

Gulfport members learn church is not brick and mortar

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The building of First Baptist Church of Gulfport, ravaged by Hurricane Katrina, has been torn down. The congregation is rebuilding several miles to the north of the Gulf.

Gulfport members learn church not just brick and mortar

By Hannah Elliott

Associated Baptist Press

GULFPORT, Miss. (ABP)—Members of First Baptist Church of Gulfport

have learned a lot in the year since Hurricane Katrina destroyed their waterfront church buildings. Mostly, they've learned that a church is much more than an edifice.

"It's an exciting time for us," Pastor Chuck Register said. "Probably the most exciting thing for us has been being forced to rethink the New Testament (concept of) what really is the church. The church is not brick and mortar."

Katrina erased much of Gulfport, a town of 72,000 before the storm, which hugs the Gulf shoreline. First Baptist was located a few hundred yards from the water, in the center of downtown.

A photo of the congregation's decimated sanctuary was published around the world, symbolizing the response of faith to tragedy. It even inspired a country-gospel song about indomitable faith.

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The sanctuary's ruins are gone now. But the lessons of Katrina live on, Register said. Church members have learned the joy of fulfilling Christian

responsibilities, namely to worship God, spend time with other Christians and tell other people about Jesus, he said.

The patience to refocus and reflect came gradually, though. After initial elation about surviving the storm, many church members became depressed with the seemingly hopeless state of their ruined homes and the partially abandoned town, Register said.

“We rode the typical disaster psychological profile,” Register said, adding that it began with the “euphoric, mountaintop, ‘we’re survivors’ mentality” and progressed to a subdued resignation.

“If you follow that curve, you get to a point where reality sets in, and you realize that this is going to be a long-term recovery,” he said. “There is a deep emotional cavern that follows. And then eventually you follow that out past the one-year anniversary, and things begin to pan out to a more normal routine. This is going to be a multiyear process.”

Founded in 1896, the church had to demolish its sanctuary that was built in 1967, and the three-acre plot of beachfront land where it stood is now up for sale. Demolition crews began tearing down other church buildings June 21, so current Sunday services are held at Gulfport High School’s auditorium.

Meanwhile, the congregation has bought a 34-acre site several miles north of the Gulf. Phase one of the new project will be finished in March 2008, Register said, and the church will raise money for the project with the help of profits from the three-acre plot sale.

Financially, Register said, the church has fared relatively well. Sunday morning numbers have dropped in recent months, often because people work on restoring their houses on Sunday, but the congregation has been “extremely blessed” in meeting its budget. They also have information posted online about how to give money for disaster relief and to the

congregation.

Register also continues to lead the congregation in prayer to be more outwardly focused on the Gulfport community—something that could elude them as they begin a building project.

“The biggest challenge has been trying to help a community that is 80 percent unchurched to see that with Christ there is hope,” he said. “Through Christ, even in the midst of challenges, his grace is sufficient.”

Help from Southern Baptist volunteers has aided that outreach, Register added. The work has given Baptists an inside advantage in the community, especially when people see that “it’s Christians who put their roof on, who took the trees off their house. ...”

“What we discovered is that when the church loves as she should love, we bring a sense of hope to those families,” he said. “They see that people do care. They are interested, and they want to help. With the help of our community and churches and our spiritual community, we will be able to see the light at the end of the tunnel.”

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