

REV. ERIC HYSTAD: Operation Compassion at the George R. Brown



Thousands of people came to the George R. Brown Convention Center to assist in feeding the many evacuees.

Photo by Diana Rodriguez.

Reverend J. Eric Hystad joined the staff at Houston's Second Baptist Church in 1999. Having worked in pastoral education, he transitioned to working in new campus pastor development in the Houston area. After Hurricane Katrina, he was called upon to head up the effort to feed evacuees at the George R. Brown Convention Center. Ernesto Valdés interviewed Rev. Hystad on August 3, 2006.

J. ERIC HYSTAD (JEH): We knew what was going on with New Orleans, and we knew the tragedy that had happened there. We also knew that as a church, we were going to respond in some way . . . One of our pastors stopped by my office and . . . said, "Hey, we are going to recommend that you be in charge of this deal." At that point, I really wasn't sure what that "deal" was . . .

About one hour later . . . one of our pastors . . . said, "Hey, you need to get down to the Astrodome with one of our other staff members [Pastor Jerry Town] and find out what in the world is going on." . . . The information we had was that [the evacuees] . . . might be pulling up in big buses any moment. . . . We were surprised that nobody was out there to stop us. We pulled right up to the front door of the Astrodome, walked in, looked around

for people, [and] didn't see anybody. There was one table on the floor of the Astrodome, two guys eating lunch at noon on the day that thousands of people were coming to the Astrodome. . . . We quickly realized, they didn't know what was going on. . . . We broke the news to the poor guys that were having lunch there that they would soon have another job, and they didn't believe us. . . . Obviously, there wasn't anything for us to do there, so we went to the Red Cross. . . .

It was a different story there. People were coming in, registering. Lots of people were donating supplies and all that in anticipation of the folks coming from New Orleans. . . . An idea kind of germinated. . . . The best thing we could do . . . was to find one niche, and try to fill that niche—to help provide food to

feed the people. . . . The Texas Baptist Men, which is an organization that helps in disasters across the world, . . . had feeding centers, these big trailers, and are capable of feeding 100,000 meals a day. . . .

All along, I was talking with the Texas Baptist Men . . . [We] went down to the George R. Brown, met with the command center team, . . . and we simply said, “. . . We can serve all the meals. . . . We have done it before. . . .” We also knew that there were three huge trucks coming into town that could help us do this along with twenty to twenty-five men. . . . These guys are all retired; they are all from the state of Texas. Some of these guys are old farm guys. They [are] oil guys. They are just tough as nails. They don’t talk, they just cook. . . . We went on a tour of the George R. Brown, into the belly of that place, and saw what they had to offer.

We said, “. . . Why can’t we use your facilities?” . . . They gave us everything, which allowed us then to free up the trailers [to] send those to Port Arthur and to other places. . . . Once we realized how many people were at the George R. Brown, . . . we realized what we would have to do to serve meals for one month. . . . That is when it got a little scary because we figured out we had to get between 20,000 and 40,000 volunteers to help us. . . .

The Southern Baptists in Texas are made up of the Baptist General Convention of Texas and . . . the Southern Baptist Texas Convention . . . Both of them have emergency feeding disaster relief teams. . . .

They supplied the manpower [to cook,] and . . . we supplied the volunteers. They provided us a menu for the first three days—how much flour, how many cans of green beans—and then we ordered that through Sysco Foods. Sysco was amazing. A lot of the companies we called immediately said, “You know, we can’t comp everything, but we’ll comp a whole bunch of this.” . . . They would give us everything they could. . . .

We started serving, on Friday, but the first few meals, actually, we bought meals for everybody because we didn’t have a place to cook. . . . We did Chick-fil-A sandwiches one day for 10,000 people . . . the Chick-fil-A folks and Jason’s Deli folks . . . gave us great rates, and they were able to pull it together.

ERNESTO VALDÉS (EV): How did the word go out to the different denominations?

JEH: We sent an email out . . . There were a bunch of phone calls made to denominational leaders in town, and they were asked to get the heads of churches to come, synagogues, mosques—every different kind of religious strike or bent was invited. One of the Christian radio stations [KSBJ] here in town made a series of announcements.

[At] that meeting . . . Dr. [Ed] Young . . . said, “Here is what has happened to our city. This is an opportunity for us as a body of faith-based believers of different groups, this is a chance for us to stand together, and to work together, and not worry about who gets the credit and not debate theological issues.” . . . He

“Operation Compassion” volunteers help deaf evacuees of Hurricane Katrina.

