



GOD'S DISASTER WARRIORS

Into the Danger Zone with South Carolina's
UMVIM Early Response Team



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South Carolina United Methodist Advocate Press



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This book is dedicated to our awesome, all-powerful, gracious, righteous, faithful, loving, caring, mountain-moving, and storm-calming Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. All glory, honor, and praise to the precious, almighty name of Jesus, forever. Amen!



Introduction

What an amazing and totally awesome God we serve! Through his son, Jesus, and the equipping of his Holy Spirit, God has performed miracle after miracle through our South Carolina United Methodist Volunteers in Mission Early Response Team. To God be all glory for the tens of thousands of wonderful, caring and loving acts of ministry he has performed through us over these past twenty years throughout the Southeast and beyond. A wonderful Christian ministry, ERT is where life-changing events are commonplace happenings, and the rewards are out of this world.

For two decades, God used saved sinners, with all our flaws and imperfections, to carry out his ministry of presence to thousands of survivors affected by disasters, including emergency responders and others in ministry. As we put our trust and faith in him, we were able to move mountains and calm raging seas. What a distinct honor and privilege it has been to serve God as his hands and feet to a world lost in sin, gloom, and destruction. Serving is not based on the worthiness of the recipients, but the heart of the servant.

Time and time again, we have heard survivors of horrible disasters tell us they were angry with God for allowing the disaster to happen to them and their loved ones. They questioned God as to why he would allow such horrible tragedies to occur. If he really was a loving and caring God, then where was he? They were filled with anger, frustration, disbelief, worry, doubt, fear, and loss of hope.

That's when they looked up and saw us and other faith-based organizations coming into the disaster areas and danger zones to help them. Their fears and doubts began to fade as they saw the cross and flame on the sides of our trailers with the words, "Christian Love in Action." Suddenly, they realized God does care, and God does love them. He loves them so much that he sent teams of pure strangers, average people with big, loving, and caring hearts, willing to endure

pain and suffering alongside them plus all the hardships and inconveniences that occur in the aftermath of disasters—heat, humidity, cold, rain, toxic water, bugs, no electricity or clean water, etc.

I was in my thirties on my first overseas mission trip to Guyana in 1997 when an older and much wiser man named Karl “Blue” Miller told me, “Billy, you can’t out-give God.” I didn’t exactly understand what that phrase meant until the end of that two-week mission into some of the worst conditions I had ever witnessed in life, including extreme poverty, heat, and unsanitary conditions. I felt so sorry for the people and wanted to help everyone beyond the church school we were helping to build. When we left that impoverished country, I and several others left everything we physically had with the people we came to serve. I came home a forever-changed man of God, having my eyes opened to so many aspects of life and what it meant to truly live for and with God.

Many non-local missions followed—to Haiti, Mexico, Honduras, and Puerto Rico. Each time we would leave our belongings with the people we came to serve and always strived to physically give more. The more we physically gave and sacrificed, God always replenished one hundred times over. Beyond that, there was the other giving—the giving of oneself through time, caring acts, and pure love to truly show the love of Jesus in every action we performed.

The more you give of yourself to God’s obedience and love, the more he gives you in return. Financial riches are a means to helping, but they are far from the riches of true love found only through Jesus Christ. I found out how poor I was and how rich in true godly living others were, even in developing countries.

In Honduras, after a hard day’s work helping them trench water lines through mountainous terrain, I would muster up energy to play with the children in the village we were staying in. They especially loved my camera, and I would show them their pictures.

I distinctly remember a young boy who walked with us up a steep trail to where he would work all day in the coffee fields. As we parted, he reached into his garment and pulled out one of two mangos that he had to last him all day, and he offered it to me. I shook my head no, that I could not deprive him of such a priceless offer. Neither of us spoke each other’s language, but the language of one’s eyes can tell all you need to know, most times. His eyes stated, “Please take this simple yet priceless gift, as it is an honor for me to offer it to you.”

I took the mango, knowing it would leave him hungry but understanding the act of pure and honest love.

Tears streamed down my face as I thought of his priceless gesture of sacrificial

love. He had given half of everything he had to me. Once again, I came home a forever-changed man and even more so with each additional mission. At home we were worried about building a bigger home, new vehicles, recreational equipment, or winning a ballgame. But in the mission fields, they were focused on simply living from day to day, on survival—period. They had no further goals or vision.

