News
EarthBeat



Floodwaters surround buildings Sept. 27 in Newport, Tennessee, in the aftermath of Hurricane Helene. (OSV News/Curtis Hance/H&H Vapors via Reuters)



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St. Michael the Archangel mission in Erwin, Tennessee, is being set up as a distribution hub to help people impacted by flooding from Hurricane Helene.

"We're a small mission parish, but we're doing as much as we can," said Glenmary Br. Corey Soignier, part of the parish staff. Although he will coordinate the efforts, he said everything that is being done is the result of efforts by the 100-150 families in the parish.

Parishioners lost two of their own members in the flooding, but as of early Oct. 1, the local government had not released their names, Soignier said. While parishioners were mobilizing, Glenmary Fr. Tom Charters and lay missioner Kathy O'Brien were spending time with the families of those who died.

As of Sept. 30, officials said three people had died in Unicoi County and more than 40 people remained missing, and first responders were shifting from a rescue to a recovery effort, as waters in the Nolichucky River and its tributaries receded.

Erwin made news when river water began surrounding Unicoi County Hospital Sept. 27; more than 50 people were rescued from the roof and others by boat. Soignier said by the time the town of just over 6,000 people received the news of the flooding, the storm had passed; the river levels rose as water came rushing down the mountains that surround the town, flooding the Nolichucky and its tributaries.

When Soignier spoke to NCR Oct. 1, he said most of Erwin had power, and most of the outages were in the mountains. The parish serves two migrant farms in the mountains, and he said people there were safe.

"We serve a lot of people throughout the mountains; they come in to us, we go out to them," he said.

> 'We serve a lot of people throughout the mountains; they come in to us, we go out to them.'
>
> —Glenmary Br. Corey Soignier

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Immediately after the storm, he said, parishioners began collecting water, nonperishables, baby products, cleaning products — "everyday items that we sometimes forget about, that these people who lost everything need."

"The response has been amazing here," he said. "Our parishioners have been at the high school helping out. They've been out in the community, trying to get their hands into what they can." They keep trying to figure out "what more can we do, what more can we do."

He said although he would coordinate efforts and state officials would resupply them, the aid was being driven by parishioners, in an effort to help relieve the local high school, the primary hub and information center, and the middle school, which serves as a shelter and volunteer center.

Parishioners at St. Mary's Catholic Church in Johnson City, 15 miles northeast of Erwin, organized a collection drive the weekend immediately following the storm.

Soignier said people from all over the country had been sending donations. Some came from the Diocese of Owensboro, Kentucky, hit hard by tornadoes in 2021. He said two Ursuline sisters were bringing heavy-duty, disaster relief water filters, strong enough to filter water from streams if people have no running water. Some were donating money through Glenmary Home Missioners.

People cannot get to their neighbors stranded in the mountains, but local relief organizations have devised ways to get supplies to those who need them.

"Erwin is open, but just past us is not. If you're going to North Carolina, two exits down, it's closed," he said.

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Erwin is about 50 miles north of Asheville, North Carolina, also hit by Hurricane Helene. The hurricane, with sustained winds of 140 mph, made landfall in a sparsely populated area of Florida, then left a path of destruction across the Southeast. The Associated Press reported Oct. 1 more than 130 people had died in North Carolina, Georgia, Florida, South Carolina, Tennessee and Virginia, and the death toll was

expected to rise as recovery efforts continued.

Local officials asked people to stay off the roads as government officials worked to deliver aid to western North Carolina, including by mule. Asheville set up cell phone towers and water distribution points as people tried to check on their families.

Scientists have repeatedly found that climate change is supercharging hurricanes and other tropical storms as they absorb more heat from warmer ocean waters, providing fuel for heavier rainfall and higher storm surge once they make landfall.

Human activity, primarily burning fossil fuels (coal, oil, gas), is the primary driver of climate change. Catholic and other faith leaders have pointed persistently to the disproportionate harm the impacts of rising temperatures have on poor and marginalized communities.

Related: In Asheville, North Carolina, priests try to serve amid Helene's devastation