

Disaster relief chaplain discovers 'pure joy' in pointing others to Christ

PORT CHARLOTTE, Fla. (BP) – Diane Traynor is not really a fan of hurricanes, but after their arrival she springs into action—ready to offer soothing words, a listening ear and the hope of Christ.

As a volunteer chaplain with Florida Baptist Disaster Relief, she was in Perry and Steinhatchee earlier this month, helping those who had been impacted by Hurricane Helene, considered now to be one of the deadliest hurricanes in the United States.

Typically, disaster relief sends a chaplain with each of its cleanup and recovery teams as they go out to aid those impacted by a hurricane. While the cleanup and recovery teams get busy helping people with work in and around their homes and yards, a chaplain spends time with the homeowners—talking with them, listening to them, praying with them and sharing the gospel.

And Traynor says her 48 years in the medical field, where she worked as a radiologic technologist, helps her as she meets and talks with people who have had traumatic experiences.

✘ As a Florida Baptist Disaster Relief chaplain, Diane Traynor's
seeks opportunities to pray with individuals who receive
free hot meals in a hurricane's aftermath. During recovery
efforts, the Florida Baptist Convention partners with The
Salvation Army in food preparation and distribution. Photo
by William Haun

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During her recent time in Perry, Traynor was assigned to work with The Salvation Army, which provided a canteen that traveled to different areas to provide hot meals.

“We had a great time with The Salvation Army. We saw so many people that we could pray with. Their whole thrust was feeding people. We would follow them to each site and be their chaplain.”

However, working with a feeding unit actually provided less time for conversation with individuals waiting in line for food. That meant less time for Traynor to spend talking with people and engaging them for Christ, something that she loves to do.

“My ultimate goal is to always have Jesus Christ be known to them as their Savior. But sometimes you don’t have much time to really bring them to the gospel. That can be challenging,” she said.

Pointing people to Christ

One highlight of her recent assignment was talking with a young mother she met in a grocery store parking lot. The woman was with her husband and son in a car and drove up to get some to-go meals. Traynor sensed the woman was overwhelmed and asked if they could pull over to the side so they could continue talking.

Flooding had forced them from their home, and now their autistic son was out of sorts because his daily routine had been disrupted. The woman said she was bipolar and felt she was at her lowest of lows. Stressed and worried about finances and taking care of her family, she was on the verge of tears.

“She had a hard time looking at me, but we talked, and we prayed for a long time. I looked up at her, and she actually had a smile on her face. I told her how beautiful her smile was and to keep looking forward. Just take one step at a time. I said ‘God is with you, and He will not forsake you. He will help you.’”

Traynor loves to help people like that, pointing them toward Christ and making a lasting impact in their lives with the gospel.

On-the-job training

Traynor has been volunteering as a disaster relief chaplain for three years now. She decided to do the training after her missions director at Murdock Baptist Church in Port Charlotte encouraged those who had been on mission trips to become chaplains. She raves about the three-day course, which ran 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. each day.

But before you can officially volunteer as a chaplain, before you can get your badge and cap, you also must complete on-the-job training. Traynor got her experience after Hurricane Ian hit in 2022.

“My OJT was completed right in my own backyard with Ian,” she said. “I responded to the callout before I realized we had four feet of water on our street. Our house was high enough, so we were fine, but it took three days for the waters to recede.”

Sharing ‘God moments’

Traynor typically travels the state after hurricanes with her good friend, Sharon Walters, who also serves as a chaplain. She recommends others take the course and become chaplains as well.

“If you think you have the spiritual conviction to do something like this, I would absolutely recommend it. I think you have to be spiritually healthy because if you’re a broken person yourself, you likely can’t help anyone else. If you’re not sure if you’re spiritually whole, it might be hard to meet other people that you don’t know,” she said.

One of the things she loves about being part of the disaster relief team comes each evening as volunteers gather after the dinner hour and one of the leaders asks volunteers to share their “God moments” from the day.

“That is pure joy for me, whether I’m telling a story or listening to those of others. Even if I didn’t experience it, someone else has. My goodness, that’s as much joy as if you had experienced it yourself.”