

Delivering Diapers: A Visit to Lake Ponchartrain

By Sara Groves

We just got back from Slidell, Louisiana, which is on the east shore of Lake Ponchartrain. We loaded up our bus and a trailer with diapers and formula, and headed to the coast, because we know someone who attends Joy Fellowship in Slidell. When we got there, we found two churches working together, Joy Fellowship and an Assemblies of God church. We found over a hundred volunteers from North Carolina, Indiana, Minnesota, and locals who are homeless but spend their time helping others in their community.

The AG church had just roughed in a new worship center, so it was just concrete floors—a perfect warehouse for the distribution center that was just five days old. They went through our diaper delivery by the end of the day. The day we were there they unloaded eight semis, and as we prayed at the close of the day at 10 pm, two more trucks pulled into the parking lot. We asked the driver how, without any phone connections or plan, he knew to come here. He said, “The word is out—this is the distribution center.”

At both churches there are portable Salvation Army kitchen trucks that served 2,400 hot meals that day. I’m not sure the total number of people the two churches supplied, but the warehouse filled and emptied three times while we were there.

I worked in the portable kitchen making lunches and dinners, working alongside a retired Navy officer and a couple of guys from the GMC dealership in Greenville, N.C. Most of us had never volunteered like this before.

At the end of the day, I asked the man heading up the distribution center how he got there, and he said, “Last Thursday I was home watching the news, wondering what I could do.” Of all the volunteers we met, only the two Salvationists who ran the portable kitchens were “professionals.” Everyone else’s story began, “Last week I was sitting on my couch wondering what I could do...”

Last Saturday, Troy and I were sitting on our couch watching a baby dehydrate on TV.

Yesterday a grandmother who could’ve been my mom pulled up with four grandkids in her SUV, all under four. Her oldest daughter had just had a baby the day before in the hospital, and her second oldest daughter was due any time. She had nothing. What an unbelievable gift to meet this woman firsthand, to fill her car with diapers, wipes, and formula. She came back later that day to tell us that her second daughter had delivered in their home.

Some say mistakes were made in the response to this tragedy. Regardless of your views on the matter, there’s a tremendous need for lay people, like the group at these churches, to respond over the next two years.

In between lunch and dinner, the guys with the Salvation Army van took us to see the area along Lake Ponchartrain. Unbelievable. The houses on the right side of the road were on top of the houses on the left side of the road. A mile inland there’s a houseboat in the median of the highway—and this is just one community of 90,000 people.

The media is telling people not to go, but there were semis rolling in that needed to be unloaded. You cannot get into the most devastated areas, but for miles inland, people’s homes have been flooded or crushed by trees. A team could drive right into Slidell, camp out at the church, and work for as long as they wanted. You

could clean mud out of a person’s kitchen all day. The jobs are endless. The AG church has a huge parking lot and some volunteers were setting up tents there. I think the most important thing is that a team is self-sufficient as to not add their needs to the needs of the people and workers. That would mean coming in a motor home or being prepared to sleep in a tent, and coming with your own food supplies. The ideal would be coming with a truck full of goods and a team of people to volunteer. They have a lot of diapers, food, and clothes coming in. Some of the needs are for pillows and blankets, hand sanitizer, chainsaws, and generators.

One more story. Angela was in the van while we toured Slidell. She’s from there and took us by her house that had been crushed by two large pines. She had just moved into this house a few months ago and was planning her wedding. The jeweler where she designed her ring is gone; her house is gone; her church is standing but is full of diapers, clothing, and canned goods. On Monday, she and her fiancé got married, surrounded by toilet paper and toiletries, by her pastor, Pastor Larry of Joy Fellowship.

We got a phone call that pastor Larry had a heart attack yesterday. He’s been working around the clock at the church, and his own home is crushed by trees—so many prayer requests.

SARA GROVES is a Christian musician living in Minneapolis, though she spent four years teaching high school before recording her first independent album in 1998. She’s a popular women’s conference speaker and performer at youth events, young adult events, and summer festivals. Her latest album, *Add To The Beauty*, was produced by Brown Bannister and releases worldwide October 4. You can read more about her life, ministry, and music at www.saragroves.com