

Volunteers head to rebuild Katrina-ravaged Mississippi

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Seen Katrina in the news lately?

The truth is, 18 months after the ferocious hurricane devastated parts of three Southern states, the ongoing efforts to rebuild homes and lives have faded in the country's collective consciousness. Instead, the war in Iraq, the 2008 presidential election and other breaking stories grab the headlines.

But that doesn't mean the work is done. By one estimate, it would take repairing 55 houses a day in Mississippi for the next 10 years to fix all the damage done in that state alone - and that doesn't include Louisiana or Alabama.

A report published by the American Red Cross one year after the Aug. 29, 2005, disaster said that for many thousands of people, concrete slabs are still all that remain of their homes. Other homes are mold-covered or are nothing but studs and rafters, and whole neighborhoods remain desolate and vacant, the report goes on to say.

Luckily, volunteers are continuing to help with the Herculean effort. According to FEMA, the federal disaster agency, after one year, 300,000 people had traveled to Mississippi alone to help build and repair homes.

Montana continues to be part of that effort. In January and February, a tri-state organization, Rise Up & Build, will send more than 200 people, including 70 from Montana, to Ocean Springs, Miss., to repair and build houses.

A team of eight people from St. John's Ministries returns today after a week there, as another team of eight from American Lutheran Church departs. Next Saturday, 12 volunteers from King of Glory Lutheran will fly to Ocean Springs, and then, on Feb. 17, a team of seven will go from American Lutheran.

All will go under the auspices of Rise Up & Build, an ecumenical organization, under the umbrella of Lutheran Disaster Response, that encompasses the states of Montana, North and South Dakota. Others of the 70 from Montana will represent various denominations from a number of towns, said Dave Peters, executive director of Lutheran Social Services for the state.

"They're coming all the way from Culbertson to Libby to Missoula and places in between," Peters said.

Last year, 152 people from the three states went down to Biloxi, Miss., he said. This year, they are shifting their efforts to Ocean Springs, Miss., east of Biloxi.

The volunteers will be housed at Camp Victor, a warehouse set up as one recovery headquarters by Christus Victor Lutheran Church. From there, helpers will be directed to recovery projects coordinated by the church.

Peters, who volunteered last year, won't be going again this year. But he chatted with people who recently

traveled to Mississippi for the second year, as well as others going for their first time.

The first-timers told Peters they were "blown away by the devastation," Peters said. "And the folks who were there last year and went back said it looks better. So it's all relative, I guess."

What hasn't changed is the attitude of the people who survived the storm.

"I heard from one crew that folks are still so utterly grateful for people who are building and helping get their homes in order," Peters said. "I think it's that people still care. That brings hope to folks, and that is so powerful."

The Rev. Tom Schlotterback is joining 11 other members of his congregation on the trip to Ocean Springs. The pastor of King of Glory Church and his congregation first heard about the work of Rise Up & Build a year ago, when Peters returned from a week in Mississippi with a group from St. John's.

"I found it helpful for our congregation to hear from Dave himself and what was going on in the Gulf, which, as he presented it was a tragic situation down there," Schlotterback said.

Out of that came a decision by a dozen people in the West End church to go and lend a hand. Besides taking a week out of their schedules to go to Ocean Springs, the six men and six women are paying their own travel expenses for the trip.

Lutheran Disaster Relief will cover the cost of food and lodging at the site.

After a day of travel and another one for orientation, Schlotterback expects to do five days of intensive work, getting up at 6 a.m. and falling into bed for lights out at 10 p.m. after an evening meal and devotions. Schlotterback isn't sure what he'll find once in Ocean Springs, but he's sure he'll be touched by it.

"I'm expecting to be changed, personally, in the midst of encountering human tragedy," he said.

The Rev. Tim Tostengard, pastor of American Lutheran, will travel to Ocean Springs on Feb. 17 with six others from his church, including his 17-year-old daughter, Annika. The pair will meet up with wife Kay's father, so the week of work will be a three-generation effort, Tostengard said.

Going to Mississippi fits in with the church's mission statement, which is "growing deep in faith and reaching wide with the love of Christ." In addition to this trip, the church also is planning mission forays into South Africa and Eastern Europe.

"It's a mission-minded congregation, and it's a great place to serve," Tostengard said.

Annika, a senior at Senior High, said her decision to go is, in part, tied to what she has seen happen over the past 18 months.

"Everyone was so concerned about Katrina in the beginning," she said. "When it became less of a news story, everyone forgot about it, but I think it's important that we just keep supporting them."

Her father agreed.

"We're primarily going to help people in a difficult situation," he said. "As Christians, we feel called to do that."

But as much as he's ready to pick up a hammer, Tostengard said he also is bringing along a listening ear.

"That's another thing leaders talk about, the need to listen to people's stories, to help them deal with the grief," he said.

While coordinating this year's trips, Peters said Rise Up & Build is already starting to work on organizing groups to go in 2008, though he's worried that each year it may get harder to find volunteers willing to go to a place few hear anything about.

"Lutheran Disaster Relief's real concern is long-term recovery," he said. "It's not the 'sexy' stuff. But to stay with folks in their need, that's the goal."

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