

LIFE GOES ON: Crossroads project aims to rebuild in New Orleans

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Habitat for Humanity houses in New Orleans are being built by church-based volunteers and by future residents who provide at least 350 hours of "sweat equity." (Photo by ABP)

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Associated Baptist Press

NEW ORLEANS (ABP)—Last year, New Orleans' Upper 9th Ward was one of the areas hardest hit by Hurricane Katrina, with more than 90,000 homes ruined.

This year, it's the site of the largest Habitat for Humanity project ever undertaken by a single denomination anywhere in the world.



Teens from a youth group at First Baptist Church in Salado work on a Habitat for Humanity housing project in New Orleans.
(RNS photo by Ted Jackson/*The Times-Picayune* in New Orleans)

Inspired by David Crosby, pastor of First Baptist Church of New Orleans, the venture is called the Baptist Crossroads Project. Organized by the nonprofit Baptist Crossroads Foundation in partnership with Baptist Community Ministries, Crossroads plans to build about 31 houses in three months in an area still abandoned one year after the storm.

But the project predates Katrina. Crosby came up with the idea after a 2004 prayer breakfast where New Orleans Mayor Ray Nagin said home ownership was the most important factor in eradicating poverty. After First Baptist conducted a “40 Days of Purpose” renewal campaign that fall, the congregation embarked on an effort to build 40 homes.

The \$3 million project is funded in part by a \$1.5 million matching grant from Baptist Community Ministries. After the storm came, Habitat for Humanity became a matching partner as well. Crossroads plans to complete the initial 31 homes soon, and First Baptist hopes to build 100 houses in the same area over the next two years, according to project coordinator Inman Houston.

“We’re focusing here, because after the storm, this was an area that had great need,” Houston said. “But at the same time, this is an area that can and should come back.” Houston is associate pastor of community ministries and single adults at First Baptist.

To get a house, applicants must undergo a screening process that takes into account family finances and demographics. Each three-bedroom, one-bath house is worth \$85,000 to \$90,000, but families pay roughly \$60,000 for them through a 20-year, no-interest loan.

House recipients also must provide 350 hours of “sweat” equity, said Andrew Crosby, ministry intern this summer at First Baptist and nephew of the pastor. That entails long days working on the purple, blue, pink and yellow houses slowly forming a new neighborhood. Crosby is a second-year student at Baylor University’s Truett Theological Seminary in Waco.

Houston funnels a steady stream of volunteers from all over the country to work on the homes. Most stay for a week, sleeping in surrounding churches. They get free lunches provided by area churches as well.

Habitat for Humanity employee Matt Ritter said Baptist Crossroads averages more than 300 workers a week. Over spring break, more than 4,000 students descended on the area to help gut houses. So far, more than 600 have been completed.

The partnership between Habitat for Humanity and First Baptist of New Orleans works well because it plays to the strengths of both organizations, Houston said. While Habitat has the means to procure loans and administrate large numbers of people, the church has received gifts of money, volunteer support and counsel from state conventions like the Baptist General Convention of Texas and from churches like Dallas’ Park Cities Baptist Church, which gave almost \$100,000 in undesignated funds to the New Orleans church.

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Playing on those convention connections, First Baptist also provides Habitat with a constant supply of volunteer laborers.

"We can say (to Habitat leaders) that we can commit to give you X-amount of volunteers, as opposed to random individuals who work for one or two days at a time," Houston said. "We see it like we can provide something that is very helpful for them—a level of volunteers. Honestly this summer, we haven't had the time or need to do much recruiting."

The key to keeping volunteer numbers up, more than a year after the storm, is constant contact with people still directly affected. Houston said the congregation has "one foot in the flood zone and one foot out of the flood zone." As a result, members are faced with displaced people every Sunday morning.

"People who want to move on can't do that because they sit next to people every Sunday who are rebuilding," Houston said. "We see our own people every day who can't escape it. Others who don't want to go through the flood zone never have to."

Among local authorities, Houston said, churches have become known as the places to go "if you really want to get something done." The church has created waiting lists of houses in need of gutting and restoration.

First Baptist Church of New Orleans is unique in itself. In 2004, mostly because of "parking, accessibility and visibility" concerns, it moved from a location in uptown New Orleans to the famous Canal Street, which borders the French Quarter. Now that the church can be seen from the interstate, has adequate parking and makes use of a multipurpose venue, passersby are drawn to the building, Houston said, especially after the hurricane ruined so many other buildings.

"Where we are now is such a perfect location," Houston said, even though the building sustained considerable, but mostly superficial, damage from the storm. "The church is the venue in New Orleans Parish. For us, we've seen that this magnificent building is a draw for the community."

Now, Houston said, the church has the opportunity to partner with non-Baptist groups in need of space—from housing an Episcopal school for six months to allowing the Louisiana Philharmonic Orchestra to use the building for practices. They've even made the building available to the public school system of New Orleans.

Perhaps the most encouraging development since the hurricane, in terms of the First Baptist building, is the development of a relationship between First Baptist and Franklin Avenue Baptist Church, a primarily African-American congregation of 5,000 people.

Members from Franklin Avenue, who had been meeting only twice a month, recently began meeting each Sunday at 7:30 a.m. in the First Baptist building. First Baptist members sometimes usher in the earlier service, and a real sisterhood between the two churches has emerged, Houston said.

“Certainly this is not the way we would have chosen for that to come about, but we have seen good things happen,” he said.

Ultimately, the most important of those “good things” is intangible—it’s that the houses will show non-Christian homeowners that hope exists for the 9th Ward.

“We feel really energized by this,” Andrew Crosby said. “It’s amazing. This has been a wildly successful year.”

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