

Geneva church helps mend devastated Mississippi town

By: Sandy Kaczmariski
SPECIAL TO THE BEACON NEWS

(printed Friday, March 31, 2006, Voice section, page D8)

GENEVA - It wasn't just the absence of the sound of birds singing. There were no dogs barking, and no sounds of kids laughing. Half a year after Hurricane Katrina hit Gulfport, Miss., the silence was deafening.

But what made the most lasting impression on Bart Roush, who led a group of parishioners down to the Gulf city in February to help, was the realization of how we all need each other.

"I'm sure the theologies were different for a lot of people down there, but none of it mattered," Roush said. "We are all connected and that's what matters."

Roush is an associate pastor of adult ministries for the Fox Valley Presbyterian Church in Geneva. After Hurricane Katrina hit, the congregation immediately talked about collecting food and clothing to send down to the ravaged areas in Louisiana, Mississippi and Alabama.

"That's actually one of the worst things you can do right after a disaster," he said. "Systems aren't set up yet to distribute goods, people are displaced, and there are storage problems."

Roush said a challenge was put out to the congregation to raise \$55,000 in relief effort, 10 percent of its operating budget. While there were concerns, he said as a sacrificial giving it was time for the congregation to step up.

Step up they did. So far, \$33,000 has been raised to be distributed through the Presbyterian Disaster Assistance organization, of which all proceeds go to the relief effort.

"We still wanted to do more, and had many discussions on whether money should be spent to send people down there," he said.

But after hearing a relief worker share his experience, a sign-up sheet was posted with a few prerequisites.

"If you can't handle not knowing where you'll be sleeping or handle rough circumstances, then don't come," he advised.

Seven brave souls came forward: Kathy Dempsey, Carol Hammer, Diana Shewalter, Alderman Sam Hill, John Bardsley, Tom Egan and Harold Daniell, in addition to Roush.

"While we had hoped to find someone with skills, it wasn't necessary," Roush said.

Sister church Westminster Presbyterian in Gulfport had determined its niche in the relief effort was roofing, whether it be businesses, churches, or homes. Since they were located about 10 miles inland, the church itself had sustained little damage.

After a stopover in Memphis and surviving a blown tire, the group arrived February 12 and got a quick tour of the area to see what they were up against. "There's a railroad track about a half-mile from the beach," Roush said. "It sort of acted like a levee. When you went over the tracks, there was utter destruction for 26 miles up and down the coast and a mile wide."

Roofing materials were purchased by the church and sometimes by a homeowner who couldn't afford to have the roof installed. "Professionals would have cost \$6,000 to do the roof we did," Roush said. "Our labor might not have been skilled, but it was cheap."

Since no one in their group knew how to put up a roof, they had a 15-minute orientation before grabbing their hammers. A supervisor from the church stayed with them, but Roush said it was "learn as you go." The house next door was done by professional roofers who finished in a day and a half.

Theirs took four days.

While they worked and also during supertime, they heard the stories. Many of the people stayed to ride out the storm. But while Katrina was weaker than many other storms that have hit the area, it was a slow storm that hovered over Gulfport wreaking havoc for nearly 10 hours.

Roush told of a couple who decided to stay in their house until the water reached the level of the kitchen cabinets. It was higher outside. That's when they swam out, with their baby, to a neighbor's home until the water there, too, was rising fast.

"They had to leave again, with their baby, and went to the top of the hill and found their 87-year old neighbor," he said. "When they knocked on the door and she answered, they said to her 'What are you doing here?'"

"She told them, 'Obviously, to open the door for you.'" They stayed in her attic for two days.

It was stories like this one that made the group thankful for what they had. "We were down there on Valentine's Day and everyone called somebody that day to touch base," Roush said. "Being down there required us to slow down a little bit and reflect."

He said there is always the debate about whether it would have been wiser to just send the money instead of spending money to send a group of people down there. And his answer is an emphatic "no."

"The people who go down there are forever changed," he said. "You get to express your faith in a very tangible way."

#