

New Orleans churches radically changed by Katrina

September 5, 2006

Posted: 9/01/06

New Orleans churches radically changed by Katrina

By Robert Marus

Associated Baptist Press

NEW ORLEANS (ABP)—In once-vibrant New Orleans, the liveliest things in vast swaths of the city seem to be weeds exploding from once-manicured medians, lawns and parks.

And the rats, mosquitoes, mold and nutria—huge rodents that thrive in the Louisiana swamps—are the only other creatures swarming neighborhoods that—a year after Hurricane Katrina—still are largely devoid of human beings.

A boarded-up theater in a once-thriving area of New Orleans illustrates the toll Hurricane Katrina took on the Crescent City. (ABP Photo)

Despite that—and the continuing disappointments stemming from human mismanagement of a continuing disaster—Joe McKeever sees hope in the devastated Crescent City.

“We have a saying: This is a good time to be Baptist in New Orleans,” said McKeever, executive director of the Baptist Association of Greater New Orleans.

After Katrina made landfall Aug. 29, 2005, resulting floods ended up inundating about 80 percent of the city and drowning more than 1,500 people.

Baptist disaster-relief teams that converged on the heavily Catholic area—legendarily difficult mission territory for Baptists and other evangelicals—often were the first religious presence many New Orleans residents saw after Katrina.

The Baptist presence has continued in New Orleans’ long-term recovery

efforts, and Katrina's aftermath has brought both ruin and rebirth to many area churches. Nonetheless, it continues to be tough for McKeever and the congregations and city he serves.

"I'm not really (an associational) director of missions. I'm a pastor," he said. McKeever barely had been on the job a year when the hurricane struck. He previously had been a successful pastor at a large suburban New Orleans church and was puzzled why God would call him to the associational position.

But after Katrina hit, he realized the association's churches and the pastors needed a pastor. "They did not need a great administrator. They did not need a mechanic. They needed a pastor," he said.

A visit to a recent monthly meeting for the association's pastors illustrates why so many ministers needed ministering in the hurricane's wake.

Special: One Year After Katrina

- [LIFE GOES ON: Crossroads project aims to rebuild in New Orleans](#)
 - [Displaced New Orleans resident finds home at Gracewood](#)
- [Houston faith communities plan for future hurricanes](#)
- [East Texas church sends minister to southern Louisiana](#)
 - [Texas Baptists urged to adopt unreached groups in Houston](#)
 - [Miracle Farm offers refuge to Hurricane Rita evacuees](#)
 - [Nederland church marks new beginning in new sanctuary](#)
- [Nehemiah's Vision helps Southeast Texas recover from Rita](#)
 - New Orleans churches radically changed by Katrina
- [Churches become rallying points for New Orleans recovery](#)
- [Baptist volunteers make impact on Crescent City](#)
- [Volunteer director feels calling to restore Mississippi town](#)
 - [Sabine Pass churches focus on rebuilding community](#)
- [Gulfport members learn church is not brick and mortar](#)
- [Pastor uses retirement funds to help restore church](#)
 - [Couple left family, friends to run volunteer base in Gulfport](#)
 - [Katrina giving did not hurt other charities, group says](#)
- [Inexperience hurt effectiveness of some Katrina relief groups](#)
 - [Teens from FBC Wolfforth help Buckner get facilities back to normal](#)

Many had to evacuate. Jose Mathews, founder and pastor of Discipleship Baptist Church in the heavily flooded New Orleans East area, said his

church and parsonage took on more than six feet of water.

“Most of my congregation were renters, and they’re spread abroad, and they’ve vowed not to come back,” said Matthews, who recently became pastor of a church in Baton Rouge, La.

He came to the meeting of his former colleagues in New Orleans to bid them farewell.

“It’s been hard, but it’s been interesting to see the hand of God in all this destruction,” he said. “Just hold onto God’s unchanging hand. There’s one thing we can depend on in life, and that’s change.”

That definitely was the case for Jerry Garvey, pastor of One Faith Baptist Church in New Orleans. His devastated congregation still meets, but they’re doing it in Texas.

“What I’ve been doing for the last 11 months for the most part has been ministering to a congregation that went with us to the Houston area,” he said. “We’re meeting from house to house still.”

Like many Katrina evacuees from flooded areas of New Orleans, Garvey and his church members have not been able to return to their homes. Nonetheless, he drives back once a week to maintain a connection to the city, in hopes that he and his people may one day be able to return.

“It’s my understanding ... that the Lord wants me here, and that’s why I make that trip back and forth,” he said. “Many of us in this area find that New Orleans is in our DNA. But more than just what’s in our DNA, I have a love and a great concern for the people of God here. ... I do believe that this is where God wants me.”

The Baptist Association of Greater New Orleans went from about 140 member churches before the storm to 35 operating a few weeks after

Katrina, McKeever said. Now, the figure of operating churches is back up to about 80. But many of the former congregations likely will not rebound.

“Every one of the churches has gone through, is going through, some sort of radical change,” he said.

Occasionally that change is positive.

Jefferey Friend, pastor of Hopeview Baptist Church in St. Bernard Parish, just east of New Orleans, said his church building took on 13 feet of water and industrial waste from a nearby Mobil Oil facility. His congregation decided to combine with Suburban Baptist Church in nearby New Orleans East. Friend became co-pastor alongside Suburban’s pastor, Jeff Box, and both congregations meet together at Suburban’s facility.

Friend’s church is historically black; Box’s church historically white.

“Before the storm, it was all chiefs looking out for individual entities; now it’s about kingdom-building rather than building our own individual kingdom. There’s no need to have three churches in the same community when you barely have enough for one building,” Friend said.

There are other signs of hope. A Spanish-speaking church in New Orleans’ western suburbs has started a Portuguese-speaking congregation for the hundreds of Brazilian migrant workers who have come to the city to do construction.

A tiny Baptist mission on heavily Catholic Delacroix Island, southeast of New Orleans, has exploded in growth following the storm—even though its building was wiped off the map and the church has been meeting outdoors in stifling heat.

But there’s still plenty of trepidation in New Orleans. “The first thing that concerns us is that we better not have another hurricane in the next year or

so,” McKeever said. “If we do and it’s a major one, this will be a ghost town.”

News of religion, faith, missions, Bible study and Christian ministry among Texas Baptist churches, in the BGCT, the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) and around the world.