That is how it is often, even here in the United States, in the aftermath of small and especially large-scale disasters. We hear, “God doesn’t necessarily call the equipped, but he does equip the called.” We hear the call to respond, and our hearts bleed for the survivors, and we respond with every ounce of energy we have to help them, just as God helped us through our own “disasters” in life. We feel the call and the need to help the Samaritan out of the ditch, as many of us are medical first responders but also as disaster responders. We go all-in and all-out to help while never counting the cost, for we all know “you can’t out-give God.”

Over these twenty years of service, the South Carolina ERT has had countless missionaries involved in countless ways with hours of service. As with any ministry, we started out small and have been blessed by God beyond all measure. As of this writing, we have ten equipped ERT trailers and hundreds of volunteers, with thousands having been trained. Most are willing to use their own personal equipment to help, such as trucks, skid steers, tractors, and backhoes.

This has been a God-inspired and blessed ministry from the beginning with all praise and glory always going to God while we graciously and humbly serve in God’s mission fields of life. So many groups meet and talk about doing something, but our mission group has always put action with our words, responding to many missions each year throughout the Southeast. We have responded to all South Carolina natural disasters plus every hurricane and major tornado outbreak across the Southeast for the past two decades, putting hundreds of thousands of miles on our vehicles and countless service hours. The financial cost has been substantial, but we serve a miracle-working God who has sustained and protected us through the years.

As ERT, we are family! We are one big, bonded family of God, not just through one denomination but throughout all of Christ’s church. We work side by side with Salkehatchie Summer Service volunteers, church groups, and faith-based organizations, all races and social barriers joining in sickness and good health to provide a ministry of truly caring believers.

It has been one of the highest callings and honors of my life to have led such a wonderful, caring and loving group of people. It takes thousands of people to

make such a successful ministry happen, and God has provided us with awesome volunteers and leaders throughout the years, without which the ministry would not be possible.

I thank God for everyone who believed in this beautiful God-sized and God-given vision, as well as for all who dedicated so much of their lives to make it happen.

All glory to God in the highest, forever. Amen!

—Billy Robinson
South Carolina United Methodist Volunteers in Mission
Early Response Team Coordinator
October 2024



Some ERT shirts, hats, books, and manuals. All ERT members are fully trained.

Chapter 1

The Beginning

2002-2004

My first recollection of a volunteer mission was in the aftermath of Hurricane Hugo, which hit South Carolina hard in September 1989. Then, I responded with my church—North United Methodist Church, in North, South Carolina—which cleaned out our clothes closet for items to give to survivors and took them in our pickup trucks to the Red Cross.

This effort was immediately followed by my deployment as a firefighter and emergency medical technician with Savannah River Site Fire and Rescue to the devastated town of McClellanville.

My eyes were opened to the awesome devastating force of destruction that a natural disaster can produce—and the dire need to help those affected as soon as possible. They need help now, not just days and weeks later when most relief organizations respond.

At a meeting of South Carolina United Methodist Volunteers in Mission in 2002, a sign-up sheet was passed around for everyone in attendance—around 120 people—to sign up for various areas of ministry. I jumped at the opportunity to sign up for disaster response. I wrote by my name that I wanted to be a part of the newly formed disaster response mission but did not want to be the leader.

At the next monthly meeting, there was my name on the list for disaster response. I was the only one who signed up—and by my name was the title “team leader” with a question mark. Of course, I accepted the role, not wanting to let the large group of UMVIM people down, but I didn’t like it. As a matter of fact, I got mad over it and gave God all sorts of excuses why I was not fit to be the



South Carolina UMVIM personnel attend a Southeastern Jurisdiction mission/disaster conference July 22, 2005, at Lake Junaluska, North Carolina.

leader: I was shy, I got extremely nervous in front of people and could hardly talk at times, and I felt unworthy and unprepared for the job. I basically ignored the fact that a host of saints had nominated me as disaster response leader, saints such as the founders of UMVIM—Dr. Mike and Mary Carolyn Watson, Rev. George and Harriet Strait, and Doris Chambers—as well as a wide variety of other foreign mission leaders such as Rev. Tony Rowell, Rev. Bruce Palmer, and Rev. Noble Miller.

