

STATE AND ASSOCIATIONAL MISSIONS INVOLVEMENT IN NATURAL DISASTERS

DR. EMIL TURNER
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR
ARKANSAS BAPTIST STATE CONVENTION

There was an atmosphere of revival among them. The music was louder, more enthusiastic, the preacher was more animated, and even the Sunday School director was excited about giving the Sunday School report. The church was a rural, “smaller membership” congregation with a bi-vocational pastor, but this Sunday there was a sense of significance that had not been there in a long time.

What was responsible for the excitement? Hurricane Katrina.

Their first mission trip served people who had been displaced by this terrible natural disaster. The impact was tremendous. They fed hungry people, encouraged people who had no hope, gave away possessions to those who had nothing, prayed with people, and led lost people to Christ. The small, rural, congregation had been the Body of Christ serving people in need.

At the second anniversary of Katrina’s arrival there have been reports and news articles that stress the impact of volunteers on the residents of New Orleans. And a few have reported on the impact that has been made on the churches and church members that volunteered. And that impact has been powerful.

But the untold story is the critically important involvement of associations and state conventions in the relief efforts. We can not expect the reporters for major newspapers to understand how Baptist organizations and entities facilitate the relief work. They can not tell our story. While some Baptist newspaper reporters do understand the involvement of foundational Baptist organizations in the relief efforts, they rarely report on this involvement. I am grateful for this opportunity to make a brief presentation of the involvement of state conventions and associations in touching lives at such a critical time.

I do not believe the ministry to Gulf Coast or to other areas ravaged by disasters would have been as effective without the involvement of local Baptist associations and the state conventions.

Southern Baptist disaster relief occurs every Sunday morning when church members give their tithes and offerings. The next step in the process is the vote of the church in its business meeting to give a percentage of those undesignated receipts to the Cooperative Program, and associational budgets. A third step is taken when the church gives to its state missions offering. The state convention and the association are involved at the very outset in promoting and encouraging this giving. Though it takes place in the local church, different personnel in the state conventions and the Associational Missionary has made the case for such financial sacrifice in order to touch lives outside the immediate community of

that local church. This is the fountainhead of the disaster relief work. Without the Cooperative Program, associational giving, and state missions offerings, Disaster Relief as we know it would not exist. And without state conventions and associations, those offerings and gifts would not exist.

Associations and state conventions provide the “hardware” for disaster relief. Feeding units (mobile kitchens that can prepare large numbers of meals), chain saws, building materials, mobile shower units, generators, tractor-trailer combinations, material handling equipment, pressure washers, and a myriad of other items are purchased by state conventions and associations so that when a disaster strikes, the necessary tools are in place. Usually this equipment is strategically located within the state conventions that have purchased or helped to purchase them. When a disaster strikes this equipment is deployed quickly, and precisely to the place where the needs are greatest. The Cooperative Program gifts, associational budgets, and state missions offerings are the resources that purchase and maintain this valuable and often life-saving equipment. Before Katrina’s winds stopped blowing in New Orleans, mobile kitchens were in operation in that city to feed people who had nothing to eat. More than 17 million meals were served by these units. The equipment that prepared the meals, the food that was prepared, and the transportation to the disaster site were all provided by the state conventions and associations.

Not only is the “hardware” amassed by associations and state conventions, but its deployment is coordinated by them as well. This coordination begins long before a hurricane comes ashore or a terrorist flies a plane into a tower. Coordination begins with recruitment and training. Recruiting volunteers is easy in the first few days after a disaster, but state conventions and associations recruit a large cadre of volunteers that are already available before the disaster. If no one was recruited prior to a disaster, the delay in meeting needs could be tragic. Furthermore, in the weeks after a disaster, when volunteers are suffering “compassion fatigue”, the recruiting of relief workers must continue unabated. The exhaustion of a group of volunteers has nothing to do with whether or not the needs have been met. Others must be ready to take their places.

Volunteers who have been recruited must be trained. Sometimes the need for training is obvious, other times it is not. Running chainsaws after a storm obviously requires training, but feeding people requires training in food preparation, hygiene, and resource allocation. Training in basic counseling skills is critical to any disaster relief effort. Because of the compassion of Southern Baptists, associations and state conventions have recruited and trained the largest and most effective volunteer force in America.

Most state conventions have either a staff person or a volunteer whose responsibility it is to put prepare a response to natural and man-made disasters. This person’s work is supplemented by others on the staff of the state convention whose duties parallel or intersect with this responsibility. Prayer coordinators, chaplains, counselors, and others are involved with and subject to the Disaster Relief Coordinator when such an event occurs. Usually, the state convention staff member relates to local emergency preparedness officials and to the Red Cross staff and FEMA representatives. These agencies have come to depend on the resources that associations and state conventions have in place. When a disaster occurs, it is not unusual to find that most of the meals reported by the Red Cross or FEMA,

have really been served by Southern Baptist volunteers who have been recruited, trained, and deployed by associations and state conventions.

