

**Interviewee: Hystad, Rev., John Eric**

**Interview: August 3, 2006**

**UNIVERSITY OF HOUSTON  
ORAL HISTORY OF HOUSTON PROJECT**

**Interview with: Reverend John Eric Hystad**

**Interviewed by: Ernesto Valdes**

**Date: August 3, 2006**

**Transcribed by: Suzanne Mascola**

EV: This is Ernesto Valdes. I am with the Reverend Eric Hystad at the Second Baptist Church where I am interviewing him regarding his participation in the Katrina relief efforts. Today's date is August 3, 2006. Reverend Hystad, will you please give me your full name?

JEH: I am John Eric Hystad.

EV: And where were you born?

JEH: I was born in Shreveport, Louisiana in 1959.

EV: You were educated in schools there?

JEH: Actually, no. We moved around a lot when I was a kid and I went to grade school in Texas, in Dallas, and in Houston, then on to Oklahoma City. I went to high school in Oklahoma City. I went to college in Oklahoma and then finished seminary at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in Fort Worth.

EV: Where did you go to college?

JEH: At Oklahoma Baptist University.

EV: Did you serve in the military at any time?

JEH: No.

EV: Were you always majoring or studying to go in the ministry?

JEH: I was. I sensed a calling to go into ministry when I was in high school and then went to Oklahoma Baptist and majored in religion, and then went on to seminary and majored in religious education.

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EV: That is what you do now, is primary religious education?

JEH: Yes, with lots of other things. My primary responsibilities now . . . I am the new campus pastor development for new campuses here in Houston and potentially other places as well.

EV: And how long have you been doing that?

JEH: I have been in ministry since 1979 primarily for the first 20 years in the Oklahoma City area and then moved to Houston in 1999 to serve on the staff here at Second Baptist, and I was the high school pastor for about 6-1/2 years, and then transitioned from that work into the work that I am doing now here at Second Baptist.

EV: Tell me how you first got pulled in to this Katrina relief effort.

JEH: Well, you know, 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. Our executive pastors meet on Wednesdays and I think we got wind that a good number of folks from New Orleans were coming to Houston, actually that morning. And one of our pastors stopped by my office and just simply said . . . he kind of had a smile on his face and he said . . . he kind of was hem-hawing around and finally he 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. I didn't really know . . . first of all, I knew that there were some people coming from New Orleans. I didn't realize the breadth and the scope of it. I didn't realize exactly how many people nor the tragedy that they had . . . you know, I had been watching the news, listening to the news, but certainly had not spent a great deal of time dealing with it. And so, that was probably about 10 o'clock in the morning.

About one hour later, I got a phone call from another one of our pastors and he said, "Hey, you need to get down to the Astrodome with one of our other staff members

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and find out what in the world is going on,” because at that point, the rumor was that they were all coming to the Astrodome, that they were going to be rolling in. And, you know, how information comes in cycles – half of it is wrong. The information we had was that they were on their way and might be pulling up in big buses any moment. So, we went immediately down to the Astrodome. We pulled up to the Astrodome. First of all, 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, 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.

EV: Who is “we?”

JEH: It was myself and one of our pastors, Jerry Town. Jerry is the head of security and works in the facilities department here in our church. So, we quickly realized, you know, they didn’t know what was going on or they weren’t on the way. Well, they were on their way and so 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. They said, “Well, we don’t know who you are. We will check on that.” Well, obviously, there wasn’t anything for us to do there so we went to the Red Cross here in town, the main office, and obviously, 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.

EV: Are they right by the Pierce elevated? That used to be the old Red Cross, or did they move?

JEH: I am not really sure.

EV: That old building, that old house?

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JEH: No. This was a nice facility. It was 10 minutes away from the Astrodome. I can't remember exactly where it was. But we went to the front, wasn't sure who to talk to, spent some time trying to find somebody who would listen to what we were saying because we were committed to try to help and we wanted to tell them that, you know, we have a church that is ready and willing to step up and stand in and to help. And the Red Cross finally put me in contact with somebody, gave me a name. In the process of being there, as listening to people come up and say, "I am willing to give clothes. I am willing to give money. I am willing to give so and so," an idea kind of began, kind of germinated and as we were sitting here listening to this, waiting for somebody to kind of give us a direction – we were there maybe 30 minutes or so but the idea came about that, you know, the best thing we could do for the people that were coming to Houston was to find one niche, find a niche and try to fill that niche. And that was to help provide food to feed the people that were coming here because we knew that the majority of people would be coming to large centers like the Astrodome. At that point, we did not know about George R. Brown. We thought that they were going to put 30,000 people at the Astrodome.

And so, we thought, well, can we help with the feeding of these people? And from that thought, we made some phone calls. I had thought about a gentleman that I had met years ago who was with the Texas Baptist Men who is an organization that helps in disasters across the world. I called him. He was in Mississippi. He had just been there a day or two. And they had feeding centers, these big trailers and are capable of feeding 100,000 meals a day. Huge facilities that cook, clean up, and they are all self-contained, and they were everywhere from California to New Mexico. Some were already in the devastated areas, somewhere in San Antonio. And so I said, "Do you have any available?"

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Could you allocate two or three of those things to Houston?" And he said, "I don't know. I'll check and call back."

At the same time that I was down there meeting with Jerry and we were talking with those people just on our cell phones, our executive pastors were meeting and in the course of that discussion, they also felt like that the best thing would be to go ahead and fill a niche – not to try to do everything, not to try to provide houses and apartments and money. We just simply couldn't do that. We don't have the resources to take care of everybody's need but we knew we could do something and so we decided to do the food thing. So, that all came together about 12:30 when I got back here in the office. We had a meeting immediately with our staff and our people and that is the direction we decided to go. That is a very long answer to your question.

