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MCC supports initiative for housing in New Orleans

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AKRON, Pa. – By August 2005 when Hurricane Katrina struck, St. John Baptist Church in the Uptown area of New Orleans was a growing, thriving congregation with some 300 members.

Now only about 100 of those have returned to New Orleans, says Rev. Don Boutte.

Damage to the church building was severe – the roof was torn off and the building inundated by rainwater. Renovations are on hold until power company workers are available to reconnect utilities.

But no matter how well the renovations go, the heart of any church is its members – and two-thirds of them have not come back.

Boutte said those who could afford to return were homeowners, often retirees who had finished paying for their houses. Young families were most often renting their homes. Even if they wanted to return, it might be tough to find housing they could afford.

To Boutte, this underscores the need for churches to get involved in providing affordable housing to redevelop communities. "You can't develop the church without membership, and the membership can't get back unless they have somewhere to live," said Boutte. His home was destroyed and he recently moved to an area 45 miles outside New Orleans, an improvement over living 125 miles away as he did most of the time since Katrina.

Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) is providing \$75,000 to enable a team of local African-American pastors to begin to work toward affordable housing for returning church members and for others in the community.

The project, driven by local pastors serving as neighborhood coordinators, is part of a wide-ranging initiative of Churches Supporting Churches (CSC) – a partnership among New Orleans congregations and churches throughout the country.

CSC seeks to support 36 African-American congregations in 12 neighborhoods in greater New Orleans as pastors and members seek to rebuild and restore not only their own facilities and members' lives and houses – but also the neighborhoods and communities where they have long-established ties.

"I'm appreciative that folks are still taking an interest in this 18 months after the storm," Boutte said. "The reality is we'll probably be dealing with this for the next 10 years."

In New Orleans, blocks of abandoned or blighted property are available for organizations to redevelop – a privilege most often granted to large organizations that have the financial capital to develop hundreds of houses.

Through CSC, congregations hope to join forces to receive some of this property.

The first step is to document the blocks of housing and acreage that churches and church members already own and to use it to ask the city for property that can be used for a church-based effort at building affordable housing and revitalizing the community.

Neighborhood coordinators, including Boutte, are beginning work on this now in the lower Ninth Ward, Uptown, Central City and Downtown.

A broad initiative

In addition to the housing work, CSC is providing a range of training and support to New Orleans-area pastors and matching New Orleans-area church with churches throughout the country.

Monthly meetings have addressed topics from how to serve and develop a community to peace theology, said Rev. C.T. Vivian, founder and chair of the working group. Vivian envisioned a broad effort that would restore and rebuild churches and empower the New Orleans-area pastors to work to rebuild and change their communities as they strive to overcome poverty and racism.

"They are really a continuation of the moral and spiritual movement that Dr. Martin Luther King started," Vivian said. These are small congregations, and only a handful of the pastors have gone to seminary. But this cooperative effort affords them opportunities for training to become an influential force in putting the city back together, Vivian said.

Each of the 36 New Orleans congregations has been reaching out to five more churches in its immediate area. Those six churches are collaborating on shared plans for providing necessary services in their neighborhood, from childcare to youth activities to a food pantry and more. Neighborhood pastors are coming together to learn from each other and to find cooperative ways to meet needs in their communities.

Historic peace churches have been a vital part of this effort from the start. When Vivian shared his vision for CSC at a peace conference, "it was the peace churches that came forward. They were the first members of the board," he said.

Partnering with churches outside New Orleans

In addition to the housing work, CSC is matching 10 partners with each New Orleans-area congregation. These 360 partners, which would be churches from throughout the United States, commit to building a relationship with a New Orleans congregation over the next three years.

That can range from prayer support to financial contributions to work trips to New Orleans. One church partner may commit to sending thousands of dollars to its New Orleans' partner, whereas another may focus on sending work teams.

"We need the fellowship of all the churches in the country to overcome the devastation and to make it possible for these churches to return to serve," Vivian said.

CSC continues to seek congregations to match with New Orleans churches. Rev. Steve Brown, coordinator of peace and social justice for the African-American Mennonite Association, urges Anabaptist churches to take part in an effort that will not just rebuild churches but help them work against injustices and inequalities present before the storm struck. "We see this as the beginning of the war on poverty," Brown said.

In New Orleans there are still blocks of gutted empty houses where the devastation of the storm looks fresh, Brown said. He hopes churches will keep that in mind and continue to be moved by the needs in the area.

"When the storm hit in August of 2005, there were a lot of churches and groups that responded initially. But this process is going to take years. Our nation tends to have a shortened memory when it comes to disasters," Brown said.

Bob Zehr, a former moderator of the Gulf States Conference of Mennonite Church USA, also sees opportunities for Anabaptist congregations to build relationships over the next few years. "We're not talking about coming down for a weekend. What we're looking for is a long-term commitment, a congregation to say we want to be your sister congregation for three years," Zehr said.

For more information about Churches Supporting Churches or church partnerships, see

WWW.CSCNEWORLEANS.ORG

or write Churches Supporting Churches, c/o Dwight Webster, CSC National Project Director, 1700 Conti Street, New Orleans, LA 70112-3606.

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