The deployment of volunteers is a key component in the response of state conventions and associations to a disaster. Good stewardship of the compassion and abilities of volunteers is left to our Baptist organizations in times of crisis. Unless volunteers are deployed strategically, all of them show up at the same time, minimizing the effectiveness of all. Two years after Katrina has worked her destruction in New Orleans, state conventions and associations are still sending a stream of workers to serve those whose needs have not yet been met. Without this stewardship, help would be neither timed nor timely.

How does a carpenter from Crossroads, Arkansas (population, 135) get involved in hanging sheetrock in a home on St. Roche Street in New Orleans? Does he drive to New Orleans, walk up to the nearest house and offer to hang sheetrock? No. The Associational Missionary in Muddy River Association in northeast Arkansas promotes a training conference for disaster relief workers. The pastor of Crossroads Church responds by talking to church members about how they can grow as Christians and have a ministry to needy people. The carpenter's heart is moved and he signs up for the training. The Arkansas Baptist State Convention buys equipment, pays for a meal, sends trained relief worker to the Muddy River Association. The carpenter learns how his trade can be his ministry. His name is added to a list of trained volunteers. Then Hurricane Katrina roars ashore.

What happens next? Immediately, trained Disaster Relief volunteers and staff evaluate the needs and make decisions about what resources to provide. Sometimes the Red Cross or FEMA may request certain resources, but usually state convention staff members, communicating with locally affected Baptist associations, decide what is needed and begin to call volunteers transport and provide services. As the extent of the disaster becomes clearer, more and more resources are sent to the crisis area. The carpenter back in Crossroads has joined his fellow church members in prayer for those who have been displaced and whose needs are so apparent. Soon the state convention disaster relief personnel, sometimes in conjunction with NAMB, always in conjunction with the local association, establishes an area in which volunteers from the state convention can be channeled. The Muddy River Associational Missionary gets the call that crews are needed to help in New Orleans. The pastor at Crossroads prays and asks God to provide the necessary workers. A crew of men and women from Crossroads and other churches in the association, volunteer to spend a week with the state convention volunteer coordinator in New Orleans. Now the carpenter is "on board". That coordinator will locate a place for Crossroads' volunteers to stay, assign them homes on which they will work, and provide information and resources for them. The Associational Missionary will often accompany them to New Orleans and work along side the laymen from his association. The carpenter will work on a shotgun house in the Gentilly area of New Orleans. The elderly couple who live there will meet Baptists for the first time in their lives. And the carpenter, between sheets of drywall, will tell them how he was saved. They will hear the gospel. Their home will be rebuilt. They will never understand how the Cooperative Program, the state missions offering, or the state convention and the Muddy River Association came into play. But eternity will be changed.

The Sunday after the mission trip, back in Crossroads, Arkansas “there was an atmosphere of revival among them. The music was louder, more enthusiastic, the preacher was more animated, and even the Sunday School director was excited about giving the Sunday School report. The church was a rural, smaller membership congregation with a bi-vocational pastor, but this Sunday there was a sense of significance that had not been there in a long time.”

There is yet another aspect of associational and state convention work that is important to the story. The carpenter from Crossroads learned the extent of the crisis, the opportunity for his skills to be implemented, the potential for making a difference, and spiritual significance of such service because of the ministries of his associational missionary and state convention staff. Without such ministries, while the Crossroads church would no doubt have prayed for the victims of the disaster, it is unlikely that they could have conceived a role to play in the crisis.

Make no mistake; nothing happens without churches, pastors, and laypersons who volunteer. But without the work of the state conventions and associations, many live who would have died, many know Christ who once were lost, many have homes and food who would have had nothing. The impact of associations and state conventions at such a time can not be overstated.

But what is the impact on associations and state conventions? “Great in every respect.”

Associations are given new vision for missions, and associational missionaries become resource “managers” who recruit and allocate personnel and material for service to needy people. The value of the association to local churches is enhanced as the association becomes the key unit in providing ministry. Today there are voices who suggest that associations have outlived their usefulness. But you will not hear these voices in New Orleans, or at the World Trade Center sites, or anywhere relief work is being done.

State conventions are also impacted by such efforts. Their ability to raise the state missions offerings is enhanced as people realize how their gifts are used. The profile of the state convention looms large as church leaders realize that it is the most effective means of accomplishing this vital work. As churches become more sacrificial and more “missional”, the state convention is strengthened.

No one rejoices at the occurrence of a disaster. However, God has always used disasters to reveal what His people are “on the inside”. Recent disaster relief efforts have helped highlight the value of associations and state conventions. May God give us more ways to serve those who have no hope without Him.