EV: That is fine.

JEH: Are you O.K. with that?

EV: That is super. Was this done on your own volition or did somebody say, "Why don't you take care of the feeding?"

JEH: No. It came about from the meeting of executive pastors. Our pastor made the decision, obviously in consultation with the executive pastors, but our pastor made the decision that we would go ahead and we would look to feed the people. We knew at that point, we had done just enough checking that we knew that everything was fluid. Nobody really knew exactly what they were getting ready to face. We heard rumors of 25,000, 50,000, 125,000. We had no idea. I think all of us were just visualizing this mass of humanity coming to the Astrodome and eating military meals. And so, our thought was, we can do better than that. There is nothing wrong with military meals at all . . .

EV: You haven't been in the military (laughter).

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JEH: So, all of us figured, that is something that our church can do. Our church has had experience in the past . . . when tropical storm Allison hit, our church did a yeoman's job all across the city of mobilizing a large number of people to help, to help put people's lives back together, to feed. We opened up, I think, 3 different shelters of food and that was done within just our staff. So, from that, that was on Wednesday. Wednesday afternoon, our church, our staff, and we have a large staff, our pastors, our administrative assistants, our support team, pretty much everybody kind of quit doing ministry, church work, and started doing . . .

EV: Real ministry.

JEH: That is right. We became all a part of "Operation Compassion." The afternoon, we met, we decided that that was what we were going to offer. All along, I was talking with the Texas Baptist Men that afternoon and I got a phone call. They said, "We will do this." We were able to bring in . . . these guys said, "We will have a trailer here by Friday." And so, we knew then we had an apparatus to feed. So, at that point, the only thing we were lacking was we weren't sure where we were going to be doing this. And, again, the Red Cross said, "You know, that is a great idea. We will get back with you. We need you."

And so, in the process of making all those phone calls, I began to be concerned because it sounded like that there was already a contract . . . somebody else had been asked to do the Astrodome. And certainly, we weren't in a place to try to outdo somebody and we didn't want to do something that had already been done, and we weren't trying to compete with anybody. And so, it turns out that at the Astrodome, a food service provider here in town already had the contract to do that. And they did a great job with that. But now, we had our team mobilized, we weren't sure what we were going to be doing. That next morning, we had a meeting early and that is when we found

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out that they had shut down the Astrodome because of the huge numbers of people that came in that night to the Astrodome. They actually started showing up around, I think 4 o'clock I believe is right. But, I mean, all night long, they would just roll in, drop off and leave. And people would be, there they were at the Astrodome. And so, they closed that and began shifting a large number of people over to the George R. Brown Convention Center. When that opened up, then the next morning, myself and one of our other pastors, and one of our volunteer laymen in our church who we had pulled in to serve with us on kind of an advisory capacity, we went down to the George R. Brown, met with the command center team that they were putting into place and we simply said, "Here is what we can do. We can serve all the meals." We didn't say it in a way that was bragging. We know the capability of our staff and our team and we have done it before, and we knew that because of the way we operate as far as leadership style, we felt like we could do it and do it well. We also knew that there were 3 huge trucks coming in to town that could help us do this along with 20-25 men, that that is what they do. These guys are all retired, they are all from the state of Texas. Some of these guys are old farm guys. They were oil guys. They are just tough as nails. They don't talk, they just cook. So, we knew that we could do it. And so, at that meeting, they signed off on it and said, "All right. What do you need?"

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, "Look, number one, we've got all these cookers coming in, in these trailers, but you've already got this kitchen that is the size of a small state. Why can't we use your facilities?" And so, they said, "Let us get back with you." So, they signed off on that. They gave us the freezer space, they gave us all their kitchen utensils. They gave us everything, which allowed us then to free up the trailers. We got

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on the phone, we said, "Guys, we need you. We don't need the trailers. Send those trailers to Port Arthur and to other places that could use it."

And so, then once that happened, that very next day, I believe, on a Friday, we started to serve meals. And from Wednesday night, we began bringing in people, laymen, volunteers in our church, who are very gifted in administrative things and who are good at delegation and can make things happen. They are just go-to kind of guys and ladies. And so, we began putting together an organization. Once we figured out what we were going to be doing at George R. Brown, then we started building a team of people. So, from Wednesday through Saturday, there wasn't a lot of sleep going on around here because we were literally in the process of putting together a structure. And then, once we realized how many people were at the George R. Brown on Friday afternoon, we realized what we would have to do to serve meals for one month, we realized exactly how many people we would need. That is when it got a little scary because we figured out we had to get up to between 20,000 and 40,000 volunteers to help us. And that was the next part of the story.

So, after George R. Brown signed off and said you can do it, then that part got easy. Then, we went into the second part, which was the actual getting the volunteers.

EV: Before we leave that please explain who the Texas Baptist Men are and what they do?

JEH: It was actually a group of men . . . the Southern Baptists in Texas are made up of the Baptist General Convention of Texas and then there is another group which is the Southern Baptist Texas Convention.

EV: Do they have somebody you can just call up and say . . . like is he the head honcho of the whole thing?