Photo courtesy of Diana Rodriguez.



introduced the title “Operation Compassion” and told them, “Our job is simple. We are going to provide food and meals for the people as well as gift bags that would have toiletries and different things.” Then, he challenged them to provide the finances to make it happen as well as volunteers. . . . There were probably 500 people [there] . . .

We laid out some dates for training. . . . Texas Baptist Men required . . . [us] to have volunteers that were trained. . . . We set up three meetings all here at our church. The first one was on a Sunday, and it basically filled up the 6,000 seat worship center. The next day . . . we filled up the worship center, the old sanctuary, and the chapel. The next training conference, we simply couldn’t hold everybody. . . . There were about 18,000 people. . . . We immediately scheduled an additional series of training sessions . . . at different churches . . . Over a span of about two weeks, we trained . . . [approximately] 43,000 people. . . .

These folks were not just ready, they were saying, “Can I work another shift?” . . . [We took] over the volunteer responsibilities throughout the George R. Brown. . . . In some cases, we’d have 1,000 people a shift. . . . We were doing food . . . [and] gift bags; we were helping with the beds; . . . people on every station . . . cleaning, phone banks; we had people there helping people with showers—for all twenty-four hour shifts. . . . On September 9th . . . we had 7,000, 8,000, 10,000 evacuees, and 1,000 [volunteers wearing] yellow shirts . . .

EV: What complaints did you hear?

JEH: The only complaints we heard were two. One was [from a gentleman who] didn’t want to do the training, and he still wanted to help. . . . The other concern was . . . [from] a gentleman that was . . . absolutely inflammatory. He felt like the faith-based organizations were taking over, that it was a power play. . . . We

OPERATION COMPASSION

VOLUNTEERS TRAINED	43,523
MEALS SERVED	118,711
HYGIENE KITS PROVIDED	88,813

simply said, “Here is our mission.” There is no ulterior motive. . . . There are, best we have been told, 150,000 to 200,000 people that are now in our city that weren’t here over one week ago. Somebody has got to feed these people. Can you do it? . . . The bottom line is that we have people from every faith-based organization. . . . I mean, you name it, we had it. We bent over backwards to help people. The Muslims wanted to serve food on September 11, on 9/11, as a symbolic opportunity, . . . and we worked with them on that . . .

The fact [is] that in all of the time that we were there, nobody got sideways about doctrine, about theological beliefs. Nobody got in each other’s face about, my church is better than your church or bigger than your church. That was just a non-issue . . .

EV: What did you learn that may have surprised you about human nature?

JEH: The stuff that divides people so often simply went away. . . . We saw people let down their differences and let down their guards for a higher, more noble purpose. . . . We are all [usually] focused on doing our own thing. . . . Obviously, Katrina shattered that. You can’t do this unless you link arms together. The other thing is people, when you give them a task, they flat out can do it. . . . 

Jennifer Poston: Reflections on the Interfaith Effort

Jennifer Poston is with Interfaith Ministries of Greater Houston and manager of the Office of Disaster Preparedness and Response. She was interviewed by Ernesto Valdés on August 17, 2006.

Probably the biggest mantra in the disaster world, if I can use that terminology, is not to proselytize. . . . This is not a Protestant thing, this is not a Catholic thing, this is not a Muslim relief thing, this is not about “I am going to give you bread, but I am going to tell you, you need to hear about Christ in addition . . . I’ll give you bread only if you also accept the Bible.” . . . Shared beliefs are what drive us to do things of good. In the Abrahamic faiths, we all are taught to clothe the naked, feed the hungry and welcome the stranger. So, in the Jewish tradition, in the Islamic tradition, and in the Christian tradition, that is not hard for people of that background to want to go out and do something . . . America is in a politically correct society that we know that we don’t proselytize when we are out doing this. It is the act of doing the good work that speaks for itself . . . Pastoral care is taught in what is called a

ministry of presence. You don’t have to talk about the New Testament to someone. You just need to listen . . .

