

Church forced to rebuild again after hurricane damage

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METAIRIE, La. (RNS)—In the past three years, Memorial Baptist Church has absorbed a series of hard punches from Hurricanes Katrina, Gustav and Ike, but the congregation and its pastor refuse to give up.

“The people in the church are phenomenal,” Pastor Jackie Gestes said. “When the Lord is with you, who can be against you? And in the midst of all this, we know he is with us.”

In 2005, Hurricane Katrina ripped the roof off the church’s sanctuary and left the worship space in shambles. Gestes and the congregation spent almost three years rebuilding while they worshipped in the fellowship hall.

New pews for Memorial Baptist Church in Metairie, La., are unloaded from a truck earlier this year. Most of the church's repairs after Hurricane Katrina were damaged again by Hurricanes Ike and Gustav.

The congregation held its first worship service in the remodeled sanctuary July 13. The renovation included new pews, carpet, sound system and a baby grand piano.

When Hurricane Gustav blew through on Sept. 1, its winds took the roof off—again—and damaged most of the inside of the sanctuary, including the pews, piano and carpet.

“We put a temporary plastic roof on the building and thought we could save the interior walls,” Gestes said.

But the winds from Hurricane Ike the following week ripped off the temporary roof and allowed rainwater to damage the interior walls and drywall.

“When the wind from Ike took off the plastic roof, it left the inside totally vulnerable to the rain,” Gestes said. “And that finished off the rest of the building.”

Now the congregation is faced with the challenge of having to rebuild the sanctuary a second time in three years, and it is once again holding Sunday worship services in the fellowship hall.

“The Sunday after Gustav, we met in the fellowship hall, and there was some shock among some of the people when they saw the damage for the first time,” Gestes said. “Yet at the same time, they were already thinking about rebuilding and talking about how soon we could get it done.”

The church plans to start rebuilding the sanctuary as soon as possible, Gestes said. The congregation’s goal is to have it finished in six months.

“Hard times bring people together, and we have a strong unity that only God can provide,” Gestes said. “And we are going to come back better than ever.”