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JEH: Well, each of those organizations . . . one is more of a conservative group and the other is more of a moderate group. They both represent Southern Baptists in Texas. Both of them have emergency feeding disaster relief teams. And so, I didn't realize that they both had that so when I started making phone calls, I started being sent to these different guys. And so, I was talking to both of them at the same time not even knowing that they were different organizations. So, when they came here, they worked together which was a wonderful thing. It turned out to be . . . you know, we felt like it was kind of a nice little marriage. I am not sure that they looked at it that way but I think that the guys had an amazing time together. We had 3 shifts of men that over the . . . what we were supposed to feed for 1 month, we ended up feeding for about 2-1/2 weeks. And so, we would have a group of 15-20 guys. Because our church pretty much, in most ways, shut down, all our activities were canceled. Our building pretty much became Command Central.

We took a whole huge room upstairs on the fourth floor of our building [for the Texas Baptist Men], we brought in portable beds, we had areas where they could shower and clean up. We had a whole team of people that were taking care of those men basically to make sure that they were able to have basic comforts when they weren't at George R. Brown, . . . they would have a quiet place to sleep, watch TV, rest, read, have something to eat, they could get snacks. And so, all of that was available up on the fourth floor here for those men and they did all the cooking along with the people that we supplemented with volunteers.

EV: And these men were from all over the state of Texas?

JEH: Yes, they were from all over the state. In some cases, other places as well.

EV: Did they supply the food they cooked?

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JEH: What we did is they supplied the manpower and then they said we need this number of volunteers to make this work. So, we supplied the volunteers. And then, they provided for us a menu for the first 3 days - how much flour, how many cans of green beans - they gave us a menu – and then we ordered that through Cisco Foods. And Cisco was amazing. They provided 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.” And so, they did. They gave us amazing rates. I can’t say enough for the people that stepped in and helped us. The Coke folks gave us . . . Coca Cola did amazing things. Pepsi. All different kinds of groups. They would give us everything they could. And so, then all that was delivered to George R. Brown.

It was a fluid situation – everything moving, everything developing. And so, when the guys actually showed up, that first group of Texas Baptist Men with their funny looking shirts and their little hats, they were ready to go to work. Well, we were ready for them to go to work. And so, we started serving, I think, on Friday, but the first few meals were actually we went out and bought meals for everybody because we didn’t have a place to cook for the guys to cook. I think we did Chic-Fil-A sandwiches one day for 10,000 people or whatever, and the people here in the town, the Chic-Fil-A folks and Jason’s Deli folks, I mean, they were amazing. They gave us great rates and they were able to pull it together. I mean, it was amazing how they did what they did. It was amazing. And so, then by the time we were ramped up in order to feed, I think it was either on Saturday night or Sunday, all the food was in place, all the stuff was in place. Our volunteers, which I will get to that in a second, they were ready to be in place as well.

EV: O.K., let’s get to the volunteers. How did the word go out to the different denominations and the churches? Radio? TV? Is that how you did it?

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JEH: Well, obviously things began to roll on Wednesday afternoon and then by Wednesday night, we pretty much knew what we were going to be doing. We sent an email out Wednesday evening. Dr. Young's office also made . . . I don't know this for a fact and I have not asked him about this but I believe that 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 here in town made a series of announcements – KSBJ made announcements over and over and said, "If you are interested in helping, there is a meeting." That meeting, I believe, was held on Thursday afternoon and at that point, Dr. Young stood before the people, the pastors and the church leaders and 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." So, he called the leaders, church leaders, pastors, teachers, rabbis, priests. He basically said, "What will you do?"

He 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. And then, challenge them to provide the finances to make it happen as well as volunteers from their groups. At that point, we were looking at a fairly significant . . . I can't remember exactly what we thought it might run into but we were looking at feeding up to 20,000 people for 4 weeks. And so, obviously we had to set the bar real high and we said, "If we do this, here is what it could be." And we gave them that number and we challenged them to meet that number. There were probably 500 people in that room that afternoon and by the time we left.

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Afterwards, Dr. Young rallied a group of men and women and said, “Now, your job is to get your individual churches, synagogues, temples, whatever to get involved and be a part.” And then we laid out at that meeting some dates for training. One of the things that Texas Baptist Men required of us was that in order for them to come and cook, by their own by-laws, they have to have volunteers that are trained. And so, again, it was a how do you train an army of people? And so, we thought, well, you just do it. And so, we had the spokesman for the Texas Baptist Men come in. Truthfully, we set up, I believe, 3 meetings all here at our church. The first one, I believe, was on a Sunday and it basically filled up the 6,000 seat worship center here. And so, we were thinking, now that is pretty good. The next day, I believe and I would have to go back and look but I think the next day may have been Labor Day . . . I know there was a holiday that was involved in there somewhere, the next day, the word began to spread that we were doing this work and 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. We filled up the worship center, the chapel, the sanctuary, every classroom that was large, the old gym, the new gym – basically, we figured on that day, there were about 18,000 people on the campus. Traffic was stopped on Woodway. It was backed up all the way to I-10. The police were doing the very best but what can you do with people . . . and the people were not angry, they were not pushy. Some of them turned around because they could not get in the worship center. Many of them frankly would call and say, “Are you going to offer another one?”

Well, immediately we realized, O.K., we have got to do something in order to . . . people want to be a part of this. They want to serve. So, we immediately scheduled an additional series of training sessions and put them on the calendar, did not do a whole lot of publicity. KFBJ helped us. We sent emails out. KFBJ, 89.3, I think, is their call

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number. And so, the word just simply got out. Some of the denominational leaders would also tell their churches and stuff. But we also then started having training sessions in other churches. I believe First United Methodist Church here. We set up a training session there. We set up a training session at an Episcopal church, I believe, right down the street here. St. Martin's Episcopal Church, I think, hosted one. And so anyway, we found different churches and locations to have these training conferences at and, in most cases, they were completely packed.