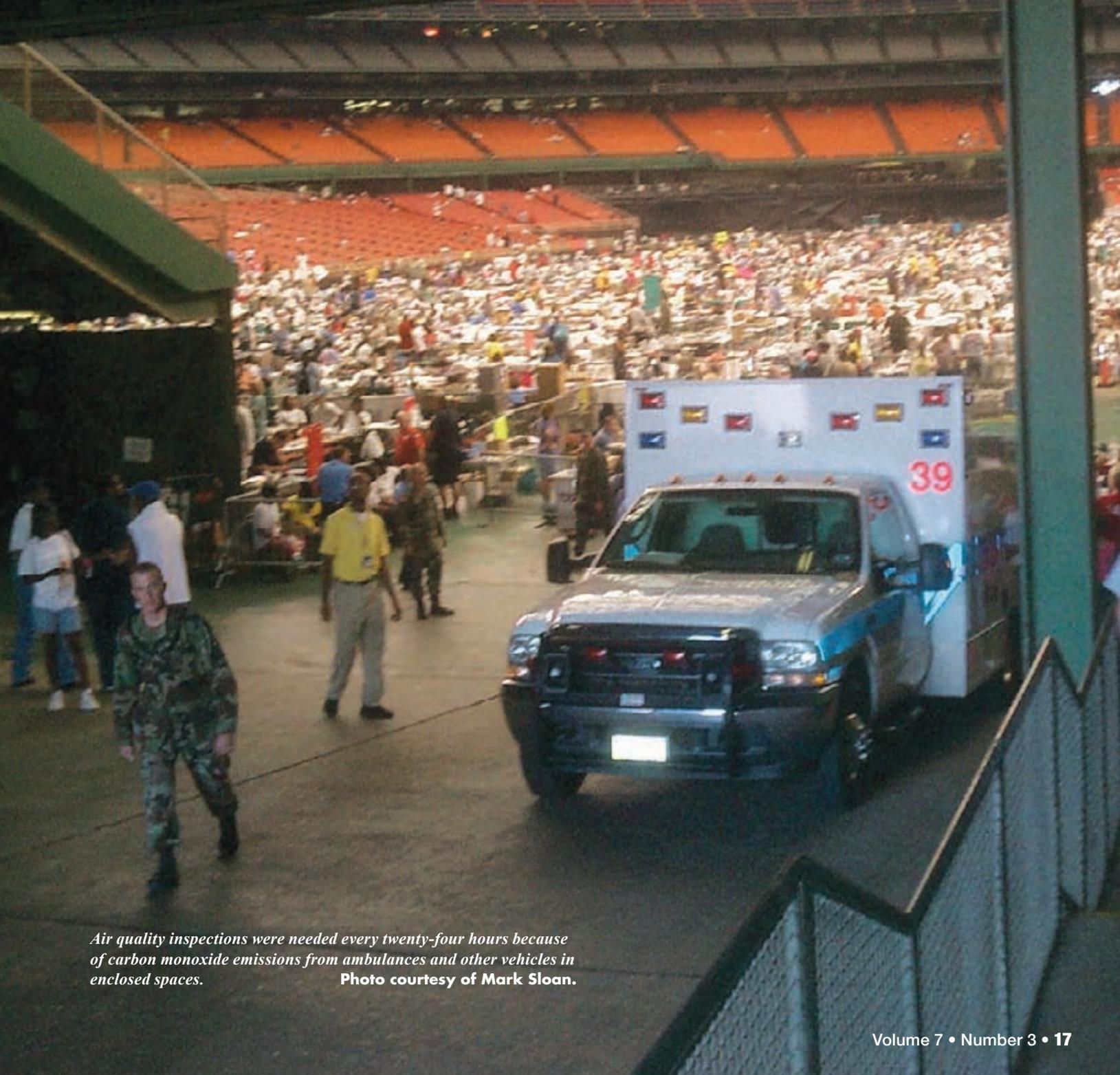
We had trained . . . Adventists, Baha’is, Baptists, Buddhists, Catholics, Charismatics, Church of God, Disciples of Christ, Episcopalians, Hindus, Jains, Jehovah Witnesses, Jews, Lutherans, Mennonites, Methodists, Mormons, Muslims, Pentecostals, Presbyterians, Quakers, Sikhs, Universal Unitarians. . . . 629 organizations represented . . .

[At] the training at Second Baptist Church, when all those faith communities came together, you had Muslims sitting next to Baptists sitting next to Buddhists. People in prayer, praying in unison. Sure, we may not have said, “In Jesus’ name.” We just said, “Amen.” But it was sometimes 12,000 or 15,000 praying at one time. How amazing is that?

Serving the Medical Needs of Houston's "Guest Citizens"

Conversations with Dr. Kenneth Mattox, David Lopez,
Dr. David Persse, Diana Rodriguez, and Ernesto Valdés

Thousands of volunteers worked in patient care and behind the scenes to provide for the medical needs of the folks who sought refuge in Houston after Hurricane Katrina. These doctors and medical personnel shed light on a portion of that story.



Air quality inspections were needed every twenty-four hours because of carbon monoxide emissions from ambulances and other vehicles in enclosed spaces.

Photo courtesy of Mark Sloan.