

Bee Tree Christian Church, established in 1872, lies near a creek in Swannanoa, North Carolina. Hurricane Helene destroyed the church building, and the community around Bee Tree Road experienced massive devastation.

Where Is God in the Storm?

words by **RACHEL STREICH**

photos by **GUY GERRARD**

The evidence of disaster remains in Ryan and Amy Geist's small town of Swannanoa, North Carolina. Piles of trash line roads. Houses near the Swannanoa River display spray-painted X-marks that glaringly identify them as having been searched. Below the X, a number denotes how many people died.

Hurricane Helene, which pummeled Florida first as a Category 4 hurricane, reached western North Carolina on September 27, 2024. In the days before and during the storm, torrential rain poured into Swannanoa, a town with about 5,000 residents.



A worker rakes trash alongside the Swannanoa River. Col. Brad Morgan, a commander with the Wilmington Army Corps of Engineers, says more than 16,000 metric yards of debris were collected from about a 2-mile stretch of the Swannanoa River. A team contracted to remove debris from the Asheville area had collected about 36,500 dump trucks full. Ryan and Amy's community — a valley surrounded by mountains — flooded on a massive scale. Waters raged, causing mudslides and wiping out bridges and rows of homes. More than 100 people died in western North Carolina, according to the North Carolina Department of Health and Human Services.

“Nobody had any category for what happened,” Amy says.

Ryan and Amy — staff members with Lifelines™, Cru®'s outdoor adventure ministry — have lived in “go mode,” jumping into action during months of crisis. And God worked in ways beyond human effort. In the aftermath of trauma and tragedy, God is present. He reveals his nature as the One who provides through answered prayers and relational connections.



Amy directs a group of students from the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga, where she and Ryan used to serve with Cru®'s campus ministry. Students and staff members packed lunches and worked from morning until mid-afternoon clearing debris.

The home that became a relief hub

When the storm passed, Amy and Ryan's Lifelines hands-on experience and store of tactical gear helped in ways they didn't expect.

They used camping supplies to provide food to neighbors outside their house. Their Lifelines experience with mountainous terrain helped them navigate through the storm-ravaged environment. They employed rock

climbing equipment to remove trees from power lines and waded through deep rushing water to get a neighbor to safety. And their ministry experience taught them how to organize an outreach at home, sharing the hope of Jesus — similar to coordinating a freshmen welcome week on a college campus.

Because of flooded bridges and mudslides, outside help couldn't immediately reach the town. Through strategy meetings with neighbors, Swannanoa's fire chief — a family friend who lives on the same street as the Geists — designated their home as a hub for donations coming and going into their community. As a result, provisions poured in from neighbors, churches and organizations such as Samaritan's Purse and Hearts With Hands. One neighbor gave Ryan and Amy 3,000 eggs to feed others, and another gave away meat to cook.

"What we saw on the ground was the people of God joining together across so many boundaries," Amy says.

The enormity of donations helped the Geists offer neighbors three meals a day for a month.

"I think it definitely is surprising the number of people that we were able to feed through just food coming to us, that we didn't have to buy any food," Ryan says. "The Lord just answered specific, tangible prayers."



During the work day, students from the University of Chattanooga haul...They helped with clean-up near the home of Robert McClellan, a Swannanoa resident whom the Geists have gotten to know.

SIDENOTE

Ongoing needs in Swannanoa

Even before the storm, Swannanoa residents experienced poverty and homelessness. But afterward, the spotlight turned to them. Then-President Joe Biden visited nearby Asheville, and news crews reported on the natural disaster. Yet while the reporting has subsided, the damage lingers. A worker near the Swannanoa River says it will take two or three years for the town to become more normal. It's an ongoing topic of conversation in the mountains, while across the country it's become a story of the past.

God meets needs and exceeds provision in the midst of crisis

Like the story of Jesus providing more bread and fish than what a crowd ate, the Geists' hub held more than their neighbors needed. For example, Amy filled three cars full of extra diapers and took them to a pediatrician. A friend lent them an ambulance to deliver donations to people, and extras remained in the vehicle.

“We’re living with the leftovers now,” Amy says. “It’s this reminder of God showing up over and over and over.”

God heard simple prayers lifted up in urgent need. After the storm, Amy often prayed, “Lord, I need your help.”

Just when the last pallet of water for the community emptied, the water that was safe to drink came back on. And boots from the fire chief met a need for shoes.

Bears roam among the mountains and use their smarts to enter cars in search of food, so cooking outside poses a

risk. The Geists prayed that the bears would go somewhere else when they were cooking, and bears only searched the ambulance once when it was left unlocked.



Gerhard Esterhuizen, regional director for Cru®'s campus ministry (left), talks with the Geist family in their home. With Lifelines staff member Matthew Kent (right), they discuss the upcoming time with students.

Recovering one step at a time

With shared experiences and needs, people rallied to help each other and enter one another's homes.

Mitchell Beddingfield joined the gatherings of neighbors for evening meals while staying at his pastor's house just two doors up from the Geists. Mitchell's home near the Swannanoa River still stands, but the flood destroyed his belongings and the houses around his. Mitchell witnessed a father and son lose their lives. Mitchell, trapped inside his house by rising waters, escaped by boat rescue.



