

N E W S

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Baton Rouge flood calms racial tensions

By Norman Jameson

In a strange irony the floodwaters spreading misery without regard to race or creed have calmed the racial tensions in Baton Rouge, LA.

Floods with odds of occurring only once in a millennium have washed downstream – at least temporarily – tensions caused by multiple shootings in July. First, police shot and killed Alton Sterling and then July 17 three policeman were murdered while on patrol and their shooter was slain by police.

In the city soaked by torrential rains and flood waters, pastor S.C. Dixon sees “white men carrying black women on their backs to a boat, black men doing the same for white women and black and white men working in boats together.”

“The city has been in uproar and tension,” said Dixon, pastor of Greater Mount Olive Missionary Baptist Church in Baton Rouge. “I saw God doing something with this city that needed to be done, even though it took a catastrophe to bring people back together again.”

A steady rain fell on the Dixon roof when he and his family went to sleep in Central, LA., a suburb of Baton Rouge, on Friday, Aug. 12. By the time they woke on Saturday, they were trapped with water knee deep in their house and waist deep in the yard and all roads closed to their subdivision. They did not get out until a young deacon guided a rescue boat to them that evening.

Normally Baton Rouge receives 2.5 inches of rain during the first two weeks of August, according to weather service data. This year, 21 inches – more than 8 times as much – soaked the city during that period.

An area just north of Baton Rouge received over 26 inches of rainfall in 72 hours. Louisiana received more rain in the last few days than Bakersfield, Calif. had received in the last 5-and-a-half years.

The North American Baptist Fellowship regional arm of Baptist World Alliance is working to encourage disaster response to churches, like Greater Mount Olive and True Light Baptist Church, which is offering its facilities to Greater Mount Olive for worship and office space.

True Light (phone [225-383-3912](tel:225-383-3912)) is opening itself next week to host volunteers overnight. Temporary housing for volunteers is virtually non-existent otherwise.

Sam Tolbert, president of both the North American Baptist Fellowship and the National Baptist Convention of America International, Inc., who coordinated relief efforts by the NBCA and Lott Carey Baptist Foreign Mission Conventions after Hurricanes Katrina and Rita, said that one of the biggest challenges for churches is that pastors and members must first tend to their own homes and families.

He said many of the thousands who have been displaced were renters, who have no control over when their landlord will restore their residences, if ever. He surmises that a large percentage – maybe most – would have no renter's insurance and certainly no flood insurance. He said he's heard only 12 percent of all affected homes have flood insurance.

In Lake Charles, 130 miles west of Baton Rouge, where Tolbert is pastor of Greater Saint Mary Missionary Baptist Church, there was basically no flooding. But as president of the NBCA, Tolbert is concerned for all of his churches, pastors and members. He had no definitive estimate as of Wednesday of the number of churches that were damaged by the flooding.

He had six requests for people who want to help:

1. Pray. "Some may discount prayer, but I don't," he said.
2. Volunteers to help clean up churches and homes.
3. Relief funds. Send to the NBCA home missions office, 2723 S. Marsalis Ave., Dallas, TX 75216. Phone [\(214\) 942-3311](tel:214-942-3311)
4. Essential non-perishables: food, water, boxes, personal hygiene items, paper towels, large buckets with lids, disposable masks, baby wipes, diapers, bleach, baby formula, gloves (both work and rubber), disinfectant, toilet paper, trash bags, cleaning sponges, mops and brooms and clean, folded clothes. Ship these items to Greater Saint Mary's warehouse, established after Hurricane Katrina and kept operating ever since. ADDRESS: GSM Hope Complex 1401 Moeling St., Lake Charles, LA 70601.
5. Pastors to act as counselors at the estimated 75 shelters set up throughout the state.
6. Volunteers to work at the distribution center. Email resident coordinator Pauline Hurst at bjmaxonjr@yahoo.com

Dixon endured a double whammy when floods claimed both his house and his church. He couldn't get to his church until the water receded Tuesday. When he finally opened the doors to Greater Mount Olive, the sight hit him "like an uppercut to the gut."

Pews had shifted in the sanctuary, where water reached four feet up the walls. In his office tables were turned over, chairs, papers and books scattered everywhere. "It took the wind out of me and I had to close the door," Dixon said.

Despite his own house being uninhabitable, he has put out an “all hands on deck” request for volunteers to come to the church Thursday to begin clean up. Until his congregation can reoccupy the facility, they have been offered meeting space at True Light Baptist Church, a fellow NBCA congregation.

Pray for peace of mind

When asked how people should pray, Dixon suggested prayer for “peace of mind.” Such catastrophe can cause people to lose perspective and hope.

“Pray for peace in their homes because things of this magnitude can bring on tension between husband and wife,” Dixon said. “The devil will use their lack of dwelling, lack of finances and a lot of other things to try to bring division and keep husband and wife snapping at each other. They are charting unfamiliar territory.”

He said many people will be unemployed as businesses are closed, including the academy at his church that now has no place to house its students.

George Bullard, formerly general secretary of the North American Baptist Fellowship is volunteering this week at the request of Tolbert. Victims are just in the first stage of disaster response, which is rescue and relief. Still to come when the shock wears off is recovery and rebuilding.

“Get ready,” Bullard urged the 30 member bodies of North American Baptist Fellowship. “This is going to take a long-term commitment and investment.”

Finding the rare sliver of light in a dark mess, Dixon said his daughter Diamond kept the family laughing while they waited for rescue. The 13-year-old said, “Mommy, you know we’ve been talking about cleaning up for a long time. God is going to make us clean up now.”

The house, which is insured, was for sale so S.C., his wife, Jacqueline and Diamond could move to a district with a “blue ribbon” school for Diamond. When the flood came, Diamond said the Lord made the decision for them. Nobody will want to buy the house now, she said, “so the Lord is saying to us ‘stay where you are.’”

Perhaps because of Diamond’s optimism, Dixon hopes to be “back to normal” in six months.

“It’s going to be challenging,” he said. “But we shall rise again.”