

News Herald, The (Morganton, NC): Page 1

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In Helene's and Milton's wake, faith-based disaster relief groups prepare for the long haul

October 19, 2024 | Associated Press State Wire: North Carolina (NC) Author: By BOB SMIETANA, Religion News Service | Section: Domestic | 1060 Words OpenURL Link

(RNS) — This past Sunday, worshippers returned to Biltmore Church, a megachurch in Asheville, North Carolina, for the first time in person after Hurricane Helene hit western North Carolina. It was bittersweet, said Bruce Frank, the church's pastor. People were glad to be together, even as many are still grieving. "There is a lot of loss," Frank said simply in his sermon.

Among the lost were Nora and Michael Drye, lay leaders at Biltmore, and their 7-year-old grandson, Micah, who became trapped on their roof and drowned in Helene's flooding. Others in the church had lost loved ones, homes and their livelihoods.

Church members have rallied to support those affected, offering their parking lot to disaster relief groups and state workers and organizing drive-by centers where people can pick up water, ice, diapers and food for those affected by the disaster, said Frank.

This content is written and produced by Religion News Service and distributed by The Associated Press. RNS and AP partner on some religion news content. RNS is solely responsible for this story.

The church is also collecting donations through a website they created called 828Strong, named for the area code for Asheville and nearby communities.

In the weeks before the hurricane, the church had been studying the New Testament's Letter of James, which contains the well-known saying that faith without works is dead. Frank said that passage has come to life as church members have responded by helping their neighbors.

The coming months, he said, will be like a "stay-at-home mission trip" for church members, as they'll be helping others near home.

With the one-two punch of Hurricane Helene and Hurricane Milton within two weeks of one another, faith-based disaster groups are getting ready for a long, slow recovery that may take years. "It's going to take a long time," said Frank, whose church is working closely with North Carolina Baptist Disaster Relief. Volunteers have already cooked more than 100,000 meals in the church parking lot.

Two hours away, in Boone, North Carolina, staff and volunteers from Samaritan's Purse, an evangelical humanitarian group led by the evangelist Franklin Graham, have been working to clear debris, set up water filtration systems and deliver food and other supplies by helicopter to communities cut off by the storm.

In rural communities the group has set up some 50 Starlink kits to restore internet service and has furnished generators to supply power. "We've also set up oxygen shelters," said Graham, for patients unable to receive their usual supplies, "and refilled more than 1,000 oxygen tanks."

So far, said Graham, more than 16,000 volunteers have shown up to help, with more expected. The group is working at sites from Georgia to Florida in Helene recovery, as well as close to home in North Carolina. More help will be needed in the months to come, said Graham.

But Graham said plans are already underway for long-term rebuilding, primarily recruiting leaders for that work and arranging with suppliers for rebuilding materials. Meanwhile, volunteers already on the scene are installing culverts to drain water and helping to temporarily restore gravel roads washed out by the storm.

Graham, a supporter of Donald Trump, nonetheless expressed relief the election has taken a back seat to disaster relief. "Nobody's talking about Democrats or Republicans," he said. "It's kind of refreshing. Politics is not an issue. It's about getting people back up and running again."

The nondenominational Christian volunteer group Eight Days of Hope has been working on rapid response to both Hurricane Helene and Hurricane Milton, setting up mobile feeding sites as well as trailers with laundry and shower equipment.

"So if you need a warm shower or you need your laundry done, you could come and do that and get a warm meal while you were there," said Hannah Fletcher, a spokesperson for the group. Having just wrapped up its Milton response, Eight Days of Hope planned to continue responding for much of October in areas affected by Helene, while making plans to return for rebuilding work once communities have a long-term plan in place.

The group's more than 250 volunteer leaders nationwide specialize in mobilizing large numbers of disaster relief volunteers, working with churches and as well as long-term recovery leaders in local communities.

"We come in and we're like an adrenaline shot," said Fletcher. "We do a bunch of work on all the homes as fast as we can, and then eight days later, we're gone. Then the long-term recovery group kind of carries the rest of those houses to the finish line."

