News
EarthBeat



Franciscan Fr. John Tran Nguyen, pastor of St. Peter Church in Rockport, Texas, looks at his cellphone inside his destroyed church Sept. 8 in the aftermath of Hurricane Harvey. (CNS/Bob Roller)

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Texas officials have written to President Trump urging him to follow up on his tweeted endorsement of federal disaster relief for churches after Hurricane Harvey.

“Regrettably, due to a FEMA policy whose terms predate your administration, the same churches that are playing an instrumental role in the recovery effort cannot receive disaster relief funding to rebuild their own buildings,” wrote Gov. Greg Abbott and Texas Attorney General Ken Paxton in a Wednesday (Sept. 20) letter to the president.

In a Sept. 8 tweet, Trump said, “Churches in Texas should be entitled to reimbursement from FEMA Relief Funds for helping victims of Hurricane Harvey (just like others).”

Citing that statement, the Texas officials told him: “We couldn’t agree more, and we write to propose that your view is consistent with federal law and constitutional standards.”

The Federal Emergency Management Agency's Public Assistance Program and Policy Guide lists among “ineligible services” provided by private nonprofits “religious activities” that include worship and religious instruction.

“Churches have opened their doors to feed, shelter, comfort, and rebuild their communities — even hosting FEMA operations in the process — but this policy has made those very same churches ineligible for assistance because their primary use is, by nature, religious,” Abbott and Paxton wrote. “That should change.”

They cited the Supreme Court’s recent decision in Trinity Lutheran Church of Columbia v. Comer as justification for a policy change in which the president could include houses of worship under the definition of eligible “private nonprofit facility.”

In June, the high court ruled 7-2 in favor of a Missouri church that claimed religious discrimination after it was refused state funds to improve its playground.

The Texas officials' letter follows a Sept. 4 lawsuit filed by three churches in the state that were damaged by Hurricane Harvey. They are challenging the current FEMA policy, which "explicitly denies equal access to FEMA disaster relief grants for houses of worship solely because of their religious status," according to the lawsuit.

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"The churches are not seeking special treatment; they are seeking a fair shake," it states.

Maggie Garrett, legislative director of Americans United for Separation of Church and State, wrote in a blog post reacting to the suit that houses of worship are eligible for government loans to help them rebuild and for government reimbursement for services provided at the request of local officials, such as providing shelter due to a storm.

But her Washington, D.C.-based organization opposes changing FEMA's current rules.

"Here's the bottom line: The government is not in the business of building churches, synagogues and mosques — even after a terrible disaster," she wrote. "That is at the core of the First Amendment, and we must stand by it in good times and in bad."