

Baptist volunteers make impact on Crescent City

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Southern Baptist volunteers worked alongside others in building new housing in the hard-hit 9th Ward of New Orleans following Hurricane Katrina. (Photo courtesy of NAMB/BP)

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By Hannah Elliott

Associated Baptist Press

NEW ORLEANS (ABP)—After serving the homeless for decades in New Orleans, Tobey Pitman finally is making significant inroads among leaders and homeowners in the predominantly Catholic region.

That's not to say he hasn't had noteworthy success with his Brantley Mission Center for the homeless. But since Hurricane Katrina hit, the Baptist missionary has led volunteers to help storm victims in ways other groups—religious or otherwise—have not. And that has made all the difference.

"Baptists have arrived," Pitman said. "We've given carefully for so many years. But since the hurricane, we've given wholeheartedly. Homeowners tell me that if it weren't for church groups, nothing would be different."

Pitman is the executive director of Operation NOAH Rebuild, a North American Mission Board organization that coordinates, houses, feeds and debriefs volunteers who come from across the country to help rebuild New Orleans.

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The organization provides the framework and oversight for reconstruction, while local congregations and state conventions do the work of rebuilding.

NOAH leaders plan to help churches rehabilitate 1,000 homes and 20 churches. NAMB is funding the two-year Southern Baptist project, which has received positive feedback from homeowners and municipal leaders.

“You’re nobody in New Orleans if you’re a Baptist person, but if you’re a Catholic, you’ve got it made,” Pitman said. “Baptists have been here for many years, trying to earn our place at the table and (contribute) input and value in the eyes of the city.”

Cathy Pitman, his wife and co-worker, agreed. She said while municipal committees spend time attempting to cut through bureaucracy and inefficiency, church-led groups have demonstrated the love of God in tangible ways.

“When our city wasn’t there, the churches were there to help,” she said. “When the churches were working, the city (boards) were waiting to come to a decision.”

A significant manifestation of that servant-attitude is NOAH’s Volunteer Village—three floors in the downtown World Trade Center that serve as a base camp for hundreds of volunteers who trek to the city each week. The village opened in early July and immediately housed more than 800 people working on 46 projects.

The formerly empty space consists of large windowed rooms with cement floors, wooden bunks, and specially made shower stalls lining the walls. A local businessman has donated 24,000 square feet of expensive, hotel-quality carpet, which is partially installed. Complete with an industrial-sized kitchen and parking accommodations, the area sits a block from New Orleans’ nightlife. It’s the perfect place to house large groups of enthusiastic volunteers.

Pitman secured the floors from a businessman that originally had planned to use them as a hostel for construction workers. When few workers

showed up to use the place, however, he agreed to sell Pitman the beds, showers, linens and other living accoutrements. Now Baptist workers pay \$20 a night for a bed, three meals a day, parking spaces, insurance and construction badges. Not bad, considering that parking alone in the French Quarter costs as much as \$27 a night.

And while the village acts as the main home for volunteers, it by no means stands alone. Operation NOAH Rebuild's 13 staff members support the effort through the office, construction, warehouse and chaplain divisions. Pitman expects eventually to hire more than 20 people for the project.

In his change of focus from the homeless center to NOAH, Pitman said, he simply waited for the city's biggest spiritual need "to come to the surface."

"New Orleans is no different than any other mega-urban city in America," Pitman said. "New Orleans has learned to run their sin up the flag pole and make a buck off of it. The others just sweep it under the rug."

Plus, Pitman added, the Bible says where sin abounds, grace abounds all the more. "I work in the most graced city in America," he said with a smile.

Ideally, that grace will abound in the form of skilled electricians and a steady flow of workers. The success of the NOAH program depends on volunteers. Workers certified as electricians or plumbers make home reconstruction go even faster, since electricity and plumbing are needed before interior parts like drywall and flooring are added.

As work crews continue to cycle through Volunteer Village, another hurricane season is under way—quietly so far. How dangerous the season becomes could determine how fall and winter reconstruction efforts fare, Pitman said. But the next hurricane is a subject people have learned simply to avoid.

"Mum's the word," he said.

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