The Salvation Army, while continuing to respond to Helene, has sent relief workers to Florida to respond to Milton, where it has served nearly 6,000 meals to residents affected by the hurricane so far through 20 mobile feeding units. It has served more than 400,000 meals in communities affected by Helene. The group also plans to assist with long-term recovery.

Todd Unzicker, executive director of the Baptist State Convention of North Carolina, said that so far, more than 2,000 of its volunteers have been deployed to assist with recovery from Helene, but he is telling churches and volunteers who are ready to help right now that there is plenty of work ahead.

"The challenge is saying, hold on," he said. "We are going to need you a month from now and six months from now."

He worries that, with an upcoming election, people will move on. That's something he hopes to counter — and believes that churches in the state will remain on the job for the long term. That's something they've done when past hurricanes hit the state.

Unzicker said that, of the convention's 3,000 churches, 1,100 are in communities affected by Helene.

He also said that Baptist disaster relief is working closely with state, local and federal officials in the aftermath of the storm. Those leaders are doing all they can, said Unzicker.

"North Carolina Baptists are grateful for all of our government officials," he said. "We pray for them and we're ready to stand by and work with them."

Frank, the pastor at Asheville's Biltmore Church, has been encouraged by the way people in his congregation and others have responded to Helene, noting that the church's 828Strong ministry began as a way to respond to needs during COVID-19 and that the work has continued since.

"Unlike COVID, which kind of tore people apart, this has brought people together," he said. "The church has stepped

up, both our church as well as other churches."

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Helene's hidden debris lurks in Charlotte-area waterways. Volunteer cleanup to begin.

October 19, 2024 | Charlotte Observer, The: Web Edition Articles (NC) Author: Joe Marusak, The Charlotte Observer | Section: weather_news | 537 Words OpenURL Link

Hazards from Tropical Storm Helene both visible and hidden lurk in and on Lake Norman, Lake Wylie and Mountain Island Lake, and volunteers are launching a cleanup of those and other Charlotte-area waterways.

Helene ripped apart boats, docks and trees and cast them adrift with other debris, according to the Catawba Riverkeeper environmental non-profit.

Nearly four million people depend on those and other waterways in the Catawba-Wateree River Basin for drinking, electricity and recreation, according to the organization, which is spearheading the upcoming effort.

The cleanups are critical to "restoring the health and safety of these waterways," according to a Catawba Riverkeeper statement on Friday. Cleanups also are planned on the Catawba and South Fork rivers, organizers said.

From 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. Saturday, Oct. 26, Lake Norman Wildlife Conservationists, a chapter of N.C. Wildlife Federation, will host a cleanup on Lake Norman.

From 9 a.m. to noon Saturday, Nov. 2, Catawba Riverkeeper will host nearly a dozen cleanup sites on Lake Wylie and Mountain Island Lake.

Lake Wylie Dam Access2.jpgDebris from Tropical Storm Helene is pictured near the Lake Wylie Dam Access on Oct. 18, 2024.

"Hurricane Helene cleanup efforts such as these will only be possible with the support of community volunteers," according to the statement.

Volunteers can sign up for the cleanups on the Catawba Riverkeeper website.

On Mountain Island Lake, the effort will complement Mecklenburg County's ongoing use of heavy equipment to remove debris near the lake — more than 100 tons as of Wednesday, Oct. 16, according to a county Facebook post.

Volunteer boaters especially needed

Boaters who can take volunteers out to cleanup sites on the water are especially needed, Kaity D'Angelo, Catawba Riverkeeper volunteer and community science manager, told The Charlotte Observer.

Sites on the water will be up to three miles from the various boat launch areas, she said.

Lake Wylie Dam Access_fitted (1).jpegDebris from Tropical Storm Helene is pictured near the Lake Wylie Dam Access on Oct. 18, 2024.

