

EMBRACING SACRIFICE: AN OVERVIEW OF THE VOLUNTEER ORGANIZATIONS THAT ARE REBUILDING NEW ORLEANS HOMES AND BRINGING THE GOSPEL TO LIFE

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“EMBRACE SACRIFICE”

As a Louisiana Baptist Convention Communications team correspondent covering the Baptist volunteer operation in New Orleans, I have had the privilege of watching the operation from the unique vantage point of both an outsider reporting on its progress and an insider, a resident of the city that is the beneficiary of the extraordinary diligence of thousands of volunteers.

News of the levee breaks that flooded New Orleans reached my family, as it did so many, the day after Katrina made landfall. Looking back, I can see that for some time afterwards we did not fully comprehend the loss to our community, our church family and to us personally. Perhaps even now, the long-term, far-reaching effects of Katrina have not been calculated. But, because my husband is a faculty member of New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary and the faculty home in which we live belongs to the seminary, we were spared the tedious and daunting task that so many New Orleans homeowners have endured. These losses are the reason the work that Southern Baptist organizations are doing in New Orleans is so very important.

Recently, a volunteer team from Spring Hills Baptist Church in Granville, Ohio explained to me the meaning of the black rubbery wristbands they each wore. The “embrace sacrifice” marking on the wristband was the theme they had adopted for the week as a reminder that they were in a special place at a special time and were called to emulate Christ’s sacrifice. Team members, even the youngest, had a sense of the urgent and opportune moment we have before us to present the gospel in a tangible way to New Orleans. As I have watched those at all levels of the relief, recovery and rebuilding effort who are devoting extraordinary resources and energy to this project, I am hard-pressed to think of a slogan that better describes the spirit and demonstration of kinship I have witnessed in my fellow Southern Baptists who have come to this city’s aid.

While this article presents an overview of the Southern Baptist organizations that are leading the way in rebuilding New Orleans, the story would be incomplete without a sense of the personal commitment of each administrator, manager and volunteer who is implementing the plan. Those in leadership positions, many of them without pay, have all come at some personal sacrifice, putting careers on hold and leaving senior positions of employment and families to take on temporary employment. When the job is finished, these men and women will find themselves back in the job market looking for new employment.

Week in and week out, volunteers from across the nation – from the east coast to the west, north to Alaska and even as far away as Hawaii – come out at personal expense, giving up valuable family, work or vacation time. Many volunteers, both individuals and teams, have returned multiple times and on occasion, have remained on task despite difficult complications. How often I have heard organizational leaders or volunteers say that while they came to do physical labor; they were compelled first by the love of Christ to care for others and to carry the gospel as they went. Perhaps someday we will be studying how the massive response of Southern Baptists to the Gulf Coast region affected by Katrina energized the mission fervor of a new generation of Southern Baptists committed to the Great Commission.

The presence of the different organizations in New Orleans is evidence of what we do best as Southern Baptists. While each is a stand-alone operation, they are also part of a cooperative network at work with Louisiana Baptists and in support of each other. Because each drew first from its own base of ministry resources, utilizing individuals and teams already trained for the task, the work was able to begin almost immediately with a workload manageable by volunteers.

What their investment has meant to New Orleans could not be expressed any better than it has been by the homeowners themselves. A single mother of six children, whose home was damaged almost beyond the point of repair said, “I wouldn’t have a home if it weren’t for the Baptists.” A father with young children, who lost both job and home, but found his family in the special care of a Southern Baptist church in Hawaii said, “What they did for my family – they took the gospel right off the pages of Scripture and brought it to life.”

BRINGING THE GOSPEL TO LIFE

Operation N.O.A.H. (New Orleans Area Homes) Rebuild

Operation NOAH is a partnership of the North American Mission Board, the Louisiana Baptist Convention, and the Baptist Association of Greater New Orleans and its churches. During its first year, NOAH mobilized more than 10,000 volunteers from around the nation and Canada as they work towards rebuilding 1,000 homes and 20 churches, a goal representing one percent of the 100,000 area homes damaged or destroyed by Katrina. As of the operation’s first anniversary in May 2007, volunteers who have shared the gospel with homeowners and neighbors have seen 203 people come to faith in Christ.

