

PARTNERS IN
the spirit
NOVEMBER 2005



The Northeastern Pennsylvania Synod

Diakon Volunteers Aid
Victims of Hurricane Katrina

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Hurricane Katrina

Operation Friendly Neighbor: One
Congregation's Story

Water with No Gas: Visit to Saxony
Companion Synod

As Church Rolls Shrink, Lay Ministers'
Role Grows

Mississippi Journal
Responding to Hurricane Katrina

Teacher Honored for 55 Years of Service
Tree Planted in Her Honor



A disaster-response team made up of volunteers from Diakon Lutheran Social Ministries recently returned from Biloxi, Mississippi. The team's mission was to aid victims of Hurricane Katrina with clean-up efforts.

The team spent 10 days performing a variety of tasks including roof repairs, cutting trees, general clean up, unloading trucks, and assisting in a church food pantry. On average, the volunteers worked from 6 a.m. until well past midnight.

"All the survivors looked dazed. Their eyes were glazed and they looked physically and emotionally exhausted. It inspired us to work even harder," says Rebecca Albright, disaster-response-team leader and director, business management systems/disaster-response services, Diakon.

While the work was extremely hard, the group also found the experience to be extremely rewarding.

The Rev. David Heineman, chaplain, Hospice Saint John — Greater Berks Area, says, "Our time in Mississippi was tough, tiring, and fulfilling. I worked with a great team and it was wonderful to know we were able to have a hand in helping others in so many ways and on so many levels in an area hit so hard and so under-reported by the press as a whole."



“Every member of our team was ready to come home but at the same time wanted to stay and do more,” says Ms. Albright. “We really became a family down there.”

So far from home, the volunteers did encounter someone with ties to Diakon’s The Lutheran Home at Topton.

“We ran into a gentleman who was a former orphan from The Lutheran Home at Topton. He was living 20 minutes away from where we were working. When he found out we were there helping, he drove all the way out to show his support,” says Ms. Albright.

Ms. Albright was and continues to be in continuous contact with response leaders. She monitored local conditions, ensured the team was properly prepared and equipped to complete tasks assigned, and made certain that the local site was ready to receive them.

In preparation for their mission, team members attended a disaster 101 training course offered by Diakon and Lutheran Disaster Response. During the training session, volunteers learned skills necessary to interact with disaster survivors, how to safely remove mold, personal and site-safety training, how to manage stress and cope emotionally, and team-building skills.

Diakon offers this training to groups who wish to send teams to the Gulf Coast or other disaster sites.

Diakon’s disaster team consisted of five Diakon staff members — Johanna Gieroczynski of Mertztown, Chris Reider of Topton, The Rev. David Heineman of Morgantown, Joie Barry of Macungie, and Rebecca Albright of Macungie.

In addition to sending the disaster team, Diakon will make a \$100,000 gift to Lutheran Disaster Response to assist with work in states ravaged by Hurricane Katrina. Further, Diakon will match contributions made by employees and residents of its senior living communities, as well as funds raised by program events for this purpose, up to an additional total of \$50,000.

“ Diakon’s mission is to serve people in need and I am

thankful that we were able to lend a hand to people who have endured such a large-scale natural disaster,” says Ms. Albright.

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This story comes from an email sent to the congregation of Grace Lutheran Church, Conroe, Texas, from its pastor, Michael Rinehart, on September 29 following Hurricane Rita. It is reprinted here by permission of "Pastor Mike."

Dear Grace Family,

I can't begin to relay to you what I've seen these past few days. It has been incredible. I wasn't sure if we could pull this off. Our friends at First Methodist had their shelter open 17 days and were exhausted. All this from a church four times our size. Yet, the people started coming to us. Asking for help. We didn't feel we could say "no." God would simply have to see us through. And so it has happened. Read some of the stories.

Who is staying with us?