The Catawba-Wateree River Basin extends 225 miles, from near Old Fort in the North Carolina mountains through 26 counties and 11 lakes to Columbia, South Carolina.

"Floods, mudslides, strong winds and downed trees (from Helene) have devastated communities throughout the river basin and have inundated lakes, rivers and streams with natural and human-made debris," according to the

Catawba Riverkeeper statement.

Catawba Riverkeeper will organize cleanups on the northern and southern ends of the basin "once water levels lower and it is safe to go out on the water," leaders said.

Are Charlotte-area waterways safe after Helene?

It's still uncertain whether Lake Wylie and Lake Norman, North Carolina's largest manmade lake, can be deemed safe for leisure boaters in the wake of Helene, D'Angelo said.

"That's a loaded question," she said, meaning some areas may be safe and others dangerous.

The deeper main channel is likely safer than shallower coves where debris may have collected, she said. A boat with a depth finder is likelier to spot hidden dangers than one without.

A boater could suddenly encounter a sandbar formed by Helene or a cluster of downed trees, D'Angelo said. The extent of such hazards is still unknown, she said.

Catawba Riverkeeper has been assessing the lakes and rivers since the storm and will continue doing so, D'Angelo said.

Debris in Catawba fitted.jpegDebris is shown in the Catawba River near Old Fort.

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Biltmore Estate sets reopening date, even as parts remain closed due to Helene damage

October 19, 2024 | Charlotte Observer, The: Web Edition Articles (NC) Author: Joe Marusak, The Charlotte Observer | Section: north_carolina | 383 Words OpenURL Link

Biltmore Estate is set to reopen after damage from Tropical Storm Helene closed America's largest home, estate officials said Saturday.

Crews are still clearing debris from woods on the property, and some roads remain under repair, officials said. Trails and the Outdoor Adventure Center are closed until further notice. Still, the estate is back in shape enough to welcome guests again beginning Saturday, Nov. 2, the start of its holiday season, Christmas at Biltmore.

The estate is one of the most popular tourist attractions in North Carolina.

Helene, a former Category 5 hurricane, killed at least 95 people in the state and caused record flooding and damage in Western North Carolina after arriving in the state on Sept. 28. Entire mountain communities vanished in swollen, raging rivers. At least 90 people remain missing, emergency officials said.

"For over 125 years, Biltmore has witnessed the resilience and community spirit of the Asheville area," according to an estate news release. "The response to Helene has resulted in signs that recovery is underway across the region."

Biltmore will be fully decorated for the Christmas season, and estate attractions and restaurants will be open. Estate lodging properties will welcome overnight guests.

Many businesses and roads in the Asheville area have reopened, estate officials said, while some areas are still working to recover. So visitors might have to take alternate routes to Biltmore.

christmas at biltmore Christmas at Biltmore is set to return despite Tropical Storm Helene damage to America's largest home.

Restoring 'the vibrancy' of Asheville

Biltmore Estate launched a \$2 million "Biltmore Relief Fund for WNC" to support employees in crisis and area non-profits.

"We are incredibly grateful for the outpouring of support for our community and the determination of our first responders, utility workers and community volunteers," Biltmore President and CEO Bill Cecil Jr. said in a statement.

Biltmore EstateCrews clear roads near Biltmore Estate in Asheville after Tropical Storm Helene. America's largest home is set to reopen, estate officials said on Saturday, Oct. 19, 2024.

"As recovery unfolds, welcoming guests back to Biltmore not only means we can open, but also brings critical support to our region's economy to aid area employees, local businesses and friends," he said. "Together, we can help restore the vibrancy of Asheville and its surrounding areas."

biltmore house heleneBiltmore House after Hurricane Helene hit Western North Carolina as a tropical storm.

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'Disaster Equity:' FEMA shifted focus to migrants, climate and DEI

October 19, 2024 | Courier-Times, The (Roxboro, NC) Author: Casey Harper | The Center Square | Section: National | 731 Words OpenURL Link

(The Center Square) – The Federal Emergency Management Agency is taking fire for its increased focus on migrants, and diversity, equity and inclusion policies while its response to recent hurricanes is under scrutiny.

