

Shelter from storm aftermath

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Richey Baptist Church put a halt to its regular church service last Sunday, but its work continues as hundreds of displaced people flock for shelter in the wake of Hurricane Ike.

Designated as a Red Cross Shelter and FEMA site location since last Saturday and with a capacity of 100 people at a given time, the church's gymnasium has been a temporary home to those severely impacted by Ike.

"Out of this shelter we are feeding the displaced and letting them stay here until they get their electricity back on or whatever the case may be," said Michael Thomas, the church's pastor.

The church is a temporary home where people can sleep, eat and, for the time being, remain safe from homelessness.

Throughout the day, a YMCA bus takes groups at intervals to shower and then brings them back.

From Galveston, League City, Dickinson, Friendswood, La Porte, Seabrook, Houston and Pasadena, those who arrive are welcome into a church that believes true faith works outside of the sanctuary as much as it does inside.

"We're here to offer them shelter and comfort," said Margaret Norwood, certified Red Cross volunteer who is also a member of the church.

The hardest part of her job, said Norwood, is turning away needy families due to lack of space.

"I tell everybody I come across — when we don't have beds — to check back with us because it constantly changes," she said. "A lot of times, they come to us as a last resort and some people have told us they had to sleep in their car. I have to tell them that I am sorry and that there is no room. They can always keep trying to come back."

Sunday services have been cancelled, but to Thomas, that only means the congregation's mission has expanded and deepened.

"This is what the church is about," he said.



Family members wait on a YMCA bus. At Richey Baptist Church, families displaced by Hurricane Ike were given shelter and the chance to begin their rebuilding process through FEMA.

It isn't about disruptions due to power outages or a sudden influx of strangers or about temporary cancellations to the church's schedule, but about faith-based, hands-on service, said Thomas.

"This is about reaching out into the community," he said. "God put this church into this community to minister to this community and as church members, we take care of ourselves, but we need to take care of our community also. We're able to do both."

Norwood tries her best to keep hope alive in an environment where misery is prevalent.

"As a Christian, I tell them that there is always hope, that God is with them and to not give up," she said. "It may not seem like he isn't, but he is always there. We're here and whether you can get in or not, you can always come in and talk to us."

To contact Richey Baptist Church on 1010 Richey Street, call its offices at 713-472-4378.