Beaumont and Port Arthur are both closed right now. In fact, people are still being evacuated. Some of our guests have no homes to go back to. In time they will move to rental property or Section 8 housing. Others' homes are still intact, and they are waiting for officials to give permission to return. Some have "snuck" back into the city to check things out. Some of our guests are locals who are without power. One family with a three-week-old baby came for shelter, and then, when their power came back on, they came back to volunteer and help. Some may be without power for several weeks. We are on a grid that extends to Louisiana. Much damage has been done, and, if they don't do this carefully with rolling power outages, the system could get overloaded,



and then everyone would be out for two to three days.

Why are we doing this?

Isaiah 58 and Matthew 25 cover the basic foundations of the church's mission. Many of our guests are arriving with only the clothes on their backs, with no place to stay. Since before medieval times, churches, which often were the sturdiest facilities in most villages, provided shelter for people and animals during storms and sieges. It is the right thing to do.

How is it going at Grace?

Super. It's a scramble, but we're doing considerably well considering that two days ago we didn't know we'd be doing it at all. Currently we are an official Red Cross shelter. We have 69 guests. We have determined our capacity to be 100. People are arriving all the time. Some of our Red Cross people have said this is one of the best shelters they have worked with. Still, it's a lot of work, and some of our volunteers are working around the clock. Guests have been doing a lot of the work: cleaning bathrooms, vacuuming, taking out trash and so on. Churches and businesses are chipping in, too.

Who is running the shelter?

One member of Grace is managing the shelter during the day. A family is in charge at night. They have slept here every night since we opened. Countless others are helping prepare meals, listen to guests, take out garbage, help the nurses and so on.

Also, keeping things running in a big way are four Red Cross volunteers and five Red Cross nurses living on site. They are from Arizona, Pennsylvania, Illinois, and California. They are some of the finest people I've ever met. They are volunteering 21 days of their lives to go anywhere in the U. S. The Red Cross sent them to Grace Lutheran Church in Conroe. Check out the photo on the right, above, of some of our Red Cross volunteers: Kathy (from PA), Gerhardt (PA), Deborah (AZ) and Bob (CA).

What should I expect if I volunteer?

Our guests are tired, stressed and grieving. Think of a time when you just couldn't think straight. One of our guests from Port Arthur, after checking the Internet on one of the computers we have set up, came up to his family and said in amazement, "The mall is gone. It's just... gone." Many of those with whom I've spoken are in shock, like someone

who just lost her spouse. The tears are just below the surface. The smallest act of kindness brings a flood of emotion. "Where will I live?" "Where will I work?" "How will I ever get through this?"

One of the greatest gifts we bring is a non-anxious presence. Calm. A quiet hope that offers no simplistic answers but knows that things will work out in the end. All who serve will encounter guests. Spiritual and emotional support is as important as the material support of food and shelter.

Stories of Guests

- Debby was one of the first calls I received. She lives in Cut-and-Shoot (oooh that name...) with her three-week old granddaughter. Her power was out and the baby was becoming dehydrated, so she needed to get out of the heat. We told her she'd be best off in a Red Cross Shelter. When she asked where one was, we did some homework and found out the closest one was in Crockett. So I told her to come on over. She stayed in the Fellowship Hall that night with some others. The next day the Red Cross asked us to open up as a shelter, so we moved everyone to the Family Life Center, and they started coming. After two days in the shelter the baby was fine, and her power was back on. Now she has returned, this time not as a guest, but as a volunteer.
- José and his wife Sylvia are here with his father Leonardo, his daughter Lilly, and his son José. Thankfully, their house is intact. They are waiting for the authorities to open Port Arthur. They are deeply grateful for this church and have been tireless workers in the shelter. Today I answered many questions in my broken Spanish about the differences between Lutherans and Catholics.
- Linda is a retired school teacher who lives between Cleveland and Splendora. A large oak tree fell on her mobile home, totaling it. She has no idea what she is going to do at this point.
- Joe and his family are from Port Naches. They don't know the condition of their house, but are anxious to get back in and see.