Many Americans assume FEMA is only focused on helping respond to disasters, but a closer look at FEMA's recent internal documents, spending, and public actions shows that FEMA has broadened its focus to handling the flow of migrants into the U.S. and attempting to double down on DEI initiatives on gender, sexuality and race.

FEMA's 2022-2026 strategic plan, an overarching document created by agencies to lay out their priorities, named its first goal not as disaster relief, but instead diversity, equity and inclusion.

In its first goal, the plan promised to "Instill equity as a foundation of emergency management."

It's second named priority is to "lead whole of Community in climate resilience."

FEMA's "readiness" comes in as the third goal in the plan.

"Diversity, equity, and inclusion cannot be optional; they must be core components of how the agency conducts itself internally and executes its mission," the plan reads.

FEMA makes clear in its plan that equity, which includes racial identity, will be taken into consideration when distributing aid, highlighting that there should be "equitable and fair distribution of assistance to all those affected – especially those disproportionally impacted."

The "especially" signifies a belief in the DEI community that certain groups, including transgender people or minorities, suffer more from natural disasters.

FEMA has also hired Montage Marketing Group to "elevate diversity and engage employees in creating an inclusive workplace."

Those efforts included kicking off an "Inclusive Diversity Council" and promoting Transgender Day of Remembrance.

FEMA's drift in focus took center stage after U.S. Department of Homeland Security Secretary Alejandro Mayorkas told reporters during the agency's response to Hurricane Helene, which devastated portions of North Carolina, Tennessee and West Virginia, that while FEMA had enough funds to respond to deadly Hurricane Milton, it may not have enough to finish this hurricane season.

"We are meeting the immediate needs with the money that we have," Mayorkas told reporters at the time. "We are expecting another hurricane hitting. FEMA does not have the funds to make it through the season."

His comments come after reporting showed that in April of this year, FEMA announced \$640 million in new funding, \$300 million of which was for helping immigrants settle in the U.S. The other \$340 million of that funding was set aside to be awarded as grants to cities also for migrants.

Critics immediately took issue with the FEMA migrant funding, which was not new but stood out in light of Mayorkas' comments.

Defenders of FEMA point out that money for migrants and disaster relief are funded differently and don't necessarily take away from one another.

Critics argue it shows misplaced priority at FEMA when migrant issues are more than funded but the administration is in danger of running out of disaster funding.

The White House stressed to The Center Square that FEMA is not in danger of immediately running out of money in a way that would prevent current victims from receiving aid.

"FEMA has what it needs for immediate response and recovery efforts. As FEMA Administrator Deanne Criswell has said, she has the full authority to spend against the President's budget, but we're not out of hurricane season yet so we need to keep a close eye on it,"Director of Public Affairs and FEMA Spokesperson Jaclyn Rothenberg said in a statement. "We may need to go back into immediate needs funding and we will be watching it closely."

But FEMA has been spending hundreds of millions of dollars for years to address the border crisis, in which at least 14 million illegal immigrants have crossed the border into the U.S. since President Joe Biden took office.

In another example of FEMA's broader focus, The New York Post reported that a video call roundtable from last year included FEMA DEI leaders backing an array of DEI efforts.

During the event, which was called "Helping LGBTQIA+ Survivors Before Disasters," one federal employee discussed shifting FEMA's mission from serving the "greatest good for the greatest amount of people" to focusing more on "disaster equity."

A 36-page FEMA DEI guide for employees published in May 2023 says that FEMA employees should "have conversations about differences in race, religion, age, disability, gender, ethnic origin or sexual orientation."

"The more diverse leadership, teams and collaborations are, the stronger, more equitable and inclusive a program becomes," the report continued.