I ignored the decision to be disaster response leader until late summer 2004, when four hurricanes hit Florida. These hurricanes were all headed our way but miraculously turned. When the last hurricane turned, it felt as if God had literally slapped me across my face and grabbed my attention.

“It is not about you and your abilities or lack of abilities,” God himself, in no uncertain words, said to me. “It is about me and what I can do through a humble and faithful servant.”

God reminded me of how Moses, David, and others had their limitations, but through their limitations, God was glorified all the more. I immediately got down on my knees and asked God for forgiveness for not believing and having faith in him as I should have.

As I started to walk in faith and trust God more, God began to open doors



Ten members of North UMC, North, gather on a fall Saturday in 2004 to place shelving and donated items on the first South Carolina UMVIM ERT Trailer. From left, standing, are Terrilynn Robinson, Laura Gleaton, Trudy Cook, Pam Mack, and Ken Midkiff. Kneeling are Billy Robinson and Patricia “Patty” Carson.

and provide just as he said he would. South Carolina UMVIM gave me a ten-foot enclosed trailer for our new team, and my home church of North UMC gave \$4,000 to purchase tools. A team of ten volunteers from my local church gathered in my backyard in North in fall 2004 to put shelving in the trailer and mount the new tools.

We had no chainsaws or heavy equipment, but we were ready to roll.

January 13-16, 2005, was our first “soft start” disaster response. That’s when eight UMVIM volunteers—most from North UMC—responded to Avon Park, Florida, to do a bit of disaster response work but mainly to rebuild after three hurricanes that had hit the area in 2004.

Four members of South Carolina UMVIM—Caroline Dennis, Jerry Gooden, myself, and Terrilynn Robinson—attended a disaster response training put on by the United Methodist Committee on Relief in North Carolina in late summer 2005. While at the training, a man from UMCOR was compiling information about which states had Disaster/Early Response Teams.

“Does South Carolina have enough people and equipment to compose a team?” he asked me.

I, of course, replied, “Yes”—though I really did not know how many volun-



Billy Robinson and Angela Rucker teach CPR at an UMVIM training as Angie and Bobby Oliver and Janice Collins look on.



Janice Tocar and Liama Brunner stand with the South Carolina UMVIM ERT banner they made.

teers we could come up with. After all, we four were the only ones trained.

As we headed home, we heard there was a hurricane in the Gulf of Mexico threatening the U.S. coast.

The next week, Hurricane Katrina hit the Gulf Coast with a vengeance, spreading devastation and chaos like none of us had ever seen before.

I received the call for our team to respond. I nervously put out a request and physically called a makeshift list of possible volunteers I had compiled. We needed chainsaws, slats, and more supplies. I asked for and God provided a pallet load of slats for tarps and fourteen brand-new chainsaws, along with extra parts from American Yard Products of Orangeburg and Chris Smoak, one of our volunteers.

On the morning of September 6, 2005, we headed to Meridian, Mississippi. We lacked proper protective equipment and many essential items, but equipped with faith, hope, and love, we headed out—a ragtag bunch of fourteen volunteers that none other than God himself put together to bear witness and give aid to some of the worst disaster situations any of us had ever witnessed.

God and only God made the mission a large success, taking us all the way to Gulfport, Mississippi. On a big leap of faith, we had stepped out into the historical response of a lifetime as we learned to allow God to direct our paths to devastated families and people who he had prepared in advance for us to minister to spiritually and physically.



The first stocked ERT trailer in South Carolina, above. Below, Billy Robinson shares a time with children during an UMVIM mission in Honduras in 1998.



Back home, as we returned to our regular lives, we began to realize God had worked as much on us as for the people we helped. God had changed us into more caring and compassionate people—people who would spearhead the future of South Carolina UMVIM ERT for countless disaster responses back into the

danger zones to rescue people from dangerous situations and give them restoration of hope, care, and the love of Jesus Christ as members of the family of God.

To God be all glory forever.

—*Billy Robinson*



Chapter 2

First Response—A Triple Blow

JANUARY 13-16, 2005

Eight members of South Carolina United Methodist Volunteers in Mission's Early Response Team headed to hurricane-devastated Avon Park, Florida, January 13-16, 2005. The team included Jerry Gooden of Beulah United Methodist Church, Sandy Run, and seven members of North UMC, North, including Laura Gleaton, Trudy Cook, Pam Mack, Terrilynn Robinson, Ken Midkiff, Mayor Earl Jeffcoat and Team Coordinator Billy Robinson.