Mitchell Beddingfield's house structure withstood the hurricane, but Cru® students and others have helped him replace what he lost inside. With a smile, he interacts with the students and staff members.

Two months later, volunteers are helping restore the inside of Mitchell's home, adding the clean smell of new wood flooring.

Though physically unharmed by the storm, Mitchell lives with the awareness of the suffering his community endured. His personal reality holds a positive outlook.

"Other than a little post-traumatic stress, I'm just fine," he says.



Amy and Ryan chat with Mitchell as new flooring comes together in his house.

Mitchell praises God in the midst of the trauma he experienced — recognizing God’s help through other people. One day after the storm, he sang the hymn “It Is Well With My Soul” at a nearby tent set up by Mennonites. The song’s lyrics declared words of peace.

“Though Satan should buffet, though trials should come,
Let this blest assurance control,
That Christ hath regarded my helpless estate,
And hath shed His own blood for my soul.”

“And eventually I’ll wake up
and it’ll be well with other
parts than just my soul,”
Mitchell says. “Life will be
life again, but until then, you
just go one step at a time.”



Mitchell supervises as Ryan lays new flooring in Mitchell's house. Mitchell wears headphones to lower the volume of the hammer as it pounds nails into the wood.

Students and humanitarian organizations combine efforts

College students help Mitchell make progress in his house. On December 7, 2024, nearly 50 students involved in Cru at the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga, Eastern Kentucky University and University of North Carolina—Asheville traveled to Swannanoa to work on hurricane relief. Two other groups of students had

previously come to serve. Instead of outdoor adventure trips, the Midsouth Lifelines team of nine people organized these as humanitarian aid trips.



Students involved in Cru® from UNC Asheville, Eastern Kentucky University and University of Tennessee at Chattanooga install a new door in Mitchell's house.



Matthew Kent, Lifelines™ staff member, talks to a student group, briefing them before they all leave to work on a home. The students and staff members gathered at the Geists' church, Valley Hope Church, before and after working at Swannanoa homes.

The students and Cru staff members deliver small artificial Christmas trees with lights to Mitchell and the two other homes during the December relief trip. Colorful lights glimmer from a corner in Mitchell's nearly finished house where the little tree rests, a reminder of the season celebrating Christ's coming.

In addition to Cru students, Mitchell has met volunteers from various organizations, such as Adventures in Missions, as they worked together.

They've been like a real beehive of activity,” Mitchell says about the Cru students. “What they’ve been doing is an answer to prayer.



Amy and her son, Will, burn wood debris while students clean up the area around Robert’s and his daughters’ homes. Amy and Ryan have two children, Will and Emily.

Inviting friends to serve together

The Lifelines team desires for Christian students to invite their friends on these trips and serve shoulder to shoulder with them, while they share the love of Jesus.

“Non-Christians labor alongside Christians, and there’s a relationship that builds, and just aha experiences and moments. So that’s been the neatest thing,” says Matthew Kent, Lifelines staff member.



Bri Booth (left), a freshman at the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga, joins women from her university as they clear debris at an area of mobile homes. Bri’s grandfather lives in nearby Black Mountain, which also experienced storm damage. At the end of the trip, one young woman said she saw how temporary material things are, which could vanish in an instant.



Cru students and staff members work on Christine and Herman Hollifield's home in Swannanoa — bagging up insulation and removing siding. The Hollifields have lived in their home for many years

The Lifelines team has a similar goal of welcoming non-Christian students on outdoor adventure trips. When college students take trips with [Lifelines](#), they experience adventure and beauty in nature while reflecting on the truth about God. This helps connect students to Jesus. Christian students also have opportunities to share their faith with others.

“So the outreach side of [hurricane relief efforts] feels very similar to what we’re doing with Lifelines,” Ryan says.



Christine and Herman Hollifield moved into a donated RV with their family after Hurricane Helene destroyed their house. In the midst of health challenges, the Hollifields look forward to moving back into their home.



A student removes the outer layer of siding on the Hollifields' house to let moisture dry.



Cru students pick up debris around downed trees near Robert's mobile home.

Forming teams for the future

After the hurricane, some of the locations for adventures with Lifelines have completely changed, and the team can't plan trips. Yet God brought more opportunities for outreach as Cru's campus ministry offered a spring break mission trip March 15-21, 2025, for students who desired to help with hurricane relief around Asheville.



Along with students' cleanup work, hurricane relief efforts happened in other areas of Swannanoa on the same day. Cleanup among the water and mountains of western North Carolina continues after student groups leave.

Although Mitchell's house is nearly done, the work in western North Carolina is not finished and will most likely take years. In the midst of devastation, community members showed gratitude. "Here is what the Lord provides," Mitchell says while motioning to his new flooring.

"It's the beauty of it all working together," he adds, "to give glory to the Lord."



Reagan Corder, a student from the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga, bundles up on a December day outside a Swannanoa home during relief efforts.

CALL TO ACTION

**Hear more from the Lifelines™ team
and students by watching this**

LIFELINES: FAITHFUL PRESENCE IN THE STORM

NEXT STEPS

To learn about Lifelines™ and how to get involved

LEARN MORE

GET EMAIL UPDATES

Subscribe now to receive our best and latest resources.

SUBSCRIBE NOW