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Gene Lyons: Forecast: Extreme conspiracy theories with heavy lies

October 19, 2024 | Daily Advance, The (Elizabeth City, NC) Author: Staff Writer | Section: News | 781 Words OpenURL Link

Chances are quite good that yet another major hurricane will come ashore in the United States sometime before the 2024 presidential election is decided, and that it will afflict mainly Republican areas of the country. And if that should happen, large parts of the country will go even crazier than they already are.

And that is seriously crazy. Barking mad.

No particular expertise is required to see how these things could happen. We're still in the midst of hurricane season, after all, and 2024 has been a particularly active one so far. Also, if you glance at a map, Southern coastal regions are where Republicans live. Damn few Democratic strongholds in the gulf states. Houston, New Orleans — that's about it. You'd think even a dunce like Rep. Marjorie Taylor Greene could figure that out.

But no, the Georgia Republican thinks it's all a big conspiracy. She professes to believe that "they" control the weather. "They" presumably being the same mysterious cabal responsible for "Jewish space lasers" that caused massive wildfires in California a while back.

What's more, she has lots of company. Writing in The Atlantic, Charlie Warzel documented how crackpot conspiracy theories swept the internet. Infowars' Alex Jones alleged that hurricanes Helene and Milton were "weather weapons" deployed against American patriots by the U.S. government, i.e. the Biden administration.

"Scrolling through these platforms," Warzel wrote, "watching them fill with false information, harebrained theories, and doctored images — all while panicked residents boarded up their houses, struggled to evacuate, and prayed that their worldly possessions wouldn't be obliterated overnight — offered a portrait of American discourse almost too bleak to reckon with head-on."

Remember when Vice President Al Gore used to carry on about "the information superhighway" that was going to usher in a new age of enlightenment? Well, that's not what happened.

Instead of roadside shacks at the edge of town housing palm readers, tarot card mavens, horoscope experts and other solitary purveyors of mystical mumbo jumbo and superstition, we now have websites peddling delusional nonsense to thousands. Sheer folly has gotten organized.

And the politicians are not far behind. Donald Trump, JD Vance and Fox News have all peddled the lie that FEMA (the Federal Emergency Management Agency) is offering only one-time payments of \$750 to homeowners who have lost their property due to the hurricanes, and that the money must be repaid.

None of that is true. Republican governors in the affected states have been unanimous in praising the federal response.

Elon Musk, owner of X, claimed — utterly without evidence, because it's absolutely false — that FEMA was "actively blocking shipments and seizing goods and services locally and locking them away ... It's very real and scary how much they have taken control to stop people helping."

Musk's post has been read a reported 40 million times.

If the United States is going to deport immigrants, maybe we should ship him back to South Africa.

Anyway, as a consequence of Musk's and Trump's lies, crazy people have been harassing and threatening to shoot FEMA workers trying to deliver lifesaving supplies to hurricane victims. Other idiots are threatening to kill TV meteorologists for debunking "weaponized weather" fables.

It's enough to make a newspaper columnist feel superfluous. I used to get death threats all the time. Haven't had one for months now. Perhaps I should become an "influencer."

Anyway, hurricane or no hurricane, when and by whom will the 2024 election be decided? It's not necessary to use your Marjorie Taylor Greene Magic Decoder Ring(TM) to understand that the signs and portents aren't good. Is there any chance that candidate Trump would concede defeat? I would say that there is no chance at all.

The man has been visibly "decompensating," as psychologists say, for months now. During his increasingly chaotic "rallies," Trump can scarcely keep a coherent thought in his head. It's all sharks, Hannibal Lecter and name-calling Kamala Harris now. At an appearance near Philadelphia the other night, he quit talking and stood listening to recorded music for fully 40 minutes. Just stood there.

That's a long damn time. Members of the Trump Cult pretended it was a genius stroke, because that's what cults do. There is pretty much no behavior so bizarre that it can't be rationalized as an expression of sheer genius. Adepts surrender to reality quietly, and one at a time. Meanwhile, Trump is much further gone than Joe Biden has been at his most confused.

That doesn't mean Trump can't try to incite an insurrection if he loses come Nov. 5. But it surely means the effort would fail.