Southern Baptist conventions of six states- the Virginia Baptist Mission Board, the Southern Baptist Convention of Texas, the Baptist General Convention of Texas and the Kentucky, Missouri, Alabama and Oklahoma Baptist Conventions - have joined with NOAH by “adopting” a section of the city and concentrating their efforts there. These sister conventions play a vital role in providing volunteer assessors to evaluate damaged homes and have proven faithful in encouraging their own churches to send workers.

Project coordinator David Maxwell oversees the New Orleans team, including staff, office and warehouse operations and volunteer management. A Louisiana pastor who first joined the NOAH team as a construction coordinator, Maxwell and his wife, Wanda, are representative of the spirit and commitment of the NOAH personnel. Maxwell has said, “I left the pastorate, but I didn’t leave the ministry.” In representing NOAH’s mission to others, Maxwell says, “We have a golden opportunity to share the gospel and glorify God.”

Managing the construction operation is Steve Gahagan, a professional builder with more than twenty years of experience, including years of service with Habitat for Humanity and NAMB’s World Changers. While NOAH volunteers handle a variety of job orders, the bulk of their work involves roofing, electrical and plumbing rough-in, and the installation of windows, doors, insulation and drywall. Building materials are purchased primarily through homeowners’ resources but NOAH’s partnership with the Salvation Army provides a link to additional resources for homeowners who qualify. Supplies and materials are managed by the NOAH warehouse housed on the property of a Southern Baptist church during an interim period in which the church restructured its ministry in light of the heavy damage to its community.

NOAH office manager Dianne Gahagan came to the project from a corporate position as chief financial officer and with sixteen years of finance and managerial experience. Gahagan’s staff, many of whom are short-term volunteers and Mission Service Corps missionaries, oversee the process linking homeowners to volunteer teams and other resources. Located on the property of Calvary Baptist Church in Algiers, a region of New Orleans on the west bank of the Mississippi River, the office is next door to “Fort Calvary,” a small recreational vehicle park that is home to many of the NOAH staffers and to volunteers who travel by RV.

“Volunteer Village,” three floors of the World Trade Center in downtown New Orleans leased and operated by NOAH, provides housing accommodations for volunteers. One floor houses a cafeteria and worship area, with each of the other floors designated as sleeping quarters for men or women volunteers. Gutted prior to Katrina in preparation for renovations, the space was readily modified with showers and bedding to accommodate as many as 450 volunteers per night.

Although Baptists at every level – national, state and local – are involved in carrying out NOAH’s very sizeable construction project, they are mindful that their primary task is to present the gospel in deed and in word. Steve Gahagan has said, “The most fulfilling part of the job is when a volunteer tells me they have led someone to the Lord – that’s why we’re here. God has used Katrina to give us a city open to the gospel.”

Arkansas Baptist Builders in partnership with Kansas/Nebraska

The Arkansas Baptist Convention disaster relief team, as did several other state teams, responded to Katrina with feeding and chainsaw units just days after the storm. Arkansas’ presence in the New Orleans area was continuous even as the disaster team’s focus changed from relief to recovery to rebuilding. When power was restored to the Gentilly neighborhood in July 2006, Gentilly Baptist Church became the Arkansas Baptist

Builders headquarters for operations and a housing site for volunteers. Repairs and renovations made on more than 23,000 square feet of the facility by the Arkansas Builders restored the church building for ministry and provided a base for mobilizing volunteer crews in Gentilly and throughout the city. The completion of additional renovations to the church's gym in February 2007 increased the number of volunteers that could be housed on-site from 95 to 200 per night.