And so, over a span of about 2 weeks, we trained initially and then we had an additional series of training for people who would sign up for later days and we trained, I believe the numbers were somewhere in the neighborhood of 43,000, something, people who went through the hour-long training, they heard about food preparation, all the things that the Texas Baptist Men normally do when they do training for volunteers, we gave them a T-shirt, yellow shirt, that said "Operation Compassion," we gave them a car pass that let them park down at the George R. Brown, and we gave them directions and we gave them some information on when they were to serve.

At the same time we were doing that, we have a building here on our campus that we turned into a command center and that building has a series of phones. It is a phone bank basically for people when they call in to us - you know, Dr. Young's radio and television shows and they request a prayer or whatever. And so, we turned that into the command center. In that command center, we would handle requests . . . people were starting to call saying, "I am from New Orleans. I need this. I need that." People were calling saying, "I have money to give. Where do I give that money?" We had set up an account through the United Way. It was controlled by the "Operation Compassion" organization. We were simply a group of people who were committed to do this project

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but that money would funnel all through the United Way. They would be the gatekeeper for those funds.

And so, you know, those people in that command center they were on the phone literally nonstop from early, early morning to late, late at night. And then we had a group of 5 people who, as people would come to the training, we had a group of 125 people who were on computers entering the data. And so, obviously that data was dumped into a master list of volunteers that we knew their address, their phone numbers, their cell phone numbers, everything. And then, we came up with a simple plan to implement them, put them into a schedule. And so, within 3 days, we had sent everybody their day that they were going to work, the time that they were going to work, and so many groups came on as groups but a great number of them received email – they could go on . . . if I was scheduled to work Monday from 4 o'clock in the morning to 10 o'clock in the morning, if that changed and I couldn't come, I could go into the web site and get on there and change my time and they would let them do that. So, that was all happening over the span of that time.

EV: So, this training was primarily to assist the Texas Baptist Men?

JEH: That is right.

EV: And they did the training?

JEH: The Second Baptist gentleman, he did the training from the stage. In several of our rooms, we had video cameras. We filmed it obviously and showed it in the other additional worship rooms but then we realized, O.K., we are out of cameras, we are out of rooms, so now we are putting people in small Sunday school rooms and bible study rooms and hallways. It got to the point that everywhere, our staff was doing the training. We didn't necessarily desire that. We would rather have had them do it but at that point,

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the Texas Baptist Men weren't here. It was the Texas Baptist man, one, and he was doing all the training up front.

EV: So, what they heard from him is what they just parroted to everybody else?

JEH: Right. All of our staff had been to the very first one on Sunday, I believe, so they knew it and they had their worksheets and all that, so that is how they did it.

EV: I imagine it wasn't anything really complex, just a simple, be sure you wash your hands . . .

JEH: It was very, very simple.

EV: So, I mean, it wasn't formal training in the sense of having a training manual?

JEH: No. Texas Baptist Men, really over the years because they do this so often, that is what they exist to do, they have really narrowed it down to what do you have to do in order to do triage food service basically.

EV: Let me get to the structural politics of this in just a little bit and see how you all can fit into this. Keep in mind that 50, 60 years from now, some young Turk might be reading our tape or listening to our tape right now and kind of wonder how this may have gone so I am trying to cover that ground. In the chain of command between the mayor, the county judge and the governor who started all this, and you all were Operation Compassion. That included your feeding and the volunteers, is that correct?

JEH: Feeding and gift bags.

EV: So, did you all work under any one of those chains of command or were you just kind of a lone wolf that went in there and did what just had to be done?

JEH: Once we were into serving and feeding, yes, when we went to George R. Brown and met with the command team which consisted of Rick Noriega who was overall basically . . . he was over George R. Brown project. I think he was state senator, something like that...anyway, a phenomenal guy. Very disciplined, very structured, and

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his leadership style in a lot of ways is the leadership style that we have at the church. It is, don't micromanage, find people who can do it and turn them loose, let them do it. And so, at that meeting, you know, you had people that were in charge of installing showers, you had people who were in charge of communications – how are we going to get a computer to people so they can check their . . . how are we going to do the cell phones . . . and so, all these different groups of people were there as well as obviously our group, myself and two other people. And so, when we said, here is what we have to offer, here is what we can do, he said, "Done. You do that." So, he gave us the freedom then to develop . . . we kept his office abreast of what was going on.

We really didn't . . . now, I am sure that people in other places – my pastor, the executive staff, other folks, you know, I am sure we had conversations with people in other places whether that be the governor or Judge Eckels, I personally did not have those conversations until later. I spoke with Judge Eckels about another issue later. But they were very supportive. My impression is that they simply said, "Just get this done. Do it. Whatever it takes, you know, just do it and do it as well as you can as cheaply as you can." So, when they realized there wasn't any cost involved to them, that the faith-based organizations were going to pay for it and that it would be done with quality, and they realized that there were an army of people willing to do it, they were very amenable to that. And actually, what happened was when we first got to the George R. Brown on Saturday, we were there already helping, we already started taking volunteers though we were not cooking the food. That is when we were bringing in Jason's Deli and all those other groups, other food kinds of things. But for the first couple of days, I think Saturday and even part of Sunday. CenterPoint Energy had mobilized their volunteer base just from their company, which is an amazing group and an amazing company. And so, on the weekend, they were all over the place and they had the CenterPoint desk. They were



