News
EarthBeat



A drone view Sept. 29, 2024, shows rescue personnel working in a flooded area in Asheville, N.C., following the passing of Tropical Storm Helene. The storm made landfall at 11:10 p.m. (Eastern time) Sept. 27 in Florida's Big Bend as a Category 4 hurricane and was downgraded to a tropical storm the next morning. (OSV News/Marco Bello, Reuters)

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Charlotte, N.C. — September 30, 2024
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Relief efforts are under way to help communities across western North Carolina reeling from the impacts of Tropical Storm Helene.

Unprecedented flooding from the storm swamped municipal water systems, washed away roads and downed utility lines — leaving many mountain communities cut off Sept. 27 and in critical need of emergency aid. At one point, authorities closed 400 roads deeming them unsafe for travel. AP reported Sept. 30 that supplies were being airlifted to the region around the isolated city of Asheville.

North Carolina Gov. Roy Cooper said it was "one of the worst storms in modern history for parts of North Carolina."

As of Sept. 29, at least 36 deaths were reported in North Carolina due to the storm, according to media reports, and search and rescue operations continued through the weekend to locate hundreds who remain stranded or unaccounted for.

"Power is out everywhere and cell phone towers are down — and water is out in some places, too," said Margaret Beale, principal of Immaculata School in Hendersonville, which was flooded and remains closed. "This really is a disaster. People can't get out of their homes and may not have food or water."

Parishioners, clergy and staff across the Diocese of Charlotte are rallying to provide help — uniting in prayer, raising money and collecting — and delivering — relief supplies.

"We pray for everyone who has been affected, especially for those who have been injured or lost loved ones, and for the communities in western North Carolina that are seeing total devastation," said Msgr. Patrick Winslow, vicar general and

chancellor of the Diocese of Charlotte.

Winslow and other diocesan leaders have been contacting pastors in the affected areas to survey parishes' immediate needs and evaluate how best to help as the sheer scale of destruction becomes clearer.

The diocese has also organized a drive to take emergency supplies from Charlotte to affected areas. An initial truckload of supplies was delivered Sept. 29 to Immaculate Conception Church in Hendersonville, where the community was in need of water, according to staff reports.

In Huntersville, some 400 St. Mark parishioners and surrounding community members quickly marshaled a drive for supplies of diapers, nonperishable goods and water that were airlifted and carted in trucks and trailers over the weekend to parishes in Waynesville, Hendersonville and elsewhere.

In Concord, St. James the Greater Parish is organizing a supply through the Concord airport for delivery to Western North Carolina as part of Operation Airdrop, a national organization that's arranging aid relief for the region.

Other relief aid collections are being coordinated by local police and fire departments.

Catholic Charities of the Charlotte Diocese has launched an online appeal at https://ccdoc.org (Helene Relief Aid) to support communities for what is expected to be a long recovery from this historic storm.

The aid agency is coordinating with local first responders and emergency relief agencies such as FEMA and the American Red Cross, and it has also requested disaster grant funding and other help from Catholic Charities USA and its Disaster Response Team out of Alexandria, Virginia.

"Our hearts are with all those suffering in the wake of Hurricane Helene," said Gerry Carter, executive director and CEO of Catholic Charities. "While we'll be there handing out water and providing food as soon as it is safe to do so, our real impact is on the longer-term restoration of lives. It's important to remember that when you've lost everything, it can frequently take months, if not years, to be restored."

"In addition to immediate financial assistance, and the distribution of food, diapers and other essentials," Carter added, "we'll also be there offering case management

services to help rebuild and restore lives."

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As of Sept. 29, power remained out, trees were down and water damage was reported at several churches and schools. In a statement, Duke Energy said a majority of customers are expected to have power returned no later than the evening of Oct. 4. However, repair efforts are so widespread that very few areas have been assigned estimated times of restoration, the company said.

"Thousands of lineworkers are working tirelessly to assess damage and make repairs in response to the historic destruction from Helene," the statement said. "Due to the severity of damage and ongoing flooding in the western Carolinas, we anticipate a multiday restoration effort."

In Swannanoa, a large oak tree fell onto the 88-year-old St. Margaret Mary Church, which announced on Facebook its "campus is closed indefinitely; no Mass or Sacraments can be offered at this time, and we have no idea when our ability to have Mass may be restored."

"It's terrible. It looks like a war zone," Roger Patton, a landscaper for the church, said after checking on his clients' properties in Black Mountain and Swannanoa.

"There's no power and no water and none of the stores are open. Almost everybody has some kind of damage. And everybody up here needs water — and we're getting to the point where we're going to need food, too," he told the Catholic News herald, Charlotte's diocesan newspaper.

On Sept. 27, Patton said, he saw six people rescued from swift currents of the Swannanoa River, which had swelled beyond its banks to five times its size. "People were clinging to trees and debris piles, anything they could. The river washed away whole houses and trailers just came apart. We've had floods before but we've never seen anything like this."

In Hendersonville, flooding and leaks from the roof and windows at Immaculata School inundated multiple classrooms, the gym and its new STEM lab. The adjacent Immaculate Conception Church also experienced water damage in the sacristy.

Immaculata School will remain closed this week Sept. 30-Oct. 4, and officials will reassess the situation as soon as utilities are working again, the school announced.

Water leaks were reported at churches as far east as Winston-Salem, and trees were down at churches in Elkin, Shelby, Gastonia and Mooresville. Water damage from flooding was also reported in classrooms at St. Michael School in Gastonia.

A diocesan Family Life Conference planned for Sept. 28 at St. Matthew in Charlotte was postponed due to a power outage at the church late the day before; power was restored in time for Saturday morning Masses.

Charlotte Bishop Michael T. Martin lifted the Sunday Mass obligation in places impacted by the storm, but some churches held Sunday services as usual — even without power.
"Stay strong," St. Aloysius Parish posted on Facebook Saturday, calling on its patron saint to "pray for us!"

"Friday was a tough day," Immaculata's Principal Beale said, "and it's really frustrating for a school that has gained so much momentum. But then you get on the other side of the storm and you see how horrific the damage is, you realize you are blessed. There isn't anything that's happened at our parish or school that can't be repaired. We are such a strong community that we'll come back from this."