Stories of Community Spirit

- Dr. Andy Davis from Your Family Doctor instantly agreed to offer medical support. He has been getting prescriptions for those whose medications were left behind.
- Richie's Pharmacy told us to come on over. They charged nothing for any of the nursing supplies we needed.
- Alan Clayton, pastor of the Ark Family Church, sent Administrative Pastor Freddie Hector over to check things out. They purchased \$1,000 in \$50 gas cards, making it possible for people to get their kids to the school system, and themselves to FEMA.
- Pastor Downen Johnson of April Sound Church brought a check for \$1,500 today. Members of his church are also providing numerous meals.
- Conroe Bible Church and Tree of Life Lutheran are providing some meals.
- First Methodist donated all their blow-up mattresses and cots.
- K-Star 99.7 donated two truckloads of clothes.
- Borden is providing milk and orange juice as needed.

As always, it is a pleasure to serve in this place, with such highly committed people. You are doing the work of God in this place, with the Spirit's guidance. For this I am grateful.

Much love,

Pastor Mike

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By Nettie-Rose Reynolds, member of St. Paul, Easton

My name is Nettie-Rose Reynolds, and I was chosen to participate in the 2005 Saxony Youth Exchange. That's me in the black t-shirt on the right, above.

It's been about four months since the trip took place, and yet I still remember it all as if it were only yesterday. I would love to give you a detailed story of how everything went, but that would take a few hours, so I'll give a brief but good one.

I'll start with the country first. I always thought Pennsylvania was beautiful, but nothing compared to Germany. Everything seemed 10 times prettier and that may have been because it was 20 times cleaner. I can't remember seeing litter populate an area more than people, and that was even true when we went into the bigger cities from our host home villages.

Everything is separated and recycled, which is something we have to fight to do here. And even though we were told to be careful of the water because we were not used to it, the water seemed to taste sweeter than water here.

The little villages that were over a thousand years old were well kept and looked just like they would have back then. I always wanted to live out in the countryside, and I hope that if I still do, that just maybe it will be a German countryside.

Our hosts were truly amazing. I had a bit of a heads up on the German youth, because I had met most of them when



they came to the United States in October 2004. In the first city of our stay, two girls who actually stayed with me had a little quarrel about who was going to take me. I felt special to know that they still remembered me and were eagerly waiting to see me.

Everyone was very welcoming and ready to make our stay with them the most they could. I'm going to get into food in a bit, but I have to say this here. Germans like to drink carbonated water, and for me, someone who won't even drink soda, that's just gross. I tried to explain to Kristin, my host sister, that if possible I would like her to get water with no bubbles. She looked at me questioningly and said, "You mean water with no gas?" We both laughed and I told her yes.

People here in America are hospitable to a certain extent, but no one here compares to families in Germany. They made me feel like I was truly a part of their family and that I belonged.

Food; everyone's favorite subject. I think I've eaten more sausage (or bratwurst) in 10 days than ever before in my life! Everything I ate was delicious. I remember one night, we were all together and Andreas, our main host and tour guide, made Hungarian goulash. A major part of my heritage is Hungarian and I remember my mother trying to get me to eat goulash as a little girl. It looked gross to me and I hated it. When Andreas made it, I enjoyed it and couldn't believe that years before I had rejected it.

On our last night with our first hosts, a few of the German youth decided to have a cookout and eat together. There was so much food on the table! It had to have been enough to feed a family of 20 at Thanksgiving! By the time the fourth dish had finished cooking we were getting quite full. Our hosts looked at us in surprise because we weren't eating anymore, and so a few of us tried to eat more to make them happy. I don't think I have ever been that full.

My experience was truly amazing and transforming. I missed my high school graduation to go to Germany, and in the long run, my trip is proving to be far more beneficial to me. If I were given the chance to relive the month of June, I would do it all the same again.

I thank God everyday for the opportunity he has given me. Without God, none of it would have been possible and

everything that happened, every way that I was blessed and was a blessing, was a gift from God. Some time within the near future, I hope that God blesses me with the chance to go back again.



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By Mike Urban, Reading Eagle

[Ed. Note: This article is excerpted from one that appeared in the September 20 Reading Eagle. It is used by permission.]

