News
EarthBeat



Bishop Mark Beckman of Knoxville, Tenn., comforts grieving family members who have loved ones missing in the flooding that hit upper East Tennessee. Bishop Beckman visited the affected communities Oct. 2, 2024. (OSV News /Bill Brewer, The East Tennessee Catholic)

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The people of upper East Tennessee near the North Carolina border are working to piece their lives back together amid the devastation wrought by Hurricane Helene.

And the Catholic parishes of this region are joining together to lead disaster-relief efforts as communities find themselves without water, basic necessities, and even roads to access assistance.

"They need prayer. They need our support and love, and they need to know they are not alone in the journey ahead," Bishop Mark Beckman of Knoxville said after an Oct. 2 visit to affected communities.

The disaster unfolded on Sept. 27 as Hurricane Helene blew northeastward after making landfall in the Florida panhandle. With high winds and dark clouds swollen with record amounts of rainfall, Helene unloaded on the mountains of western North Carolina, which sent torrents of water rushing down mountain tributaries and into the Nolichucky, Pigeon and French Broad rivers that flow through East Tennessee.

Almost without warning, the rivers spilled over their banks and consumed everything in their path, including businesses, services, roads, bridges, and most importantly, residents.

The towns of Erwin, Newport, Mountain City, Hampton and Greeneville in East Tennessee are still dealing with the devastation a week later. The communities have been without water, and some roads that connected the towns have been washed away.

Interstate 40 at the Tennessee-North Carolina border is closed after the normally serene and picturesque Pigeon River turned into a raging rapid that swept away part

of I-40. And Interstate 26, which connects upper East Tennessee at Johnson City to Asheville, North Carolina, was also washed away by the fierce, fast-moving currents of the Nolichucky River.

Those major arteries will be closed for months, according to Department of Transportation officials.

The Tennessee Emergency Management Agency has confirmed nearly a dozen deaths from the East Tennessee flooding, with more people reported missing. The agency is continuing to receive calls about missing residents.

During his visit, Beckman met with parish pastors who are on the front line of disaster relief and who also are ministering to family members of loved ones who died in the floods as well as flood survivors.

When Beckman arrived at St. Michael the Archangel Church in Erwin, one of the hardest-hit areas, he was welcomed by a group taking part in grief counseling as they shared their experiences of being rescued from rapidly rising floodwaters and of anxiously awaiting word about missing loved ones.

"The two moments that have stayed with me most are the first moment when we walked into the church in Erwin, and we met this circle of the community there taking part in grief support," Beckman told The East Tennessee Catholic, Knoxville's diocesan publication.

"Watching the faces of those who have lost loved ones in the flood, those who have survived and witnessed what happened to people, and also those who are still missing loved ones who haven't been found yet made a tremendous impact," he said. "The immense grief and sadness in the room has remained with me. They are really traumatized."

"The second moment that was very heart-wrenching for me was the press conference where the people who are missing loved ones were holding up pictures of their missing family members and pleading with the authorities to help find them," he continued. "You could really sense their desperation and their cries for help. They, too, need to know they are not alone. They are valued members of our community, and we will do whatever we can to help them."

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Catholic Charities of East Tennessee, a Diocese of Knoxville ministry, has taken a lead role in disaster-relief efforts. The agency has been coordinating truckloads of water, food, products for babies, personal hygiene items, and other necessities to the affected areas since Sept. 28.

And it has dispatched Catholic Charities staff to the areas to assist with collection and distribution of resources as well as translation services for the large Hispanic communities there.

Materials have begun to reach the hardest-hit areas as residents await the resumption of water and power service.

The need for assistance will continue for some time as authorities and residents come to terms with the breadth of destruction.

"The scope of the damage is really unimaginable, especially if you haven't been to a flood zone before. They have done significant clean-up work in the few days since the worst of it. The power of the water to move houses, to destroy bridges and interstates, is overwhelming," Beckman said. "If you haven't been to a flood area like that before, it really is unimaginable until you see it for yourself."

Father Tom Charters, a Glenmary Home Missioner, who is associate pastor of St. Michael the Archangel, and his community of volunteers have been leading rosary vigils and prayer services at the church and at Unicoi County High School in Erwin, which is serving as a shelter for those displaced by the disaster.

Beckman was joined on the visits to Erwin, Hampton, Elizabethton, and Johnson City by Father David Boettner, rector of the Cathedral of the Most Sacred Heart of Jesus in Knoxville, Deacon David Duhamel, executive director of Catholic Charities of East Tennessee, and Sister Mary Lisa Renfer, a Religious Sister of Mercy, the physician who leads the St. Mary's Legacy Clinic for the Diocese of Knoxville.

In addition to reaching out to the communities and parishioners at St. Michael the Archangel, St. Elizabeth in Elizabethton and St. Mary in Johnson City, Sister Mary Lisa was planning for the mobile medical clinic's visit to St. Michael the Archangel Oct. 11, where it will provide free medical care to anyone from the flooded areas.

Beckman and Boettner said they are thankful for the community outreach by the Catholic parishes in the affected areas and to be a part of ministering to people

in need of support.

"I was grateful to be able to go with the team from Catholic Charities, our mobile medical clinic, and our bishop and be pastorally present with the people in those communities who are hurting," Boettner said. "It was inspiring to see our Bishop Mark as he met with and prayed with the families who have lost loved ones in the flood in Erwin. Their pastor, Father Tom Charters, is just doing an amazing job."

"Everywhere we went with Father Charters, every person in Erwin knows Father Tom and was consoled by his presence no matter where we were," he added.

Boettner also noted the importance of being at Unicoi County High School in Erwin, which is serving as a shelter, and being a ministerial presence to those who are hurting because their homes have been destroyed as well as to the volunteers serving at the shelter.

"As the recovery efforts go forward, they are still finding groups of people who were separated by the flooding and are now being reunited with family members. Sadly, there were at least four fatalities in Erwin and still seven missing," Boettner noted. "It was heartbreaking to see the pain and suffering that those families are going through and the uncertainty that they are experiencing right now.

"The hopeful thing is at the same time we were visiting all those impacted communities, people throughout East Tennessee were bringing supplies of water, food, and donations of cash to help those communities. So, we were able to assure them that they are not forgotten and that they are united with us not only in prayer but also in the fellowship that is reaching out to be the hands and feet of Christ in those devastated communities," Boettner added.