

# Baptists on Mission among helpers at work in Western NC after Helene devastation

BY MARTHA QUILLIN  
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Until last week, Bill White had the kind of home in Arden, just south of Asheville, that real estate agents would describe as park-like, with a lot so dense with trees it was hard to see the house from the road.

Then destructive remnants of Hurricane Helene came through and did some unwelcome landscaping, dropping at least

10 mature trees, including a four-trunk oak that landed on the house.

White, 86, was just about to climb onto the roof and size up the damage Monday afternoon when a trio of men from the N.C. Baptists on Mission pulled into his driveway and started unloading chainsaws and limb loppers.

“This is unbelievable,” White kept saying, his sea-blue eyes filling with tears. “It’s unbelievable that they do this.”

Craig Schomburg, John Miller and Mark Cantrell have been doing this together for years. They know each other from Apex Baptist Church, and now that they’re retired, they have the time to travel to the places where people are the most relieved to see them.

Between them, they have done disaster relief in several states, and regularly volunteer at the Baptist on Mission’s Rose Hill outpost, where workers still are rebuilding

homes lost in Hurricane Florence n 2018.

This week, they’re working with teams based at Biltmore Baptist Church, where several disaster-relief efforts have converged in response to the widespread need Helene created.

The Baptists have set up two of their mass-feeding kitchens behind the church and have been preparing meals for students and faculty at UNC-Asheville, a nursing home in Asheville and some of

the shelters around Buncombe County where people are staying—because their homes are uninhabitable.

Feed the Hunger has delivered thousands of bags of pre-mixed rice and pasta meals that church volunteers were giving away Monday along with donated bags of ice and cases of water. Inside the church more volunteers were sorting gifts of baby diapers, formula and other items displaced residents will need.

Drinking water has been an urgent need since the storm. The city of Asheville had to shut off water to make repairs to its system and those on wells in rural communities need electricity to power pumps.

Biltmore Baptist’s pastor, Jason Gaston, who used to serve Raleigh’s Summit Church, has been

working with Raleigh sources to bring in some of the water and other supplies. Monday afternoon, a line of cars wrapped around Biltmore Baptist’s parking lot as residents rolled through and volunteers placed the items in their trunks or back seats.

The campus bustled with the work of more than 100 volunteers Monday.

“Hope showed up today,” Gaston said. “Hope has been here, of course, but hope showed up tangibly for our community today.”

Watching the chainsaw crew work in his yard a few miles away, Bill White agreed.

“It’s here,” he said.

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# Helene shuts down Spruce Pine mine that is pivotal to world’s semiconductor supply

BY BRIAN GORDON  
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The remnants of Hurricane Helene ripped through the Western North Carolina mountain town of Spruce Pine last week, disrupting a quartz facility integral to the global production of solar panels and semiconductor chips.

The largest Spruce Pine mine is owned by Sibelco, a private Belgium mineral company that is Mitchell County’s top employer. Sibelco told The News & Observer Monday that the company has “temporarily halted operations at the

Spruce Pine facilities” since Sept. 26.

“The hurricane has caused widespread flooding, power outages, communication disruptions, and damage to critical infrastructure in the area,” the emailed statement said. “Many people in the area, including our employees and their families, are facing displacement and significant disruptions.”

As of Saturday morning, the storm had dumped more than 2 feet of rain on the town, submerging its downtown buildings and overwhelming area roads, railways, utilities, and homes.

Sibelco’s mines are north of downtown in an area called the Spruce Pine Mining District. From above, they look like giant white sandy beaches. The area is set back from the local North Toe River, which flooded.

But news reports indicate surrounding Mitchell County has experienced extensive damage to roads and rail lines, which could impact workers’ ability to get to the site and the company’s ability to transport materials.

The town is home to the purest quartz on the planet, a byproduct of continental formations that

occurred more than 380 million years ago. High-purity quartz is essential to making the silicon wafers that get cut into chips. While there are other sources of quartz, the purity many producers demand is only found around the mines of Spruce Pine.

“It is rare, unheard of almost, for a single site to control the global supply of a crucial material,” wrote Ed Conway in his 2023 book “Material World.” “Yet if you want to get high-purity quartz — the kind you need to make those crucibles without which you can’t make silicon wafers — it has to

come from Spruce Pine.”

**NOWHERE ELSE MATCHES THE PURITY**

Facility issues have hindered the global supply chain of quartz before. In 2008, a fire at a Spruce Pine quartz refinery “temporarily brought production to a halt and impacted the market,” reported Global Risk Intel, a Washington D.C.-based consulting firm.

Throughout the 20th century, local miners extracted mica and feldspar from the Mitchell County sites, yet, in the past 30 years, escalating demand for newer technologies has made high-purity quartz one of North Carolina’s most important exports. Last year, Sibelco announced it would invest \$200 million into the site by 2025 to double production. The company sells its quartz under the brand name IOTA.

“I’ve been sent to Brazil, I’ve been sent to Aus-

tralia, and nothing matches the final purity of the Spruce Pine quartz,” local geologist Alex Glover said during an interview last March.

More recently, a second company named The Quartz Corp has invested in mines around Spruce Pine. On Tuesday, the company announced it too had stopped operations on Sept. 26, adding “we have no visibility on when they will restart.”

“This is second order of priority,” The Quartz Corp said in an online post. “Our top priority remains the health and safety of our employees and their families.”

Compared to Sibelco’s sites, The Quartz Corp location is closer to the North Toe River, aerial images on Google Maps show.

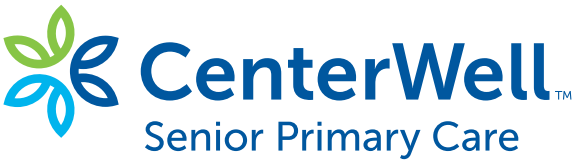
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