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doing everything. And then we obviously were bringing in 200 or so volunteers to help them. When we got there, we realized as we were training all these people, I realized how many people we had, how many volunteers were ready. I mean, these folks were not just ready, they were saying, "Can I work another shift?" I mean, I had people calling begging me, emailing me, "You only gave me one shift. I want more." Well, what do you do in a case like that? So, what we decided was let's see if indeed they had needs in other areas. Now, our first, foremost and complete responsibility was to feed. We never left that. That was what we did. And to provide gift bags. What they did ask us to do was to take over the volunteer responsibilities throughout the George R. Brown. And I believe it began on Tuesday or Wednesday of the following week. So, Centerpoint then pulled back on their volunteers, let them go back to doing their business and then we upped our volunteer count to anywhere from 300 to 600 people. And in some cases, we'd have 1,000 people a shift. And so, the people would come and then, at that point, we were doing food, we were doing gift bags, we were helping with the beds, helping with . . . we had people on every station all over that place. I mean, you name it, we were doing it. Cleaning, phone banks. We had people there helping people with showers. From all 24 hour shifts. So, we were there all day and all night for that time. During that time, Rick Noriega, because we had a large number of people and we also had a number of our staff that were involved, directly involved, he began to pull in several of our pastors into key leadership roles in the command center there at the George R. Brown. That command center initially had a lot of . . . well, obviously you had Health Department people, Centerpoint folks, state troopers, you name it, it had a lot of those different kinds of groups. Well, as they realized the army of people that we had and what they could do, then they started turning over those other areas as well to people not all from our church but a good number from our church. And then, we worked under Rick's

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authority. He would convene meetings in the morning, go over the state of the house and determined what needed to be done, changes, and so we stayed under his authority. At no time did we ever make policy. We followed policy. If they said jump, it wasn't you know, we don't want to jump. It was O.K., how high do you want us to jump? We stayed out of the whole politics of it. As a matter of fact, that never came into play. It was simply, this is the need, we are going to meet this need and do this particular thing.

EV: So, would it be fair to say that you put yourself in this position by acquiescence rather than just being drafted into it?

JEH: I don't like the word "acquiescence." I think we chose, we made that choice.

Sometimes, you can be forced into something. Our church will never get into a situation where we feel like that it is damaging to the work of the gospel or any of that.

EV: Yes, I didn't mean that. All I meant to say was you weren't necessarily in any . . . you were there because you wanted to be there, you ought to be there and if someone as Rick Noriega wanted to "order" you through, you were compelled, and you felt compelled to do that. We pretty much, unless we saw a real issue, you know that we simply couldn't live with and that never came about, we simply were there to fill a need and to do all we could to help the situation.

EV: And these were folks from your church or was it part of this conglomerate of the folks you had.

JEH: The folks that were inside of the command center that ended up kind of migrating to . . . we had a command center here at our campus, obviously all those people were church staff – pastors, administrative assistants, support team, we were here on shifts. There was always 20 people over there or so. Then, there was also the command center at the George R. Brown. That command center consisted of early on 30 to 50 people and originally, the first couple of days, was almost all other organization people. Rick

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Noriega was able to bring in a couple of our staff members because they knew them and knew kind of what they did for a living and then also brought in some of our key volunteers at our church because one guy was involved in a waste pickup facility. So, he was able to be pulled in. But as we got into the business of feeding people and as our volunteers started showing up and the yellow shirts were everywhere, they realized O.K., we have people that can help us here. And so, they begin pulling in more and more of our team into it. So, within probably 2 days, 3 days, probably mid week, the end of the first week, it was probably half other organizations half our pastors or staff or support team. There were a couple of other people from other churches or religious organizations but it was primarily people from here.

EV: O.K., what was your day like? If you were to say, a day in the life of Eric Hystad during Katrina . . . was there a commonality to your days or was it always different?

JEH: It changed. Obviously, Wednesday, Thursday, Friday and Saturday – you know, the first few days, everything was literally by the moment because things were changing. I mean, I am no martyr but you have got to get things done and so did not sleep a lot. I mean, I actually put a pillow on my floor in the office the first 2 nights and slept here for a couple of hours because at that point, the command center next door was open pretty much 24 hours. Because not only did we have to figure out to get Texas Baptist Men who were all on vacation somewhere with no trucks and trailers to get them here and then set them up so they can actually function and then figure out how to get volunteers and then figure out how in the world we were going to communicate with 40,000 people who we don't know. And now we have to train them. And then, we have got to figure out how to do that. And so, the first 3 or 4 days, it was definitely organized chaos. I was definitely proud of our team. We made a standing joke and I had a huge bag of M&Ms

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and I told our staff that were here in the office, when we pulled the trigger and said, O.K., this is what we are doing, your lives are now on hold. You are not your own. You are Operation Compassion for the next month. I said, "If you come in here and you are all stressed out and you are freaking out over stuff, I am going to throw candy at you, make your life easier, O.K.?" I said, "Don't make my life crazy by being stressed out. There is enough stuff getting ready to happen that . . . we are going to run up against situations that are out of our control, we have no answers for. You had better be able to spin the plates and move on."

And I think after . . . those days were literally all day and all night. I mean, we would get phone calls . . . I got phone calls in the middle of the night. I got phone calls from reporters. From radio stations wanting to interview me at 6 in the morning, you know, and they think that you don't sleep so they call you and do that. That was just pretty crazy. Once we got through the training, those 3 days of training were nothing but training. I mean, it was mass, absolutely mass organized training chaos. It was very organized, the people were very happy but it was, can you imagine, 18,000 people showing up at your facility at one time? That was just . . .

EV: Do you have any film of this?

JEH: We had some folks film it.

EV: You had folks come in or did you all do it?

JEH: No, we did it ourselves.

EV: Do you think we might get some photos of that for the archive?

JEH: Sure. Yes.

