

Mormons, Baptists assist in tornado cleanup

by [Greg Garrison](#)

May 17, 2011

BIRMINGHAM, Ala. (RNS) Mormon missionaries are often unwelcome guests when they knock at local front doors wearing white dress shirts and holding a Book of Mormon.

But after a tornado, when Mormon missionaries arrive in work clothes carrying chainsaws to help clear fallen trees, they are a welcome sight.

More than 4,000 volunteers for "Mormon Helping Hands" have been working in tornado-ravaged areas across Alabama, descending from Georgia, Louisiana, Tennessee and Kentucky to help.

Jacob Hamilton of Pleasant Grove, Ala., said a group of 15 Mormon volunteers came to his yard on a Saturday afternoon and asked if he needed help removing fallen trees. He signed a waiver and the crew did in one hour what it would have taken him days to get done, he said.

The only way he could identify them was by their yellow shirts that had the "Mormon Helping Hands" logo above the words Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

"They never tried to tell me about their Mormon faith," said Hamilton, who attends a Baptist church. "The Mormons were just going door to door. It was a great blessing. They know their way around a chainsaw."

Faith groups have played a major part in tornado relief, said Julie Wright, director of operations for the Greater Birmingham Area Command for the Salvation Army, an evangelical denomination that has the largest church-run worldwide disaster relief program.

"We've had everybody from Gardendale First Baptist to the Islamic Relief Agency that's been here," said Wright. "We've had people come down every day to volunteer. It's been a tremendous response."

The Southern Baptist Convention and Catholic Relief Services are among the largest religious relief agencies worldwide and are working in tornado relief. In Alabama, Southern Baptists have deployed 7,742 trained and certified emergency volunteers, many who have experience in earthquake efforts in Japan and Haiti, said Mel Johnson, state strategist for the Alabama Baptist Convention's disaster relief ministries.

"We work hand in hand with the Red Cross," Johnson said.

Southern Baptists have nine feeding units and 30 shower trailers at Alabama tornado relief sites, and have cooked more than 177,000 meals. Chaplains have counseled more than 5,000 clients, Johnson said. Crews travel at their own expense and typically stay a week, sleeping on Sunday school room floors.

"It is hot, hard work," Johnson said. "But people do it because it's an opportunity to bring hope."

The Baptist cleanup and recovery crews, who also cut and remove trees, often end up working with Mormons and other religious volunteers.

"Catholics, Lutherans, Methodists, they all bring certain things to the table," Johnson said. "The community of faith is usually the first to respond. They have compassion; that's where they live."

The Mormons, who have no paid clergy, rely completely on volunteers who spend weekends working and sleep in tents at Mormon churches.

"It's just being a good neighbor, assisting people when they're in a time of need," said Seth Clayton, bishop of the Columbiana ward of the Latter-day Saints, who took part in a tree-clearing effort in Tuscaloosa.

"We believe in service," Clayton said. "Many hands make light work."