

Richey Street Responds

By: M.I. Torres

Richey Street Baptist Church in Pasadena, Texas, has proved that small churches can do great things. Since welcoming its new pastor, Michael Thomas, eight weeks ago, the church has doubled from 40 members to 70 – just in time to respond heroically on the afternoon of April 11 when an apartment complex near the church caught fire and displaced 32 families. The story of a church who just gained a new leader and a neighborhood who lost everything began on that day.

Thomas, a native of Pasadena, also serves as a chaplain for the Pasadena Police Department, where he was on duty the day of the fire. An American Red Cross worker looking for a place to set up an emergency shelter noticed the Richey Street Baptist Church facilities close by. Not knowing Thomas was the pastor, the worker asked him if he had any idea how to contact the pastor to get access to the building for a shelter. Thomas replies, "I know I can get a hold of him with no problem." Immediately, Thomas opened the church building to the Red Cross volunteers and called other chaplains and the church's youth minister to assist.

Within two hours, the church's community center was organized for disaster response. Victims were informed that the shelter set up in the church was offering food and a place to rest. Volunteers from the Red Cross and the church's youth ministry assisted the families.

The next morning the donations started pouring in. "It just so happens that we had scheduled a church work day the next morning," says Thomas, "When I showed up at 8, we had trucks lined up with donations from the community. The Red Cross was setting up outreach. Channel 11 news and the Houston Chronicle were there. It was complete chaos. 40 church members showed up for the work day and we switched it to disaster response."

The Houston Food Bank donated \$7100 worth of food to the fire victims. Local churches donated \$8000 total to assist families with half of that used to buy \$50 increments of Wal Mart gift cards and the other half used to buy new beds, bedding and furniture from a new furniture outlet. \$5000 alone came from a Pasadena SBC church.

That morning changed the face of Richey Street Baptist Church in its community. After the Red Cross concluded its emergency response, the church continued with the mission. Since that Saturday morning, the church has been open 6 days a week, from 10am to 1pm and again from 3pm to 7pm, to distribute food, clothing and other household items.



Before the fire response, Pastor Thomas had wondered if the food pantry that the church operated on a regular basis was necessary in serving the community. "I didn't see it as a vital function. But God showed me how vital it was and I was amazed to see the need and work done through those ministries," he says.

Thomas says that this mission has shown the congregation amazing things and shown them the heart of their community. Within the past two weeks, all of the families in contact with the church through the response ministry or apartment complex have received new furniture, food, clothing and gift cards for their needs in their new apartments.

"This is what churches are called to do," explains Thomas, "The Lord has moved in the church and wants it to be a vital part of the community."

Even children have become involved in the ministry effort. A ten year old girl who came to help the first day continued to return. Thomas recalls a twelve year old boy who took off his designer Michael Jordan tennis shoes to donate to the child victims. Children's ministries from local churches brought bedding, toys, gift cards and blankets. Thomas says, "It's amazing to see these children come in carrying all these gifts."

Richey Street Baptist and its community have a passionate new leader in Thomas. His vision is for the church and its community, hoping to merge with other Pasadena churches. "I attended this church as a kid," says Thomas, "of course it was much different and there weren't as many needs in the community. It's the only church that I've put in an application with to be the pastor."

When asked why he feels such a strong calling to Richey Street and its community, he says, "I feel God has called me to this church to rebuild and minister to the community." Reflecting on all that has happened with the church and neighborhood since the April 11 fire, Thomas seems to be on the right track. "I'm the proudest pastor in Pasadena."

Richey Street Baptist Church is located at 1010 Richey St. Pasadena, TX 77506, Phone 713-472-4378. Iglesia Hispana Bautista Buena Tierra Spanish services are housed at the same location, Phone 713-534-0009. Sunday services: 9:30am Bible Study, 10:45am and 5pm Worship. Spanish Sunday services: 10:30am Sunday School, 12pm and 6:30pm Worship. For more information, visit www.rsbcctx.org or www.iglesiahispanabautistabuena tierra.org