

Storming

Two hurricanes dealt them devastating blows, but members along the Gulf Coast are slowly and optimistically rebuilding their lives.

BY NORMAN C. HILL AND RICHARD M. ROMNEY

Photographs by Richard M. Romney
and courtesy of members in affected areas

It was like someone took our entire town and put it in a blender,” says Alfred Trahan, remembering how Hurricane Rita ravaged Cameron, Louisiana, late in 2005. Even though it has been a year and a half since the devastation, Cameron still looks like a war zone.

“This *was* the foundation of our house,” Brother Trahan says on a visit back to Cameron, pointing at a concrete slab. “It’s all that’s left.” It’s a similar story at his mother’s property, except the shell of her house can still be found—500 yards from its foundation, lodged against some trees.

“For a while we salvaged what we could out of the mud,” Brother Trahan explains. “Sometimes what we found amazed us—things like my son’s \$5 wristwatch that was still ticking, or the piggy bank that belonged to our daughter’s friend. She lived two blocks away, but the piggy bank ended up in our yard.”

Moving Ahead

Like most Latter-day Saints living along the Gulf Coast after Hurricanes Rita and Katrina, the Trahans put fear behind them and moved on, relying on faith that the Lord



Back



"The Lord does temper the elements. Yes, we had a lot of people who had damage. But time after time we saw that trees had fallen parallel to the houses rather than on the houses. It was scary to think what could have happened if the trees had fallen the other way."

Nelwyn Marion, Texas

Left: The Trahans and their daughter stand on the foundation at his mother's property. Her house lodged against trees or it would have washed away completely. Right: Their son's watch, found in the mud still ticking.

Above: Jerry and Nelwyn Marion show what's left of a flag that flew outside their home.





“If you live along the Gulf Coast, you must prepare for hurricanes, just as if you live along the fault lines in California or Utah, you must prepare for earthquakes. The prophets have warned us. The question is how well will we prepare.” Joe Clarke, Louisiana

Opposite page, top: Cheryl and Bruce Jackson remember the many LDS volunteer work crews, shown here and on following pages, that came to provide relief.

Bottom: Johnny W. Ross is rebuilding his “secret garden.”

would help them to recover. “We’ve learned that even in the toughest times, Heavenly Father is nearby,” Sister Trahan says. “And we’ve learned to be grateful for what we have instead of missing what is gone.”

For a while the Trahans lived in a trailer parked on relatives’ property. Now they live in a “fixer-upper” home in Lake Charles, a bigger city 35 miles north, where they plan to stay for a year or two until they can return to Cameron, “as soon as a grocery store opens.”

Brother Trahan’s wife, Claire, finds a way to lighten up about all they have endured. Shortly after the hurricane, she joked about how easy it was to tidy up when the home teachers came over. “All you do is wash off the concrete and set out some folding chairs.” More recently, she chuckled about a home, family, and personal enrichment lesson in Lake Charles. “The subject was how to reduce clutter in your house. That’s really not a problem—our clutter is long gone.”

In many ways, the Trahans typify Latter-day Saints all over the Gulf

Coast. They are not just survivors; they are people of faith. And there are thousands of them, Latter-day Saints storming back from the storms, decidedly optimistic and eager to move forward.

Thriving and Growing

Take Johnny W. Ross, for example. President of the Orange Texas Stake, he not only organized and participated in relief efforts for victims of Hurricane Katrina but also guided members of his own stake through Hurricane Rita the next month. And when all of that was done, he had to clean up his own property.

“I used to have a private place I called my secret garden,” he says. Tall trees shaded a little grove where he liked to sit and think. “Now my secret garden has been revealed,” he laughs, and says the Lord must have decided it was time to prune the trees.

He says that sharing a common experience, even a difficult one, helps build unity in wards and stakes. “In one fell swoop, everybody in this stake had something in common,” he explains. “We *all* lived through the storm, and we *all* have a story we can relate to. We think about the tender mercies of the Lord because we’ve seen those mercies in our lives.”

Helping Everyone

There is a similar optimism in Slidell, Louisiana. Bruce Jackson,





who joined the Church five years ago, typifies that spirit of hope. He stands with his wife, Cheryl, inside their jewelry shop on Pontchartrain Drive. Even though the store is four miles from the lake, it was flooded five feet deep with water. Brother Jackson is also a former race car driver, and the storm surge destroyed his automobile shop and all the vehicles in it. He also lost his home, the house he built for his disabled mother before she died, and another home he built for his father. What's more, the Jacksons lost all of their clothing and personal belongings, and because the damage was from flooding, it wasn't covered by insurance.

"It would be easy to just to throw your hands up, walk away, and have a sour attitude," says Brother Jackson, "But the way I'm looking at it is that I'm blessed to have made it through the storm. My wife and children are safe, and we have each other. And the support from people in the Church has been overwhelming. Ward members kept coming by and

saying, 'Keep your head up; things are going to work out.'

"During one of the darkest times," he continues, "I asked for a priesthood blessing."