EV: We would be happy to pay for the copies.

JEH: No, I think that is something we can take care of. So, you know, those days were pretty much get ready, take a deep breath, get ready for the next one. After that was over,

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then it really, then it got down to once we knew who the volunteers were, then it was all right, now, how do you solve, how do you get these volunteers there? And so, it begins switching gears.

We had a huge meeting with key leaders, men and women, who . . . we called them red shirts and black shirts. Anyway, they are the guys at George R. Brown who would, when all these yellow shirts showed up to volunteer, these guys were the directors and they would take them from all showing up together at one time and one place not knowing what in the world to do, they barely know what they are supposed to do, they just know they are supposed to serve food or whatever, and then when they got there, we would assign them to a different location, different job. There would be a red shirt guy who would work with them at that job. And so, for them, that first week, it was, you know, working with all them, getting all these volunteers, getting their names in the computer and then sitting down with email and saying, here is your time you are going to serve. Of course, the first couple of days after we sent that out, we were on the phone literally from the earliest, I mean, 6 in the morning to midnight with people going, "I was assigned Thursday and I can't come because I want to work on Friday." And they didn't realize, you know, that all they had to do was go in . . . we immediately began shifting . . . again, it was very fluid, things changed. We found some ways computer-wise to make our lives a little easier. So then, we'd begin getting that information out to volunteers. It was easier after that.

Tape #2

EV: The reason I am asking you about this expansive stuff . . . somebody had mentioned along the line that you are going to find these kind of opinions but he said he kind of resented the fact that faith-based people who were involved in this from the constitutional question of church and state. Now, without going into the evaluation of

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that opinion, have you heard anything about that or have you heard anybody mention that?

JEH: Yes.

EV: Other than the reasoning of mixing religion and church and state, was that the only complaint they had that you heard?

JEH: The only complaint we heard was . . . there were two. One was, I think, a personal one and frankly, I can understand this gentleman's concern and we actually tried to work with him but his concern was, basically I think it was just personally – that he didn't want to do the training and they still wanted to help. Well, obviously we appreciated his desire to help. That was an admirable thing, it was a positive thing and . . . we were glad that he wanted to help. But the reality was that because of the way we set up the volunteer team, you know, we required anybody, in order for us to be able to work with the volunteers, we had to have them go through training. And so, he didn't want to do that and so obviously, he was unhappy about that. You know, we left it, you know, like this . . . “unless you are willing to go to training, you are going to be unhappy and we can't do anything about it.”

The other concern was that . . . there was a gentleman that was very, very vocal, very unhappy, very fairly inflammatory. No, not fairly inflammatory, absolutely inflammatory. He felt like that the faith-based organizations were taking over, that it was a power play. He was very vocal. He wrote letters. He tried to get a lot of play. And the reality is we simply . . . we didn't ignore him but we just didn't give credence to it. We simply said, “Here is our mission.” There is no ulterior motive. There is nothing sinister behind this. Here is our deal: there are, best we have been told, 150,000, 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? We had the opportunity to do that. We don't care who gets

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the credit. Nobody is waving a banner or a flag. The bottom line is that we have people from every faith-based organization. We had groups that frankly weren't really religious groups – they were just coming in . . . if somebody is wanting to take a shot at us . . . in our worship center, we had Muslims, we had Jewish folks, we had Baptists, Catholics, Presbyterians, the Baha'i faith. 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 to let people know that they . . . and we thought that was a great idea. And so, we worked with them on that. So, when this guy was being real vocal, we spoke to him but we let it go. And I don't know what he ended up doing. He may have gone above us and went to congressmen or whoever but \_\_\_\_\_, we were like, you know what? This is who we are, this is our job, this what we're about and we let it go.

EV: I was surprised that issue ever came up.

JEH: It did.

EV: When you sit back every once in a while, kick your shoes off and everyone is sleeping, do you have any kind of particular memories of things that come back to you, good or bad? Could you share some of those with us if you wouldn't mind?

JEH: (Laughter) I think, frankly, going down to the Astrodome and seeing two guys having lunch when an entire city is coming their way and they are worried about their ham sandwich. We are telling them that the city of New Orleans is heading their way and they are like, what are you smoking, boy? And then walking away and going, "We're in heapin' big trouble now." There are lots of memories there.

When we had training, there were a group of nuns and they all came in their white nun outfits and with their habits and everything, and they were walking away and all of them had received a yellow T-shirt and it wasn't communicated this way but I guess as they got the T-shirt, they thought that they had to put it on immediately. Well, I

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was walking in front of them and I heard one of the sweet ladies say, "I can't get my T-shirt over my head." She was trying to get this T-shirt over her habit. It was just all messed up and it . . . I turned around and I just started laughing. I was like, "You don't have to put that on right now if you don't want to." About 3 minutes later, I turned around and all of them were walking together with all those yellow shirts.

EV: Over their habits?

JEH: Oh, yes.

EV: That must have been a great scene.

JEH: Oh, it was. It was great. Lots of stories like this, but we had people that at the end of their shift and they worked 6 hour shifts, at the end of 6 hours shifts, many, many, many times, people would come to me and they would say, "Please let me stay another shift." And there were times when we simply said, "We cannot because we don't have any room here." I mean, for example, on September 9, I believe, we had 1,000 volunteers, up to 1,000 volunteers in one shift. We had 7,000, 8,000, 10,000 evacuees and 1,000 yellow shirts. And so, the fact that people would give up their free time and do that, that was fun to watch. The fact 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 nonissue. People literally, they said, "We're going to work together."