The Lutheran congregation of Jerusalem Red Church had come to a crossroads.

More than 250 years after parishioners first gathered in a log cabin, the union church in Kempton could not find a part-time Lutheran pastor.

Part of the problem was a regional shortage of Lutheran pastors.

And since the congregation's membership had dwindled below 60, it couldn't afford a pastor anyway.

Some members feared their church was nearing extinction.

But the congregation found its salvation through the **synodically authorized ministry** program of the **Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA)**.

Synodically authorized ministers

In recent years the ELCA — like other mainstream denominations — has had a tough time replacing pastors and priests who retired or died.

For about 20 years there were fewer young people entering



the ordained ministry. That meant more older pastors who would require replacement more quickly. Available pastors were usually called to larger churches.

To help fill the gap at smaller churches, the ELCA began training laypersons to be lay ministers in a congregation. About 10 of the 293 congregations in the Northeastern Pennsylvania Synod are now served by **synodically authorized lay ministers** (SALMs).

Though they are not ordained, SALMs perform many of the same functions as those who are. They lead services, deliver sermons, preside over weddings and funerals and visit home-bound parishioners.

“They do almost everything but give counseling,” said the Rev. Catherine Ziel, executive associate of the bishop.

Synodically authorized ministers are not as well trained as ordained ministers, but most are skilled at leading their congregations, Pastor Ziel said.

That makes them a good alternative for churches with shrinking memberships and budgets, she said.

Call to ministry

The synodically authorized lay minister serving Jerusalem Red’s Lutheran congregation is 53-year-old music teacher Robert J. Billig Jr., who long had felt the call to ministry but never had the time to attend the seminary full time.

Mr. Billig, of South Whitehall Township, Lehigh County, completed his training in 2003 and was assigned to replace the congregation’s supply pastors.

Parishioners agree that in the last two years he has helped stabilize the congregation, which shares its church with a United Church of Christ congregation.

The Lutheran congregation’s Sunday attendance has increased slightly and the church programs have expanded since Mr. Billig came, pointed out life-long member Dennis J. Schroeder, 57, of Kutztown.

“Having our own minister will help our future,” Mr. Schroeder said. “He’s doing very well. We’re very happy to have him.”

A blessing

Bob Billig continues to work as both teacher and preacher

and his schedule can be hectic, but his first two years at Jerusalem Red have otherwise gone smoothly, he said.

"In the pulpit I'm often teaching lessons, so my work in education has helped prepare me," he said. "There is no substitute for full ordination, but the parishioners are happy with the work I'm doing. They tell me they're very thankful to have me."

Mr. Billig feels blessed to have his second career, and the congregation he leads.

"It's just an unbelievable experience," he said. "I don't ever want to leave."



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By Christian Harding

[Ed Note: Chris, age 14, is the son of Pastors John Harding and Deb Scheffey. Chris is the youth in the blue shirt and white t-shirt in the picture above. His dad is in the red t-shirt. Chris accompanied a group to Biloxi, Mississippi, in late September. He wrote this journal as a school assignment.]

Day One

Mom wakes me up at 6:00 a.m., as if it were a normal school day. I get up, eat breakfast, get changed, and say my goodbyes.

My dad and I drive to Ruby's house and pick her up. Ruby is a member of my mom's church. The three of us drive for another twenty minutes and pick up Annie, a member of my dad's church. We then drive to my dad's church and pick up two others, Brian and Jeannette.

We drive for awhile, get some gas, and I do some homework. The group stops for lunch at a restaurant in Virginia. As we wait, I use the peg-game they provide for us. After lunch, I purchase one to use on the way there. Then we're on the road again.

Around 4:00 p.m., while we are on the freeway, the car in front of us suddenly stops. Luckily, the cars behind us stopped in time, or they would've creamed us. In Georgia, around 9:00 p.m., we stop at Wendy's for dinner. Another hour of driving, and we stop at a hotel outside of Knoxville, Tennessee.



