

Bay Area Presbyterians Help ‘Mud Out’ New Orleans

Teams from Presbyterian churches across the country have converged on New Orleans to participate in one of the region’s largest hurricane relief efforts. Working through the School of Urban Missions, more than a dozen teams from Presbyterian churches have cut up fallen trees, strapped tarps onto roofs, distributed food and ‘mudded out’ soggy homes.

“Our church has really developed a heart for this mission,” said Kelly Krauss, a high school teacher and member of the Walnut Creek Presbyterian Church in California, which sent five teams to New Orleans over a five week period in October and November. “I was in church on a Sunday when some of our returning volunteers gave testimonials about their experience in New Orleans. I decided I wanted to help out, even if it meant getting dirty.”

The Walnut Creek church already had a connection to the School of Urban Missions because the college’s vice president for development is church member Mark Tilton. Tilton has spoken to churches throughout the San Francisco Presbytery, encouraging them to support the relief effort by sending volunteers, supplies and funding assistance.

The School of Urban Missions, also known as SUM, is a 13-year-old Bible college, with a sister campus in Oakland, Calif. When Hurricane Katrina hit in late August 2005, SUM expanded its mission to include relief work for area churches and individuals.

“The vision of SUM is to reach the lost in the world’s urban centers,” Tilton said. “Presbyterian churches share this mission and have been among the leaders in supporting relief work in New Orleans. The members of those churches who volunteer to come and work in New Orleans are witnessing how a city can be transformed.”

In addition to the Walnut Creek congregation, California Presbyterian churches that have sent teams to New Orleans include Lafayette-Orinda Presbyterian, First Presbyterian Church of Berkeley, College Avenue Presbyterian Church of Berkeley, St. John’s Presbyterian Church of Berkeley, and First Presbyterian Church of Hayward. Moraga Valley Presbyterian Church is making plans to send a team of its own.

One of the busiest volunteers in New Orleans in early November was Onsi

Fakhouri of the Berkeley First Presbyterian Church, who called on his experience with Habitat for Humanity to help organize the distribution of huge amounts of donated food stored by SUM in the city of Gretna's municipal warehouse on a Mississippi River wharf.

"I had been following in the news the damage that Katrina had done and wanted to do something to help, but I didn't realize that my chance would come so soon," said the 22-year-old University of California at Berkeley doctoral student. "When our church decided to send a team it just seemed to be an opportunity at the right time."

"I think our church has embraced this work because it appeals to people on so many levels," said Stacie Donnelly, a financial manager and a member of Walnut Creek Presbyterian Church, where the high school group has changed the destination for its upcoming annual Easter break mission trip from Mexico to New Orleans.

"There is so much work to be done and some of the jobs can look pretty awful because of the mud and the grime," Donnelly said. "You just have to be open to what God puts in front of you."

Donnelly said one of the most meaningful experiences she had in New Orleans was as part of a 'mud-out' team that emptied a water-logged home as the young couple who owned the dwelling and their three children watched tearfully from the curb.

"The family was so emotional that they couldn't even bring themselves to go inside of their ruined home even as we brought out damaged personal things like the baby clothes and crib and piled them with the rest of the trash," she said. "Then, one of our team brought out a small necklace that had belonged to the woman's great grandmother, and she screamed and danced for joy. That made me wish we could have stayed in New Orleans longer."

To learn more about volunteering for hurricane relief efforts through the School of Urban Missions in the New Orleans area go to the Web site at www.sumonline.org or call 1-800-385-6364. For information on making donations in support of SUM's relief work, call 1 (888) 567-6174 or send an e-mail to mtilton@sumonline.org.