Nearly three thousand volunteers from across the nation, of all ages, backgrounds and abilities, have been a part of the Arkansas project since January 2006. Of that number, almost half were mobilized in the first quarter of 2007 alone. Focusing primarily on restoring a house to the point where repairs are manageable by the homeowner, the Arkansas Builders have filled a variety of job orders, including roofing, installing insulation and hanging drywall. While their work continues to gear up in 2007, the Arkansas Builders have completed assignments at more than one hundred homes and have seen 94 individuals come to faith in Christ since the opening days of the operation.

Jackie James, the director of operations for the Arkansas Baptist Builders' New Orleans project, and his wife Linda, put their family-owned business in the hands of a friend to take on the volunteer leadership position. Living in a trailer on Gentilly Baptist Church property, James spends up to forty weeks of the year in New Orleans overseeing a volunteer staff of five project coordinators as well as a kitchen and office staff.

The New Orleans project is a partnership of the Arkansas and the Kansas/Nebraska conventions, with the Kansas/Nebraska Builders providing the electrical expertise so crucial to a home's restoration. Under the supervision of Elijah "Touch" Touchton, the project's lead electrician, Kansas/Nebraska teams have returned every month to provide an important service at a time when licensed electricians are in high demand. Reflecting the diligence and resourcefulness of the volunteer spirit, Touchton's teams haul a trailer of the supplies, tools and ladders needed to complete their job assignments to New Orleans each trip. To make the most of their resources, Touchton and his crew take the rusted electrical wire pulled from gutted homes, burn off the insulation and sell the copper to cover a portion of the fuel cost for the next month's trip. Touchton, who serves as a Mission Service Corps missionary in Kansas doing the same type of work for missions, ministry centers and churches, said, "We will be in New Orleans as long as we're needed."

"Our primary goal is to rebuild lives," James says of the organization's commitment to first fulfilling the Great Commission. "We will be here until God calls us somewhere else."

Baptist Crossroads and First Baptist Church of New Orleans

First Baptist Church of New Orleans has presented a two-fold response to the needs of the city. In partnership with Habitat for Humanity, First Baptist initiated Baptist Crossroads, a building project that proved timely for the city in that plans were finalized prior to Katrina and construction began at a time when housing was critically needed. The original plan of building forty homes proved so successful that Crossroads announced in early 2007 a five-year plan to generate 300 new homes and refurbish many more in a disadvantaged neighborhood of the city. A project particularly popular with student groups,

Crossroads has drawn volunteers from around the world, often having 200-300 volunteers, or more, on-site per week.

Alongside Baptist Crossroads is First Baptist's home relief and recovery ministry that is focused on helping those affected by Katrina. Travis Scruggs, known as First Baptist's "disaster pastor," has overseen the ministry that has gutted homes, hauled away debris and mowed yards, parks and medians. This ministry filled a vital role in the recovery process by continuing to offer this service as other organizations transitioned to a rebuilding focus.

Through the work of more than 16,000 volunteers mobilized through Baptist Crossroads and First Baptist's recovery ministry, 1,000 homes in the New Orleans area have been gutted and more than 140 have come to faith in Christ.

A Host of Other Faithful Supporters

No less important than the large-scale organizations detailed above are the churches in our area who stepped up to help other congregations even in the midst of their own difficulties. Often, churches that had lost facilities, congregations and homes were enabled to minister to the needs of their own community by fellow Baptists who stood alongside in support.

The contribution of churches and individuals that have given sacrificially through the Adopt-a-Church program, New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary, the Louisiana Baptist Convention, the Baptist Association of Greater New Orleans and other connections, is perhaps incalculable. It would be impossible to list the churches that have given and to put a dollar value on what their investment has meant. So many of those who adopted a hurting congregation have exceeded all expectations, going far beyond the responsibility they were asked to assume.

As a member of a Southern Baptist church in New Orleans, I can attest to the outpouring of love and grace from our brothers and sisters in Christ who have done for us what we could not do for ourselves, walked beside us through a difficult task and joined us on our knees before a gracious Father. We are truly grateful.