Day Two

I wake up, have waffles, and we're on the road again. Another three hours and we stop for lunch. Five hours later we're in Mississippi. We stop at a gas station that is very "different" from the others – there are bugs mating everywhere.

We finally get to Biloxi. The damage is terrible. It is so humid and every day it's at least 95 degrees. Once we get to the church where we are staying, we are introduced to everyone who works there. They run "The Shop," a store where people without supplies come in and take what they need, for free. My job is to take the supplies out to their cars for them. It isn't as easy as it sounds.

Days Three through Six

Every morning is the same routine. I wake up at 7:00 a.m., eat breakfast, get changed into work clothes, and go to work. Each day I work some place different. Some days I work at The Shop. Some days I work on houses.

On the days I work on houses, our crew takes our equipment with us in a van that seats eleven people. When we get to the house, we unload equipment from the van. Each worker has a different job. My dad and I work on taking the walls apart. Others break up the tiles from the floor, and still others tear the paneling and the electric circuits from the walls. All the sinks, tubs, kitchen appliances, and cabinets are taken out, too. When we are finished at the end of the day, the house is down to the wood framing.

Every hour, I'd take a five minute break. At the end of the first day, one member takes us on a tour of the damages. The damages are awful. Some of the people who live in Biloxi tell us that over half of the city was destroyed by two waves. One wave was 28 feet high and the other was 40 feet high. The storm surges (that is what they call the waves) met in the middle of the city from two different directions. The rest of the city lost roofs and had terrible water damage.

On Wednesday, my dad and I work on trees. My dad and a few others cut down the trees that are leaning on people's houses. Some others and I take the branches and logs and hurl them onto a pile.

Each night when we get back from working we have dinner. The Shop closes at 6:00 p.m. Usually after dinner we carry

in more supplies from tractor trailers that were unloaded outside during the day. The tractor trailers bring food, water, cleaning supplies, and baby clothes. Then we line up to take a shower in the one shower available to everyone (40-70 people, depending on the number of volunteers working that day). After that we are free to do what we want.

The only thing open is Walmart down the street, which is open to volunteer workers after 8:00 p.m. and closed to everybody else. We go there nearly every night to hang out.

Each night we watch the same movie: "Men in Black."

Days Seven and Eight

I get up on Thursday and get some breakfast. We and the people from Virginia, Wisconsin, South Carolina, and Georgia, are leaving today. The groups from Washington, California, Kansas, and Michigan and some more of our group from East Stroudsburg and Kresgeville are staying.

When I am in regular clothes and everybody is packed, we say goodbye and hit the road. After a long day of driving and getting stuck in traffic around Sweetwater, Tennessee, our group finally stops for dinner. Ironically, it is the same place where we had lunch on Day One.

The group then stops at a hotel. We fall asleep watching the movie "The Rundown" with the Rock. Next morning we are up about 7:30 a.m. and drive home with a few stops for food and gas. We get home about 10:00 p.m. on Friday night. I sleep well!

Final Thoughts

When I get back from Mississippi, I realize how lucky we are to have all of the things we do while half the people living in Biloxi have almost nothing except the clothes on their backs. I also notice how everybody in the southern states is so kind to each other, while up here, not everyone gets along with each other. I was glad to see that we could help the people who had nothing. It was overall a great experience.



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By Joyce Egge, St. John Evangelical Lutheran Church, Sayre

St. John Evangelical Lutheran Church, Sayre, Pa., held a lively anniversary party in October for Vera Fenimore.

The party celebrated Vera's 55 years as a Sunday church school teacher at St. John.

Attending the party were Sunday church school children from St. John, past and present, plus Vera's family, members of the congregation Women of the ELCA, and friends.

The party included cake and punch, and the presentation of a plaque. It also included the planting of a lovely young weeping cherry tree on the church grounds to commemorate this remarkable anniversary.

Vera Fenimore has lived in the next door town of Waverly, NY, since 1953. She has been a member of St. John since her marriage to her late husband in 1943.

Vera teaches the youngest members of our congregation, who all love her. The members of St. John look forward to many more Sunday church school classes being taught by Vera Fenimore.