And then, the other thing that was really, really . . . there was a young man, he was probably in his late 30s, I would guess – a big guy. Some of our volunteers were working on the floor where all the evacuees were sleeping and they had all their worldly stuff with them. I mean, they had the air mattress cot and then their stuff. And this guy had just recently checked in. He was at the registration table and our yellow shirts are everywhere. And so, he came to the registration table and he was pretty belligerent, he



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was pretty angry. They asked him questions – he didn't want to answer questions. He was like, "Just give me a bed." I said, "Well, we have to check you in." He said, "I don't want to check in. You are wasting my time. I am hot," and he was. It was horribly hot. And so finally he gave in and answered the questions and he got his bed and he went on his way. It wasn't 2 or 3 hours later, he came back to that same place, to those same volunteers and he said, "I want to apologize to you." He said, "I am from New Orleans," and he described what had happened. He had been on his housetop for 2 days, had been rescued and had been put on 3 different buses. Literally didn't even know where they were going. He was at the mercy, he and his family, at the mercy of the bus drivers. And he said he ends up in a city where he doesn't have any friends or relatives in, he said, "I am homeless, I have no possessions." He said, "Everything I own is under water." He said, "I was sitting over there in my bed thinking, "These people care for me. Why am I angry?" And so, from a place where this guy and his family was of feeling like I have nothing left of a place, "Do you know what? At least I have a place where people care for me." And we were able to walk with him the next week as he was there, he ended up getting a place to stay here in Houston, he was able to get back on his feet, ended up getting something to drive to get him to work and actually got a job here in Houston in the course of one week. And so, those stories, and that is not the only one – there are many stories like that – there are lots of personal interest stories that we had that were really with a happy ending.

EV: Had you every thought about maybe recording those?

JEH: We actually did. I'll tell you, I'll be real honest with you – we were so inundated by this . . . I mean, literally . . . my job was the development of new campuses. Well, we opened up our Pearland, Second Baptist Pearland campus and Second Baptist Willowbrook campus in January and February of 2006. Well, we were in the planning

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stages of doing that in August and September. Forget that. That all went away. And so, for 30 days, I mean, it was just nonstop. And so, by the time . . . when George R. Brown and Rick Noriega said . . . what happened is that people liked it so much, there were so many nice things about that place – a beautiful structure, there was a playground for kids, there was a movie place, there was a hair stylist place – it was a nice place, and in some cases, maybe the people that were in there, the life was better for them there than it was even at home.

EV: Oh, absolutely.

JEH: Well, what was happening is people weren't wanting to leave. And so now we had a real problem on our hands. We had to figure out a way to get these people into a more normal life situation and they can't live in a shelter their whole life. And so, we had to begin scaling back. And so, instead of serving for 4 weeks, we put a cutoff date and tried to make it . . . we ended up going a couple of days later than the cutoff date. So, all of that was going on in the whole process of things.

EV: Yes, I suspect you have probably one million heart-warming stories and probably as many tragedies or sad stories . . .

JEH: Yes, and you know, you asked about whether we wanted to recorded . . . by the time we got to the end of it, I think we were all so tired of it that we were all like, we'd sooner break. But recently, actually, several people have said, "We really need to have maybe figured out a way to keep track of some of the evacuees," and the people that we spent time with and took stuff to their homes and transported to their hotels . . . but, you know, at that point, we went from being in charge of Operation Compassion to doing church work. We had the ministry here that had been neglected for one month or so.

EV: What did you learn from this experience that probably you didn't know before that may have surprised you about human nature or the nature of tragedy?

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JEH: Let me start with the good. My theological belief is that men and women are born with a sin nature. The conservative theological belief system says that we all have a sin nature that we are born with. And so, the idea that all men are basically good, I don't buy that. But I think all of us, every person, has within them the ability to think and to act in a way that is very, very good, very wonderful. We have the ability to do well, to think well, to act well. And we saw that. We saw . . . I mean, nobody has to teach me to do bad things. It comes natural to me, O.K.? But I also have within me the capacity to help and to encourage and to support and to be friendly and to do good and kind things. And that is what we saw. We saw people who, in most settings, would never have fellowship. We had people who laid aside their ideas of going to a Baptist church. I mean, you know, we had people come to Second Baptist Church for training who were probably intimidated by coming to this building because it is a Christian building, it is a Baptist building. It is not what they do. But nobody complained. People were very kind. The stuff that divides people so often simply went away. That was a really good thing. The other thing is people, when you give them a task, they flat out can do it. One of the things that I learned in the process is . . . nobody is an expert around this place but, you know, it is not rocket science to get things done. It is just not. If you have people that can do it and you let them loose, turn them loose and give them the resources and you have some accountability . . . we had strong accountability financially and not just that but also as part of the work that was accomplished. I mean, I like that people would look 5, 10, 20, 30 times at everything we did. And so, it had to be above board in every way. And when you do that, you get a lot accomplished. I mean, we got . . . I think that the folks at the George R. Brown, I am guessing would probably say we were blown away by the work of these yellow shirt volunteer guys and girls because we don't care who gets the credit and we do the work.

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The negative was, and it came about because of tragedy . . . I think that we ended up becoming, after 2-1/2 weeks . . . we saw the other side of human nature. There were people who were taking advantage of evacuees. People here in Houston. There were some trying to take advantage of the things that were given out to the people who were really in tragic situations. We saw some of that. That wasn't very pleasant. We talk about now in Houston, Newsweek did an article on compassion fatigue or what do they call it?

EV: Volunteer fatigue.