But what do I know? I'm one of those "radical left lunatics" the great man blames for betraying America. An elitist. A guy who believes what the National Weather Service tells him.

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Community Calendar

October 19, 2024 | Daily Courier, The (Forest City, NC) Author: Staff Writer | Section: Archives | 561 Words OpenURL Link

Ongoing events

Distinguished Young Women of Rutherford County scholarship

The Distinguished Young Women of Rutherford County scholarship program is accepting applications for the Class of 2026. Interested young ladies must be current juniors in high school and residents of Rutherford County.

Please register at www.distinguishedyw.org by Oct. 31. Additional details will be emailed to those who register.

We Care Wednesdays

The Chick-fil-A in Forest City is holding We Care Wednesdays from 6-10 a.m. for seniors ages 55 and up.

Seniors can get a free coffee with a purchase of any menu item.

The General Store at Cherry Mountain updated information

The cost of our tours has increased! It is now \$10 for 4 people or less, and \$8 for 5-12. Please contact us for information on larger groups, 954-410-2892.

Fly Fishing outfitter is no longer available.

Ellenboro Train Depot Museum

The Ellenboro Train Depot Museum is open each Saturday 10 a.m. until 12 p.m. and Sundays from 2-4 p.m. Admission is free.

Free Tutoring

Team NC Tutoring, will offer free tutoring in reading, for Rutherford County students in grades 1-7. The location is McBrayer Office Building, 132 E. Main Street, Forest City. Slots available Sept. 9-Dec. 20, one hour sessions, twice per week.

For more information call 828 202 5593, or visit online, teamnctutoring.org.

Serene Haven Relief Program

Serene Haven Apartments is waiving half of the rent deposit due to Hurricane Helene. For people 55 and up that lost their home due to the hurricane, Serene Haven is waiving half of the rent deposit for people looking to live at Serene Haven Apartments. For more information, call 828-380-4766.

Thursday, Oct. 24

60-year reunion

East Rutherford High School Class of '64 will hold its 60-year reunion on Oct. 24 from 5 p.m. to 7 p.m. at the

Spindale House in Spindale, N.C. \$22 per person Make checks payable to The Class of '64. Send to Richard Champion 361 Lincoln Rd. Forest City, NC 28043 Call Richard at 828-429-6752.

If you have a community or charity event you would like to put in the Daily Courier's events calendar, email the event information to vyoung@thedigitalcourier.com

Monday, Oct. 28

The descendants of Bryant Homer Womack — a native of Rutherford County's Green Hill Community — will be reunited with his original Medal of Honor certificate and some related memorabilia at an October ceremony. The event will be held at Isothermal's Performing Arts and Conference Center on Monday, Oct. 28, at 1 p.m. The free event is open to the public.

Thursday, Oct. 31

Hurricane Helene Disaster Relief

When: Thursday, Oct. 31 at 6:30 p.m.

Where: Crestview Baptist Church, 630 S Church St, Forest City, NC

What: Benefit Concert for Hurricane Helene Relief

Who: Jackson Smith, Charlie Griffin, Pine Ridge Boys, Perry's

More Information: 704-374-5910

A Love Offering will be received. All proceeds will go toward the relief efforts.

Saturday, Nov. 2

Open house and fly-in

Rutherford County Airport is holding an open house and fly-in community event from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. All welcome. Flights offered by Jaars Aviation, but flight age limit is 2 years old and above. Helicopter rides \$45. Aircraft rides \$40. There is free admission and parking. Aircraft, motorcycles and classic cars will be on display. 110 Marchman Field Dr., Rutherfordton, NC 28139 Info: 828-287-0800

Thursday, Nov. 14

The Rutherford County Democratic Party will have its monthly meeting on Thursday, Nov. 14 at 6:30 p.m. at party headquarters, 142 W Main St, Forest City.

If you have an update on a community event in the calendar or a new event, email it to vyoung@thedigitalcourier.com.

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