"The next day," Sister Jackson joins in, "we got up with a whole different outlook. We went into our home and just started working, working, working." A Mormon Helping Hands crew of 12 men came to remove damaged carpet, flooring, and wallboard.

The Jacksons explain that it was "phenomenal" to witness such relief efforts. "It was like watching the Church step up and hit a home run," Brother Jackson says.





“It isn’t the material things you lose that you miss; it’s the things that bring back pleasant memories, like family photos. But with the comfort of the gospel, you know that in eternity the good things will be restored to you.”

Barbara Baesle,
Louisiana

“People know we’re LDS,” Sister Jackson adds. “And even though it’s been quite a while since the storm, they still tell us how Helping Hands cut up a tree, moved debris, tore out damaged wallboard, or provided food.” One of their business associates was so impressed she decided to investigate the Church.

Mike Dohm is another Latter-day Saint who saw firsthand how Church efforts were appreciated in Slidell. As coordinator of command center field operations, he and others from the bishops’ storehouse worked with

community leaders, other churches, and officials from Church headquarters to organize distribution of relief supplies and coordinate assignments for volunteer work crews. He notes that every faith-based group in the city was involved in recovery operations, but the LDS Church effort was especially well organized, arrived quickly, and provided consistent help for months. Thousands of LDS volunteers came from all over the region, some driving hundreds of miles, working all weekend, then returning to their homes.

At a city meeting Slidell’s mayor said that assistance from Mormon Helping Hands was like having 5,000 additional city workers, without the need of additional payroll. The 200 community leaders in attendance “exploded in applause,” Brother Dohm remembers. “That’s how the community feels about us now.”

Bishop Steven Baxter of the Lake Charles Ward also notes that many churches and



volunteer groups helped during the times of crisis. “Latter-day Saints don’t have a corner on charity,” he says. “It’s just that on a Churchwide basis we are so well prepared that we can follow up quickly on our good intentions. People in the community came to us because they knew that we could get things done. The relief effort showed me and all of our neighbors as well that Latter-day Saints are not alone, that during times of distress my brothers and sisters of the Church will be here for me, and for them.”

Learning about Faith and Love

“Tree Cuttin’ and House Guttin’ ”—for months, such handmade signs were posted all over the devastated town of Waveland, Mississippi. Many homes were completely swept away by storm surge. Others were so flooded they had to have all the carpet and plasterboard removed. Many people lived in government-furnished trailers for months.

Sitting in the foyer at the Waveland Ward building, Terrie Garrett reminisces. “The commercial building next door had four feet of water inside,” she recalls, “but our meetinghouse had only a foot and a half. It was as if the Lord put a bubble over the church because He knew we needed it. In the days and weeks after the storm, the members came here. They put their names on a bulletin board to say they were OK. It was like a refuge to say ‘somebody knows.’ ”

She remembers how ward leaders worked with Church officials to



prepare for 200 Mormon Helping Hands coming to assist with cleanup the week after the storm. “What we did first was to find our people. They had scattered everywhere. We went to see if their homes had been washed away, to find out what their needs were.” Her husband, working with a ward address list, helped prepare work orders for every Latter-day Saint. “It didn’t matter if they had been coming to church or if we hadn’t seen them in years. We just wanted to make sure they were all right.” She says there are several members who, because of contacts made following the hurricane, have started coming back to church.

Melanie Cuevas remembers returning to her home in Bay St. Louis, Mississippi, after the evacuation. “We had heard that our house was still there, but that it was off the foundation,” she recalls. “We thought maybe we could move it back and live in it. We also run a millwork shop. So I was thinking, even if the house is no good, if the shop is there we’ll still be OK because we’ll have a job and we’ll be able to get going. But when we got here, we saw that the house was gone, the shop was gone, and all of

HELP WAS ABUNDANT

The effort to help victims of Hurricanes Katrina and Rita was the largest response ever by the Church to a disaster in the United States. Although the Church is still helping, here is a summary of what has been done.

- Anticipating the need for relief in areas affected by the hurricanes, the Church prepositioned truckloads of supplies in staging areas nearby.
- More than 200 truckloads of commodities and relief supplies were delivered for distribution.
- Almost five million pounds of food and water were contributed.
- Volunteers made 40,000 linen sets, 60,000 cleaning kits, 70,000 kitchen kits, 250,000 school kits, and nearly a million hygiene kits.
- About 4,000 refugees were temporarily housed in 20 Church buildings.
- Approximately 10,000 Church members, mostly from the southern states, worked for months to clear downed trees and power lines, remove mud, tear out damaged wall-board and carpet, and disinfect homes. Crews came every weekend for three months, until public services could once again handle the volume of tasks remaining.
- Church volunteers provided more than 42,000 man-days.





Left: Many survivors painted messages on what remained of their homes.

Above: The Cuevas family recalls how priesthood blessings helped.

SUGGESTIONS FROM SURVIVORS

“Be both spiritually and temporally prepared,” says Charlotte Moore of the Waveland Ward in Mississippi. “Have food and water in your home, gas up your car, and know when the storm is coming. Then you’re not struggling to deal with basic needs, and you can take care of your family and serve others.” Here are some other suggestions from those who survived the hurricanes.

