

East Texas church sends minister to southern Louisiana

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A team working with Celebration Church in Metairie, La. help clean up hurricane damage.
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METAIRIE, La.—When David Jochum felt God calling him to leave First Baptist Church in Marshall to help a New Orleans-area church in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, the East Texas congregation decided to send him as their missionary to southern Louisiana.

First Baptist Church agreed to pay Jochum's full salary and benefits as

pastor of enlistment at Celebration Church in Metairie, La., for one year. The Marshall church also pledged to continue their financial support up to four years on a sliding scale, as Celebration Church becomes capable of gradually assuming responsibility for the position Jochum will continue to fill there.

“We were unanimous in believing this is what God wanted us to do,” said Pastor David Packer of First Baptist Church in Marshall.

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Even though the Marshall church has sufficient financial resources to provide Jochum's support, the loss of their minister of education and

administration involved sacrifice, Packer noted. He recalled an appeal Baptist missionary Lottie Moon once issued from China to churches in the United States: "Send me men who will be missed."

"We miss David here," he said. "Now, we've moved from the theoretical idea of sending him to dealing with the nitty-gritty of having to work out the details (of coping with a staff vacancy). But we look forward to what God is going to do through him down there."

Jochum grew up in New Orleans, but he moved away years ago to attend Bible college.

"When I left, I never had any intention of coming back," he acknowledged.

But when Katrina hit, relatives who still lived in the New Orleans area had to evacuate, and they temporarily stayed with Jochum, his wife and their four children in Marshall. Because of that personal connection, he intently followed news reports from southern Louisiana in the months following the disaster.

"God began to tug at my heart," Jochum recalled. "He gave me a burden for my home city, but I didn't know what to do with it."

About that same time, First Baptist Church in Marshall started spiritual preparation for an Experiencing God weekend—a discipleship event based on Henry Blackaby's popular book about discovering and obeying God's will.

"I prayed that if the desire in my heart really was from the Lord, that he would show me what to do," Jochum said. "I was thinking in terms of a mission project—not anything long-term."

He discussed his desire to help in New Orleans with Packer. The pastor already had talked to him about his concern, First Baptist Church was not

fully making use of the financial resources God had entrusted to them. Their individual concerns began to gel.

“The week before the Experiencing God weekend, the pastor came to me with a radical idea,” Jochum said. “He asked, ‘What if we sent you as our missionary to New Orleans?’”

Jochum knew about the recovery ministry Celebration Church in Metairie was providing in the aftermath of Katrina. So, after continued prayer and discussion, he contacted his friend, Dennis Watson, pastor at Celebration Church, to explore the possibility of joining his staff.

Jochum later found out his e-mail arrived while Watson and his remaining staff were in a prayer meeting. They were asking God how their church could reassemble staff with volunteers who raise their own support. Celebration Church, which drew more than 2,000 in attendance before the hurricane, dropped to about 500 when they resumed worship services five weeks after Katrina.

After receiving an enthusiastic reply from Watson, Jochum and Packer took their proposal to the missions, personnel and finance committees at First Baptist Church and then to the church’s deacons.

“They all unanimously recommended it to the church, and the church unanimously committed to a four-year plan of support,” Jochum said. He believes God has placed Celebration Church in a hurting community to minister at a strategic time.

“The church has been able to minister to people and meet needs, and it’s been at the forefront of recovery efforts,” Jochum said. Two weeks before the storm hit, Crescent City Church merged with Celebration. And another church that lost many of its members in the wake of Katrina recently also voted to merge and give its facilities to Celebration Church.

“The vision now is to be a multi-site church,” Jochum said.

Having a physical presence at multiple sites already has enabled Celebration Church to take a lead in offering relief to families in need and providing housing for volunteer builders, he noted.

Jochum started work in Metairie Aug. 2 as minister to Celebration’s Church’s home-based cell groups.

“Before the storm, the church had more than 100 cell groups. Now there are about 50,” Jochum said. “But we are getting out into the community where people are.”

And he sees incredible growth potential because people who remained in the New Orleans area after Katrina—or who have returned in recent months—have a spiritual hunger.

“Everybody really wants this city to be a better place, and as believers, we’re convinced God wants us to be a force here,” Jochum said.

“We want people to know there is hope in Jesus Christ. They are finding that hope. They need it like they never have before in their lives. And our people here at Celebration Church are sold out to God. They believe we have a mandate to reach this city for Christ.”

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