

## VOLUNTEERS ARE KEY TO THE HURRICANE RELIEF EFFORT BY SUM

In the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina more than 600 volunteers from churches across the nation have come to the School of Urban Missions near New Orleans, headquarters for one of the area's largest disaster relief operations.

"I've never been on a mission before," said Marla Richards, who was part of a seven-member volunteer team from Orchard Community Church in Campbell, Calif. "My eyes have been opened to see that God can put me to work 'mudding out' houses one day, then do just as important work the next day by giving encouragement to people who have lost everything they owned."

More than 50 churches from 22 states have sent teams to the School of Urban Missions in Gretna, Louis., where as many as 170 volunteers have spent a week or longer working on projects including food distribution, fastening tarps onto damaged rooftops, construction projects, and cutting up toppled trees.

The majority of volunteers, including a team from Ontario, Canada, have been involved in 'mudding out' homes by emptying items from ruined houses and piling everything curbside.

"Some neighborhoods are so ruined that the residents have nothing to come back to," said Enid Balavac, member of a team from South Valley Christian Church in San Jose, Calif. "This has been a 'light bulb experience' for me because I can see how important it is for a mission church like ours to have a presence here."

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 its mission changed, but not dramatically, according to the Rev. Dylan Schultz, assistant director of hurricane relief operations for the campus.

"Our hurricane relief work is very much in line with SUM's mission of reaching the lost in urban centers," Schultz said. "The volunteers working with us are witnessing how this part of America is being transformed by tragedy."

“Volunteers don’t need any special skill, just a willingness to help people in need,” said Bonnie Nelson who, with husband Rich, coordinates the daily meetings at which team leaders from various churches get their project assignments at the SUM campus building in Gretna. “We are becoming well-known as a group that gets things done. Even FEMA is giving out our phone number.”

At a recent meeting of team leaders Nelson gave out work assignments to 150 people in teams from more than a dozen churches. One group comprised of volunteers from Maryland, Michigan and Pennsylvania built steps and platforms for trailers provided to residents whose homes have been destroyed. Another group from Wisconsin was sent to put blue tarps on rooftops and some of their members went to pack crates of food in a section of the Gretna municipal warehouse on the wharf designated for SUM work.

A team of volunteers from six states was pulled together to clear fallen trees with chainsaws. It included volunteers from the First Assembly of God in Coraopolis, Penn., who brought with them 500 work gloves donated by the Norfolk Southern Railroad.

“We packed as much as we could into two vans and drove 1,100 miles in 20 hours to get here,” said Jeremy Rogerson, who volunteered along with his father Bill.

The largest volunteer groups were sent to various sites for ‘mud out’ work. One team was sent 20 miles south to the small town of Lafitte. Their task was to report to the mayor as part of relief efforts connected to Hurricane Rita, that followed several weeks after Katrina.

“SUM saw that I needed help and they said ‘let’s go!’” said Nolan McSwain, who met a team of volunteers at the formerly flooded home where his two daughters and three young grandchildren lived before evacuating to Texas.

In about 90 minutes a team of 20 SUM volunteers from Virginia, Pennsylvania, Michigan and California did a ‘mud-out’ of the home McSwain hopes to rebuild for his daughters, piling all the contents into a soggy mound on the front sidewalk.

“It was just a fantastic effort,” said McSwain, principal of an elementary

school that has been closed since levees burst and flooded the community. “The thing I miss the most in New Orleans since the hurricane has been the joyful noise of playing children. I want to bring that back to this deserted neighborhood when I bring my grandchildren home.”

Luke Freddrick, SUM’s volunteer mission team coordinator, said church groups and individuals need to be prepared for challenges when they get to New Orleans.

“Needs can change very quickly here,” said Freddrick, who is taking a leave from his work with the Midwest-based Answering The Cries organization to work with SUM. “Our most effective teams are the ones prepared for a variety of jobs, and to possibly be split up in order to make another team more effective.”

Freddrick recommended that church teams coming to New Orleans bring along work gloves, boots and N-95-model respirator masks (mud out operations can expose volunteers to mold). It also is helpful for groups to bring their own chain saws and other tools.

Groups should plan with SUM well in advance so that arrangements can be made for lodging. A list of suggested items for volunteers to bring to New Orleans is at the SUM Web site at [www.sumonline.org](http://www.sumonline.org).

Team members stay in dorm rooms at SUM or at a nearby church and generally eat breakfast and dinner in the campus’ third floor kitchen. Lunches can be made in the morning and taken with the teams to the job sites. Although donated food is often provided, some volunteer church groups bring and cook their own to share with other teams. Local stores are open for business because Gretna, an incorporated city on the “West Bank,” was not flooded after the hurricane.

A typical day for volunteers includes breakfast on the campus at 7 a.m., a brief worship service at 7:30, followed by team assignments and work crews departing from 8:30 to 10:30 a.m. Work crews usually return to the campus by 5 p.m., have dinner at 6:15, and participate in a chapel service at 7:30 p.m. Sundays are generally when crews do not work, but worship in area churches and take tours of the region.

“On Sunday we went to West Bank Cathedral Assembly of God, which they call ‘God’s House,’” said Louis Tapley-Van Pelt of Lafayette-Orinda

Presbyterian Church in California. “The graciousness and hospitality there was overwhelming. I’ll always remember meeting a woman who told me as we cried and hugged that she had lost her home in the hurricane. “”But I’m alive,” she told me. ‘God will get me through.’ Just to witness that expression of faith made this trip a blessing for me.”

*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](http://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](mailto:mtilton@sumonline.org).*