Evacuation, travel, communication

- Take evacuation orders seriously. Leave as early as you can.
- Travel in caravans. “It may slow you down a little, but there’s security in knowing you’re in a group,” says President Johnny Ross of the Orange Texas Stake.
- Be aware of gridlock. Highways may be tied up with evacuating traffic. Leave early to avoid it. Back roads may be open when major interstates are clogged.
- Contact your home teacher or other priesthood leaders, and let them know your plans. When you get to an evacuation center, check in and let them know where you are headed.

Evacuation centers

- Know where you can go ahead of time. If possible, have a plan to stay with family or friends.

Emergency supplies

- Gasoline. If you know a disaster is on the way, keep your gas tank full and have extra gas containers filled well in advance.
- Extension cords.
- Cash. Get it out of the bank in advance, or keep a small emergency supply if you

can. “If you wait until everyone else is taking money from the bank, it will be empty,” cautions Melissa Moore of the Williamson Third Ward, Orange Texas Stake.

- Ward roster or address list. “You might not think of it first off,” says Keith Crossley, also of the Williamson Third Ward. “But when we were asked to start checking on people’s homes, it came in really handy.”
- Prescription medication.
- Flashlight with extra batteries.
- Portable, battery-powered radio.
- Waterproof matches.
- Fire extinguisher.
- First aid kit and instruction book.
- Blankets and sheets.
- Duct tape. At evacuation centers, duct tape came in handy for making labels and signs.
- Change of clothes.
- Adequate supply of food and water.
- Coloring books and crayons. These will give your children something to do during long hours of waiting.
- Favorite games, toys, and books.
- Consecrated oil.
- Scriptures.

For those who stay and those who return

- Turn off gas and electricity.
- Don’t open doors or windows during a storm. The change in pressure may cause destruction.
- Beware of downed power lines. To avoid electrical shock, treat every power line as if it is live.
- Take as many belongings as possible off the floor, or move them to a higher floor.

the equipment was destroyed. We were homeless, jobless, and all we had was what we had taken with us.”

“There’s a time when reality hits,” says her husband, Donald. “You understand that you’re alive, you’re safe, and it’s time to move on. But which way do you move? When we prayed about it, we felt that the Lord wants us here for a reason, but He hasn’t completely told us why. We lost pretty much everything we had except our seven children. But the answer to our prayers has been clear— that we’re supposed to stay here. So we’re here, and we’re going to rebuild.”

Sister Cuevas remembers the power of priesthood blessings. “I was so unsure about what to do,” she says. “But my husband gave me a blessing, and then the bishop gave him a blessing. I’ve never been more grateful for the priesthood in all my life. After that, my mind became clear. I was calm and realized what we had to do. I knew it was going to be a long road with lots of hard work. But I was at peace, and I knew we were going to be OK.”

Today, the Cuevas family, like the Trahan family and thousands of other Latter-day Saints across the Gulf Coast,



“By working together, we’re rebuilding our homes and communities. Through our combined efforts, the Church is literally coming out of obscurity. It’s like we have lifted a lantern in a darkened area, and not only can we see farther ourselves but others also see and are attracted by our elevated light.”

Kim Crossley with her family, Texas

WHAT ABOUT MY NEIGHBOR?

Hurricanes, floods, earthquakes, and other natural disasters are community hardships, not just individual misfortunes. Like Joseph of old, who directed food storage plans that included enough grain not only for Pharaoh’s household but also for Egypt and her neighbors, members of the Houston Texas (Spanish) Stake are involving their neighbors in emergency planning.

As they prepare their own emergency kits and food storage plans, stake members are asked to include friends and neighbors in their efforts, and as they develop emergency response plans, they are encouraged to develop them together with the rest of the community. The stake has prepared a Spanish-language brochure that can easily be shared with neighbors, but members are committed to go beyond just handing out a brochure, explains Mario Salcedo, stake preparedness specialist. “Instead, we

support joint planning, joint preparation, and joint arrangements,” he says.

According to Cheryl Driggs, Houston area LDS preparedness specialist, Church members have taken to heart the counsel that sharing ideas and plans is truly following the Savior’s counsel to love our neighbors. “It’s easier to work together than to work alone,” she says, explaining that the idea “isn’t to do something *for* their neighbors but to do something *along with* their neighbors.”

The Houston Spanish stake’s plan is based on principles represented in the good Samaritan story. “It involves making plans together with trusted friends who live close enough to encourage each other to buy something extra each visit to the grocery store, perhaps share costs on expensive preparedness items, and look out for each other in the event of an emergency. It’s helping ourselves as well as sharing what we know in a way that also helps our neighbors,” Brother Salcedo concludes.

is moving forward with faith. They are rebuilding a house and rebuilding their lives. They continue to pray, to believe, and to live the gospel of Jesus Christ. They are storming back from adversity, sure in the knowledge that even when the hurricane rages, they are in the hands of the Lord. ■

Even though the devastation was enormous, members all over the Gulf Coast are rebounding and rebuilding, both on their own and with help from others.