The short-term mission was focused out of the First UMC in Avon Park, which itself had been hit by three hurricanes in the fall of 2004. Each of the hurricanes either blew out or severely damaged some of the sanctuary's stained-glass windows.

Hurricane Charley also severely damaged one of the sanctuary's walls and caused water damage. All of the church's damaged stained-glass windows had been boarded up but not repaired, and the damaged wall had scaffolding in place where it was slowly being worked on.

Yet this church surely had the loving spirit of God alive and well in it. First UMC had been hosting volunteer mission teams for four months while pastor Robert Thorne was coordinating teams to help the many needy families in and around Avon Park. They were putting the needs of others before their own needs, and in doing so, they transformed their church into a mission—a place where missionaries were fed, slept, and had their essential needs met, which included good fellowship and spiritual nourishment.

Mission supplies were stored there and distributed, such as truckloads of donated food, clothing, and building materials. Sunday school rooms had all been



Above, team members carry debris from a home. Above, demolition was a huge part of their work in Avon Park, Florida.



transformed into storage and sleeping quarters.

Upon our arrival, Reverend Thorne introduced us to approximately twenty other mission volunteers from Michigan, Virginia, Georgia, and various parts of Florida. Our team brought the total number of volunteers they have hosted to 224. They were really living up to the United Methodist motto of “open hearts, open minds, open doors.” What a wonderful place this world would be if all Christian churches would follow their examples of expressing Christ’s love



Ken Midkiff of North uses a hammer to knock down Sheetrock that had been damaged by the hurricanes.

through their actions.

Roofing was the biggest need throughout Florida, and we came prepared with roofing nails, hammers, ladders, nail aprons, kneepads, shovels, and various supplies for roofing, including a \$500 donation for construction material. Because of a rainy forecast, our plans were changed from outside work to inside. But we have learned many times before to simply go where God sends us and trust him to provide all the needs and even most wants.

This led to us doing something none of us expected—demolition. Reverend Thorne laid several indoor jobs before us to choose from. One that stood out was helping a family of five whose home had received severe damage from the hurricanes, which included roof and water damage throughout the home. The children of the family have asthma, so the complete interior would have to be removed and replaced since most of it received extensive water damage. The home was valued at \$57,000, and FEMA estimated the damage to it at \$54,000. The homeowner's insurance would only give them \$16,000 to repair the home, which included replacing the damaged roof, carpet, and some of the ceiling but not the other portions of the home that had received water damage. So the next morning we loaded up with sledgehammers, crowbars, and various tools needed to tear down walls and ceilings.



The team shows off some of their tools during a moment of fun during the disaster response.

We arrived in Florida in darkness. As we drove to our worksite in daylight, the damage left behind from three hurricanes was ever-present in the countless blue tarps on top of homes, businesses, and churches.

As we arrived at our worksite, we saw the original blue tarp material on the home had deteriorated and been replaced with a clear plastic covering. Our worksite was the home of Mr. and Mrs. Dan King, along with their three young children, just outside Avon Park. Their home was the eighty-ninth home that First UMC had taken on as a mission project.

Demolition seemed to come naturally to us, and in no time we were busy tearing out walls, ceiling, cabinets, tile, and more. The worst part seemed to be tearing out the ceiling and the insulation getting all over us. Some team members from Virginia came by to check out our progress and found it hard to believe how hard and fast we worked, especially the women, who the Virginia men didn't expect to do such hard and dirty work. But we believe in hard, dedicated work, and we believe in fun. We all took time during much-needed breaks to pick ripe oranges off the orange trees in the backyard. There was also a tree with a fruit that was a mixture between an orange and a lemon. Pam Mack of our group successfully fooled each team member into biting into a kumquat, which looks like a very small orange and has a sour and somewhat bitter taste. Later we were even able to pick some ripe pineapple at the home of the construction coordina-



The team included Jerry Gooden of Beulah United Methodist Church, Sandy Run, and seven members of North UMC, North, including Laura Gleaton, Trudy Cook, Pam Mack, Terrilynn Robinson, Ken Midkiff, Mayor Earl Jeffcoat and Team Coordinator Billy Robinson.

tor for First UMC and given a lesson on how to make the heads of them grow so we could have some South Carolina pineapple if cold weather did not kill them.

