

By John W. Kennedy

Church Connections

Local congregations are key to Convoy of Hope's disaster response efforts

AS Convoy of Hope has grown since its inception 15 years ago, so has the scope of its mission. Since 1998, disaster relief has been one of the focuses of the compassionate relief ministry. During the past six years, COH also has sought to become a first responder in providing aid to those impacted by disasters ranging from fires to tornadoes.

Convoy trucks were among the first to arrive to assist emergency workers and disaster victims at sites such as Ground Zero after the 2001 terrorist attacks in New York City; hurricanes Charley, Frances, Ivan and Jeanne that pounded Florida in 2004; hurricanes Katrina and Rita that hit the Gulf Coast in 2005; and hurricanes Gustav and Ivan last year along the Gulf Coast.

In 2008, Convoy's U.S. Disaster Response teams helped in 99 communities in 11 states. The efforts continue this year at sites ranging from ice storms in Arkansas to flooding in North Dakota.

Typically, trucks from Convoy's 300,000-square-foot warehouse in Springfield, Mo., bring such essentials as bottled drinking water, ice, food, cleaning supplies, diapers, baby formula and personal hygiene items.

The first disaster relief effort occurred 11 years ago after flooding hit Del Rio, Texas, in the aftermath of a tropical storm. More than 75 major disaster responses have followed.

Until 2004, Convoy mobilized teams to help in the wake of a tragedy, but since then the approach has expanded significantly. Sometimes Convoy is the first on

the scene in life-threatening situations. At other times, the organization is able to assist families that have been displaced or work with local churches and government agencies to oversee a community response. For example, after Katrina, Convoy personnel reached out to displaced residents of senior citizen complexes in Picayune, Miss., thus allowing other agencies to tend to other communities.

In September 2005, Convoy of Hope immediately began sending help to Hurricane Rita victims, establishing a distribution point in hard-hit Lake Charles, La., just after the eye of the storm passed. Three Convoy trucks made a harrowing drive from a rented warehouse in Hammond, La., through fierce winds to reach the city.

Convoy had leased the Hammond facility earlier in the month as a base to distribute goods to those who bore the brunt of Hurricane Katrina. In a one-month period after experiencing the fury of Katrina and Rita, Convoy gave away 30 million pounds of materials — deliveries all made possible by a fleet of trucks provided by donors and Speed the Light.

LOCAL CHURCH CONNECTIONS

Although Convoy personnel cooperate with government agencies and other relief ministries, it's really the continuing connection with local churches that enables the afflicted to begin to recover from a catastrophe.

"During times of disaster there is a great opportunity for the lo-

cal church to be the face of help and hope to hurting people," says Convoy's Disaster Response Vice President Kary Kingsland. "Our mission is to assist the local church in furthering its reach."

Ultimately, Kingsland says, long-term recovery depends on those living in the affected community, not just outsiders who provide emergency stopgap aid.

"Church people can meet those who have encountered emotional trauma of a lost relationship or physical loss of property," he says.

While some people appreciate COH's offer of spiritual counseling, the ministry isn't involved in relief work merely as a means to evangelize.

"We want our love for people and our love for God to be visible through our service first," Kingsland says. "We're out on the front line because our faith compels us to genuinely care for hurting people."

When a disaster strikes, Convoy identifies how best to respond, communicating by phone with local church contacts and emergency management partners. From Convoy's Mobile Command Center, personnel are constantly able to monitor the threat of inclement weather via satellite and other technology.

"Getting accurate, current information is very important in responding to disasters," Kingsland says.

HAM RADIO RESPONDERS

This year, Convoy has embarked on a campaign to network with

ham radio operators as a way to improve response to crises.

Because many commercial means of communication are unavailable during a natural disaster, 19 Convoy of Hope staff members and volunteers have obtained a first-level technician class amateur radio license, which allows for local area transmission. The Federal Communications Commission has authorized the organization to form a national ham radio club called the Convoy of Hope Amateur Radio Response Service (CARRS).

"Having this technology in place and building a network through CARRS provides a platform for us to share critical disaster response information around the world with our adherents and missionaries," says Convoy of Hope U.S. Disaster Response Field Services Director Paul Coroleuski.

Through CARRS, volunteer ham operators in the vicinity of a disaster will be able to relay initial damage assessment information to help Convoy better use resources as well as speed up response time. Ham radio technology today has advanced capacities that include the ability to send e-mail and upload pictures.

COH also has launched an initiative called H.O.P.E. Begins Here (Helping Others Prepare for Emergencies). The program, in part, trains those in local congregations how to prepare for disasters, what to do in emergencies and how they can help others.

Convoy's efforts don't end when the emergency crews pack up. The

ministry partners with Mission America Placement Service, RV Volunteers and church districts to rebuild damaged or destroyed churches.

INTERNATIONAL EFFORTS

Globally, Convoy of Hope partners with AG World Missions in the wake of tragedies.

When the December 2004 tsunami centered in the Indian Ocean left more than 150,000 people dead in 11 nations,

nearly 300 dead and 28,000 homeless, Convoy immediately dispatched an assessment team from its Europe headquarters in Belgium, which is led by Michael McNamee. Team members quickly met with a local pastor in L'Aquila and national church leaders who set up tents and began distributing aid the same day of the earthquake.

Convoy also has overseas warehouses in El Salvador, Honduras, Kenya and the Philippines.

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— Kary Kingsland

Convoy and AGWM sprang into action. They quickly began working with national partners on the ground in the four nations impacted most — Sri Lanka, India, Thailand and Indonesia. Convoy, in conjunction with AGWM, shipped vitamins, gloves, hygiene kits, food and water within days of the disaster. But volunteers stayed for months rebuilding churches, schools and homes in decimated villages.

In April, after an earthquake struck L'Aquila, Italy, and left

"We work closely with national churches and missionaries on the ground to form short-term and long-term responses to disasters," says Convoy's Senior Director of International Operations Greg Venturella. "To date — in cooperation with AGWM — we've been able to provide relief in 107 countries." **e**

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E-mail your comments to pe@ag.org.