

New Orleans churches' recovery a barometer of city's health

November 10, 2006

Posted: 11/10/06

New Orleans churches' recovery a barometer of city's health

By Bruce Nolan

Religion News Service

NEW ORLEANS (RNS)—All over the New Orleans area, houses of worship, just like other institutions, are dragging themselves back to some sense of normalcy after [Hurricane Katrina](#).

Some are healed. Some still suffer trials. Some are indefinitely comatose, shuttered and perhaps dead—whether they be grand churches like the permanently closed 150-year-old St. Rose of Lima, or modest street-corner churches like the wrecked hulk of Mount Carmel Ministries in the Lower 9th Ward.

But until now, the scope of the damage largely was unclear.

Pastor Joel
Tyler sets up
chairs at
Second Rose of
Sharon Church
in New Orleans'
Lower 9th
Ward. The
church is open,
even though it
is not yet
completely
repaired after
being damaged
during
Hurricane
Katrina. (RNS
photo by Matt
Rose/*The
Times-Picayune*)

In the first systematic accounting of churches across the metro area, a new survey shows more than half of 800 churches in New Orleans and Plaquemines Parish, and almost two-thirds of nearly 60 churches in St. Bernard Parish, still were closed in July. Overall, around metro New Orleans, about 60 percent of 1,500 churches had managed to reopen by midsummer, according to the survey, organized by researcher Bill Day at [New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary](#).

Experts say a church's recovery is a rough indicator of a neighborhood's health. Physically embedded as they are, churches suffer the same physical damage their neighbors endure. More-over, they require a certain amount

of local vitality to reclaim a foothold.

But they are catalysts as well. Experts say if churches, temples or mosques can re-establish an early presence in a devastated neighborhood, they can attract and encourage pioneers who will do the heavy lifting in rebuilding communities.

“One of the problems I see in our communities is a loss of hope. People are getting depressed; they’re feeling like they’re alone,” said Day, an associate professor of evangelism and church health.

In addition to functioning as places of worship where people flock to seek community and renewal of spirit, churches and other houses of worship offer meeting space and provide rudimentary social services like child care or after-school tutoring.

Frequently, they function as clearinghouses for information about families or businesses returning to the neighborhood.

“The church’s presence in a community assists not just its members, but others around them. Part of the church’s purpose is to minister to people going through difficult circumstances. If that presence is lost,” Day said, “that’s going to impact the repopulation of the community.”

In Central City, for instance, Baptist Builders, a coalition of moderate Baptist churches, has helped rebuild Greater St. Mark, Little Zion and Greater Emmanuel Baptist churches, Elmo Winters said.

“Before Katrina, they had alcohol and drug abuse programs, tutoring programs—all of the things that address the ills of our communities,” Winters said.

Day began the research with a base list of 1,508 churches that had existed before Hurricane Katrina in Orleans, Jefferson, St. Tammany, St. Bernard

and Plaquemines parishes. The list, compiled by Baptist Community Ministries, was substantial but not exhaustive.

For instance, it included only three of about 20 local synagogues and Islamic mosques.

Day said his graduate student investigators fanned out last spring and early summer and visited every church on the list. If the church appeared closed, they looked for evidence of recent activity, interviewed neighbors where possible and followed up in other ways.

They hoped to learn whether congregations had pulled themselves together and were meeting off-site in temporary quarters, a common occurrence in post-Katrina New Orleans.

If so, Day counted the church "open," no matter the condition of the building.

Day's information was current only until the end of July. Since then, of course, many churches have reopened. Indeed, anecdotal evidence suggests the number of churches announcing they were reoccupying their old quarters increased sharply in August and September, around the first anniversary of the storm.

Having developed basic recovery numbers, Day hopes to broaden his research to identify which characteristics helped churches recover.

In coming months, Day will measure the significance of variables such as physical damage, insurance shortfall, neighborhood vitality and denominational affiliation to see whether they are strong predictors of a church's recovery.

Not surprisingly, early indicators show a church's size, its income, the repopulation of the neighborhood and whether the neighborhood was filled

with homeowners or renters were good predictors of success, Day said.

The neighborhood's median or per-capita income seemed not to be a good predictor, based on early data, he said.

"That's somewhat surprising. I really don't know why," he said.

Belonging to a denomination also seemed to help an institution's chances for recovery because it connected a damaged church to wealth and resources outside the community. But being a member of a denomination can cut two ways.

Faced with uninsured flood losses of \$120 million, Archbishop Alfred Hughes was forced to perform triage last spring. In reorganizing worship in 142 parishes of the archdiocese, he closed 30 damaged churches to regular worship, including eight small parishes and missions.

Parishioners were assigned to neighboring parishes until their own churches could be restored. Meanwhile, Hughes channeled insurance and relief money into surviving churches until others could be repaired.

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