Dan King was out making a living for his family as a plumber the first day we worked, but he worked along with us on the second day and told us what they experienced through the hurricanes.

“The first hurricane blew off some shingles and flooded our home enough to wet all of the carpet,” he told us. “With the second hurricane approaching, my son was worried about his treasured items getting wet, so I told him to pile them on his bed where the floodwaters would probably not reach them. As the second hurricane began to rage, we all huddled together in the middle of the house as the roof began leaking in various spots.

“Suddenly we heard a loud crash in our son’s room. As I looked into his room, I could sadly see that the ceiling had caved in and fell on top of his bed, destroying all of his prized possessions. Water again soaked our home as much of the roof’s shingles were blown away and damaged.

“The third hurricane basically ruined anything good that the other two had left. We have been living in a small apartment while struggling with the insurance company over the cost to repair our home. Frustrated and weary, I started trying to tackle the job on my own, knowing that we would have a lot of health problems with the children that have asthma if we left the once-wet and now molded Sheetrock, ceiling, insulation, and such in place.

“Then I heard about Reverend Thorne and how the Methodist Church was

helping, so I gave him a call and listened in disbelief as he told me that volunteers would come and help free of charge.”

We finished tearing out all of the ceiling, walls, and damaged interior of the home and had most of it hauled off. A new team would come in and help put a roof on and redo the interior.

Back at First UMC, we enjoyed singing gospel music, taking part in worship services, helping to cook, playing some serious yet fun card games, and enjoying various other forms of good Christian fellowship. Jerry Gooden of our team is a retired military cook. He made plans to return in March to stay a couple of weeks as a cook for all of the mission teams.

As with all previous missions, we learn so much about how God is at work all over the world, and we always receive more than we give. We received priceless gifts during our time there, such as true, loving fellowship and the distinct honor and privilege that comes through being used by Jesus Christ to help others during their times of need and spread his gospel of love.

Our team would have loved to stay for a couple of weeks and help more, but we had jobs with limited vacation time.

—*Billy Robinson*

Chapter 3

God's Call

SEPTEMBER 3, 2005

On August 29, 2005, Hurricane Katrina made landfall as a Category 3 storm with 140 mile per hour winds. It devastated portions of Louisiana, Mississippi, and Alabama.

A few days later we were called to respond on our first major South Carolina United Methodist Volunteers in Mission Early Response Team response since our formation in fall 2004. I was heading up the callout and trying to form a team of volunteers to go, even though there were only four of us who had been officially trained in 2004 in North Carolina.

On Saturday, September 3, Rev. Tony Rowell called me and said he knew a man who would be a good team member named Terry Rawls in Pomaria, South



Terry Rawls (left) goes over plans with the Rev. Mike Evans.



Rawls (right) chats with a homeowner during a disaster response. Below, Rawls helped stock an ERT trailer during the early years of the ERT program.



Carolina. He gave me Terry's number, and I gave Terry a call that evening.

Of course, neither of us knew who the other was, but Terry was really interested.

Terry said he and his wife, Marilyn, had been watching the news after supper, and he'd just said to her, "Those people need a lot of help. I wish there was



Terry Rawls (left) and Billy Robinson share a smile during a mission.

something we could do!”

Just then, the phone rang—with me asking if he would like to go with our team. Coincidence, I think not. That was none other than God at work. Terry was astounded and excited. He had so much going on at work that he could not go on our first response, but he wanted to do something to help. He asked what our needs were, and I gave him a list.

On Sunday morning Terry told the story at his United Methodist Men’s breakfast and asked the group to help. They donated \$500. After church, Terry and Marilyn went shopping and loaded up a utility trailer with supplies such as tarps, fuel, water, food, nails, screws, etc., including supplies for the survivors. They brought the supplies, including some they personally purchased, to my home in North that Sunday afternoon and off-loaded then onto our ten-foot ERT trailer.

One day later our team headed to Mississippi fully loaded with supplies.

As we took a big leap of faith to respond to such a dangerous situation—with-

out knowing where supplies, chainsaws, tarps, or slats would come from—God showed up in many mighty and awesome ways ... including a phone call to a perfect stranger.

—*Billy Robinson*

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