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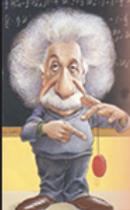
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Volunteers make a difference on mission trip

Submitted by Anonymous on Wed, 09/24/2008 - 07:06

By: Hannah Disch

It's been three years since Hurricane Katrina devastated the north-central Gulf Coast, damaging tremendous amounts of property and costing many people their lives. More than 68,000 homes were completely destroyed in the storm and its aftermath and over 65,000 additional homes suffered major damage. Today, thousands of families remain without homes and without hope of rebuilding due to lack of financial resources.

In July, a group of volunteers from St. John's Lutheran Church travelled to Biloxi, Miss., to help restore homes that were damaged by Katrina. They worked with an organization called Camp Biloxi, a temporary disaster relief camp that was principally established by the Lutheran Church of Missouri Synod, and that also receives funding from the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America.

Since its inception, Camp Biloxi has provided more than 17,000 volunteers from churches and communities across the country, making it possible for more than 1,700 families to move back into their homes. Currently, Camp Biloxi still has 1,500 additional homes that they plan to work on, all damaged by Katrina.

Twenty-one members of St. John's participated in the mission project, leaving Oregon on July 20 and returning on the 28. Sign-up was offered on a first-come, first-serve basis, with a limit of 25 people ages 15 and up. The team was comprised of 11 high school youth and 10 adults. Although this mission project was organized with the purpose of rebuilding St. John's youth ministry, it was very much intended to be an intergenerational experience, according to Pastor Paul Markquart.

The 21 people who went down to Mississippi did the physical work, but they had the support of their congregation, who donated money not only towards the Camp Biloxi registration fee, but also for Camp Biloxi as well. In the end, an additional \$2,100 was given to Camp Biloxi to help them continue their mission.

Markquart said living conditions for the volunteers were humble: "We went down and they had mobile container cars, from trains, that they had converted into dorm rooms and shower buildings and rest room facilities, etc. They had a large dining tent and they had air conditioning in all the rooms from little window-sized air conditioners."

Camp Biloxi has the necessary tools to complete the restoration work and provides managers to oversee each job site and to train the volunteers. The St. John's team worked on two different houses. On the first property, which Markquart describes as "a real clean work site" with "real progress being made," volunteers did mudding and taped the drywall. The second house hadn't been worked on since the hurricane, as the owner is a cabinet maker who had been working for other homes and businesses, trying to get the economy running again. He was living in a trailer on the premises.

"Ours was the first opportunity to get in there and begin work at demolition and pulling things out to the bare studs," Markquart said. "In the three years since Katrina, the house became inhabited by rats and mice and raccoons. It had become sort of a foul place. We had to get it down to the bare studs so that we could do the mold abatement and the preparations for it to be rebuilt."

St. John's volunteer Ashley Harp said the work was difficult, but rewarding.

"Overall, the workday was hard, fun, hot, tiring and inspiring... At the end of the day I crawl into bed and I'm thankful I have one," she said.

The volunteers were glad to see that, despite certain expectations, the business districts in and around Biloxi and Gulf Port have "come back in a really good way." This is, of course, the first step in rebuilding a healthy economy. The residential areas are a different story, however.

Markquart said at first, most of the homes didn't look too badly damaged. But upon closer inspection, they were in rough shape.

"You look at the exterior of people's homes and it doesn't seem that bad, but as you're down there, you begin to know what to look for and then you begin to see the extent and nature of the damage and what still needs to be done. The exteriors look one way, but then you go inside and you discover very quickly that most of these homes had eight feet of water on the first level, all the way right up to the rafters."

Although it seems like razing the buildings and just starting over would be the easiest course of action, often this isn't financially feasible. Insurance won't cover much of the restoration work because most of the homes that were damaged were nowhere near a flood plain, and therefore didn't have any federal flood insurance.

Jim Torpey, one of the St. John's volunteers, said he didn't think the area will ever be the same. "The damage done to the area was so great that it can only be healed so much," he said. "It will be repaired, but it will never be the same. The people that we have met have all been so appreciative that it makes you feel good in your heart. Here we are working hard and yet we are but a drop in the bucket of what lies ahead. Even though our efforts are small they are a large impact on those that we touch."

The members of St. John's hope to make this into an annual mission trip.

"All have grown from the experience. I have grown myself...and have gained a better understanding of the devastation and long lasting effects of the hurricane," Torpey said.

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