

Churches become rallying points for New Orleans recovery

September 5, 2006

Posted: 9/01/06

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By Robert Marus

Associated Baptist Press

NEW ORLEANS (ABP)—Hurricane Katrina is changing New Orleans' churches as surely as it changed the face of the flooded city itself—and some of those churches are serving as rallying points in the city's recovery.

On a recent sweltering August day, Steven Meriwether sweated through his white T-shirt as he knelt inside the living room of a shotgun home on Toledano Street in the Mid-City neighborhood.

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Meriwether, pastor of the city's St. Charles Avenue Baptist Church, was attaching squares of prefabricated flooring designed to look like parquet in a house that had taken on six feet of floodwater after Katrina. Volunteers from his church, along with visiting mission teams from churches around the country, had gutted the home.

Meriwether, who before the storm served a well-heeled congregation of about 140 regular attenders in the city's genteel Uptown area, now is

employing his expertise in home renovation about as often as his expertise in homiletics.

“We’ve gutted and cleaned out about 30-something houses,” he said while using a table saw to cut a piece of trim for the Toledano Street home. It belonged to Estelle Smith, a longtime nursery worker at St. Charles Avenue. A team from Binkley Memorial Baptist Church in Chapel Hill, N.C., worked with St. Charles Avenue on the project.

St. Charles Avenue opened up its facilities to house visiting home-renovation teams from churches like Binkley Memorial.

Meriwether said his church first began gutting and renovating homes in the storm’s aftermath—using their own money and donated funds—by starting with the houses of church members and employees who had sustained flooding. Even many middle-class homeowners in New Orleans did not have sufficient insurance to cover the damage to their homes. Many homes sat for weeks, even after the floodwaters receded, with mold eating away at their interiors.

Government funding for such clean-up work and repairs has been slow to arrive. Less than half the city’s pre-Katrina population of 450,000 has returned to their homes.

St. Charles Avenue Church experienced only a 25 percent drop in attendance due to members who left after Katrina. But its life as a congregation is vastly different.

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Meriwether, who now is the church's only full-time staff minister, spends much of his time coordinating and working with new disaster-relief teams.

The New Orleans Habitat for Humanity chapter, needing additional office space in the wake of Katrina, took over parts of the church's educational buildings.

Meriwether remains unsure about the city's future.

"We still probably don't know what the bottom is in the city, as far as what's coming back," he said.

Meanwhile, across the Mississippi River in New Orleans' Algiers section, another Baptist congregation is re-envisioning its role more as a volunteer center than the large suburban congregation it had been historically.

Oak Park Baptist Church sustained only minor wind damage from Katrina and was located in one of the few parts of the city to avoid flood damage. Algiers also was the first New Orleans neighborhood to regain city services in the immediate aftermath of the hurricane. The New Orleans Police Department even used it as a headquarters briefly during that chaotic period.

The hurricane simply exacerbated the church's longstanding trend toward statistical decline. Interim Associate Pastor Joseph Kay said attendance dropped from about 350 to about 150, but the church has educational space for 1,000.

The church decided that, with minor repairs, it could convert its educational buildings into a volunteer barracks of sorts. Members installed bunk beds and bathrooms—complete with showers—in former classrooms.

Now the educational buildings can house upward of 300 volunteers a week.

Like many New Orleans residents, the church's entire pastoral staff left the city and decided not to return. So the congregation asked Kay—who served as Oak Park's minister of music during a more statistically favorable part of

the church's life in the 1970s and '80s—to take a leave of absence from his job as a music-software developer in North Carolina and return to Oak Park on an interim basis.

“It's the most rewarding ministry I've ever had,” Kay said. “There's a higher level of commitment here now than there was in my previous years of service,” he said.

As an example, Kay noted that, although Oak Park's Sunday attendance is only a third of what it was prior to Katrina, its donations have not dropped proportionately. That's come in handy, for instance, in paying the church's utility bills, which have increased exponentially due to the hundreds of people staying in its facilities each week.

Sarah Parnell, another former Oak Park employee who came out of retirement to serve again as the church's secretary, said the congregation housed 410 volunteers in one week last month. “We've really had to stretch it to get them in,” she said, with a laugh.

The volunteers come from youth and adult mission teams coordinated through the Southern Baptist Convention's North American Mission Board. Many of them are doing reconstruction work in the 80 percent of the city that was flooded.

“We expect to be a volunteer center for some time to come,” Kay said.

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