holistic mission partner in all aspects of CBF life — missions and ministry, including disaster response.”

Hurricane Katrina relief was only the beginning for Second

Baptist. With Tornado Alley not far away, the church is no stranger to devastation caused by deadly twisters and other natural disasters. Responding to Hurricane Katrina affirmed that they could make a difference and ignited a passion to do more.

Since 2005, the church has made 27 domestic trips to aid in disaster response, in addition to three trips to Haiti after the catastrophic earthquake in 2010 that took more than 100,000 lives and destroyed more than twice as many homes.

“Second Baptist has forgotten what it was like to *not* be responding to the needs of others,” remarked former CBF disaster response coordinator Charles Ray. “They have had more than 25 deployments and have been called on by Alabama,



PHOTOS COURTESY OF SECOND BAPTIST CHURCH

Second Baptist Church is one of CBF's strongest partners in disaster relief. The church's disaster response team travels to sites across the country to remove debris, trees and other wreckage caused by devastating storms and other natural disasters.



Mississippi, Missouri, Louisiana and Oklahoma. Using lessons learned from these constant deployments, CBF national response efforts are quickly becoming some of the country's leading efforts."

Setting an example within their own community, Second Baptist's team inspired churches in the area to come together for ecumenical disaster response. Churches United is comprised of First United Methodist, Christ Episcopal, Central Church of Christ and Second Baptist, and responds to all disasters within an hour of Little Rock.

The group meets together several times a year to build relationships and continue to organize their response efforts, so they will be prepared when a disaster strikes.

"We try to assess who needs help and how our skills best fit in each individual disaster," explained Chris Ellis, Second Baptist's minister of mission and outreach, and liaison to Churches United. "If there's a tornado in Little Rock, we'll be there!"

Most recently, the church sent teams to Moore, Okla., to serve victims of the May 2013 tornadoes that demolished most of the city.

While in Oklahoma, just outside of Moore, the team met a man who had heard the tornado sirens and immediately evacuated his house to stay in his storm shelter. When the storm was over, he stepped out of the shelter to assess the damage. The damage was so overwhelming that he estimated that it would take him at least 10 years to restore the property.

Second Baptist's team came to help remove debris, cut trees, repair the roof and anything else they could do. "By the time we were finished, the man said, 'I thought I had 10 years of work, but you all got it

down to one year!'" exclaimed Herb Moore, a member of Second Baptist's disaster response team. "Roy [Peterson] decided we should keep working and told the man that we would get it down to half a year's work."

This unstoppable attitude has driven Second Baptist in their disaster response ministry over the past eight years. The group is determined to make the greatest possible impact in the lives of the people they serve, always going a step further than expected, never asking for anything in return.

"We're just doing it to help," said Moore. "The most meaningful thing about our work is knowing that we get to help somebody that might not get help otherwise. This truly is the work of the church."

In addition to providing services that help disaster victims get their property back in order, the Second Baptist team is committed to bringing a spiritual element to the work they do. Each day when they arrive at a work site, they participate in morning prayers with one another and the people they came to serve.

"Roy really impresses upon us that we're not just there to do work," said Sharon Henry, a Second Baptist member. "If the homeowner wants to talk, we are also there to listen. It is an honor to be present for people when they want to talk or vent. It's really an emotional time for these people, and we want to be available for them in that way as well."

In 2005, Roy Peterson and Robert Sproles had no idea how deep and wide their efforts to help Hurricane Katrina victims would extend. Starting with two men and one trip, Second Baptist has empowered more than 20 people at a time to bring hope to individuals and families



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experiencing the immediate and life-altering devastation of a natural disaster.

"Since Hurricane Katrina, Second Baptist Little Rock's Disaster Response Team has been one of the first in which CBF Disaster Response can count on after an event occurs," said Tommy Deal, CBF U.S. disaster response coordinator. "They are ready and willing to go and lend whatever help is needed, and have been instrumental in helping CBF share the presence of Christ by offering relief and service to communities in need."

Truly a movement within the church, these efforts have been almost entirely lay led and continue the church's mission of *trying to be like Jesus, developing deep friendships with others and joining God's work in putting the world back together.*

"When you're out there working, you realize the importance of being the presence of Christ," Henry commented. "You don't have to be a preacher to do Christ's work. You really begin to understand how important the little things are to the people you are helping and to Christ."