JEH: Yes, the whole idea of fatigue – that we are tired of doing well. We never saw that at all. But we definitely saw people who literally were . . . they had to be very careful . . . you had people working 18, 20 hours a day. And they were stretched by people sometimes who didn't appreciate what they were doing. So, we saw the other side of that just a little bit. Not much.

EV: Let me ask you, from a philosophical standpoint, what does this way . . . I am basing a lot of this on . . . do you read Joseph Campbell's books on "The Hero Within?" This wonderful cooperation, this wonderful realization that we are going to help simply because this is another human being, what does that really say about the nature of our denominations or denominational walls? I mean, at some point, you've got to say . . . I hate to use "artificiality," but there is some one dimension to this. There is a real three-dimension in the fact that you and I are here, you are hungry, I have food, I am going to . . . that is a reality of almost every religion, I think, every philosophy that I have ever experienced. And when I started getting into this . . . I don't mean to be preaching but . . . did you ever contemplate anything like that? I am sure you probably had other instances before this that you had had to think about that.

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JEH: Well, I think several factors play into that. One, I think the enormity of the situation was so obvious that we knew that nobody by themselves could handle this. Our church is a large church with lots of resources that God has blessed us with and, you know, we can help and do significant things but we can't handle . . . we couldn't handle a city that moved to our city. We can't handle hundreds of thousands of people who have ongoing life needs. But we want to make a difference. So, what do you do? Well, you link arms with people who are in the same boat you are – who are overwhelmed by the enormity of the situation but who want to make a difference. And so, what we saw was people would let down their differences and let down their guards for a higher, more noble purpose. I think what happens so often is we don't mean to cut each other off or to isolate ourselves from other people but we just get in the habit of our life is so busy and we are all doing our own thing and I am not talking about just back to the churches as they relate to other Baptists churches – I am talking about folks in the Hindu religion, in the Baptist church, in the Methodist church. We pretty much are all focused on doing our own thing. Many times – all good things. But we don't feel like the need is so great that we have to interface with each other and work together. Well, obviously, Katrina shattered that. It was you can't do this unless you link arms together. Once that happened, once that was clearly obvious, then all those other things that divided us were almost non-issues.

EV: That is interesting. Is there anything that I didn't ask you that you think is of importance for your interview?

JEH: Well, I will tell you this: I was unbelievably impressed . . . you know, politicians and government people and city folks and city leaders, civic leaders, sometimes they are given a bad rap. And maybe, in some cases, deservedly so. But I will tell you this, as somebody who certainly is not a civic leader and certainly not a government leader – as a

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pastor, an associate pastor in a church who spent most of his time very focused doing his job, but in this situation, was now thrown into a place where I was hearing decisions, watching people act. I watched these men and women and I was unbelievably impressed by Judge Eckels, unbelievably impressed by Rick Noriega. Rick Noriega is a Democratic senator. There were probably many Republicans who were staunch Republicans who would . . . that might go, "He is a Democratic guy and I am working for him?" Yes, he is great. The guy was amazing. He is an amazing leader. I watched those guys and those ladies . . . Senator Hutchinson was there, was involved, not I don't think directly but we saw her several times and just the interaction that they had and the way they led and the way they really cared . . . I mean, they weren't there just to make rules and laws – they were involved. And so, as somebody who was just trying to get the job done, working with a whole bunch of people who had the same goals, we felt good because we thought the people that were making decisions really were people with great intentions and were honorable men and women. That was something that was, after it was all said and done, people said, "Oh, man, did you have a chance to meet so and so?" "Yes, and I was very impressed."

EV: Did you have any observations pro or con with FEMA or run into them?

JEH: No, not at all. My only feelings towards FEMA at that time, because FEMA really, at that point, they were just kind of wrapping up. I felt sorry for FEMA. That is really my only . . . because it is like spitting into the ocean. I mean, that is kind of what was happening. I mean, you know, all of a sudden now you have got half a city in these buildings over here in Houston and you've got . . . I can't imagine the mandate and the workload that that group had, and I am sure not defending FEMA because I know that they had some issues. But what I saw was they tried to do the best they could with limited resources, and it was very difficult. Whenever they ran into a problem, they tried

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to fix it even though it was, at times, I am like, "Can I give you another suggestion?"

(Laughter)

EV: Even if it was wrong!

JEH: Even if it was wrong, he did try to fix it. You know, I heard a few people make comments about FEMA and I am like, "Well, I can't go there because I saw people with great intentions trying to do the best they could." It is just sometimes when you are working with an organization like that, the red tape just kills you.

EV: Did you ever go to New Orleans? I don't mean before but during this thing?

JEH: No.

EV: A couple more questions: Out of this, did you all decide to set up a corps of volunteers you could call on in case of another emergency locally?

JEH: We have the database . . . obviously 40,000 names of people now. Of course, in 1 year, half of those could be wrong information now. Our commitment to the people was: 1) nobody would ever get those names. We are not going to give anybody those names, any church, any religious organization. They are the possession of Operation Compassion. If another situation happened, God forbid, like what we dealt with before, we may or may not be involved and if we were involved, we would have access to try to rally the troops. More than anything, I think what we gained was the experience of doing this and knowing if this ever happened again, though I felt very, very good about how things happened and how they went down and how it all worked out, it would be much easier the second time around, much easier, just because of our experiences. So, we have had some people that have been very kind but they have called and said, "Hey, can we get your list?"

EV: Oh, have they, really?

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JEH: Yes. I mean, they want to know because obviously there are a whole bunch of people there that are civic-minded people and who would be great to help. So, obviously we wouldn't take advantage of that anyway.

EV: O.K., is there anything else? Thank you very much for this interview. I was very interesting. It is good to get that perspective.

JEH: You bet.

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