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By the Rev. Barry Mitchell, Emmanuel, Emanuelsville

There is no way to describe adequately the devastation we saw on the Mississippi Gulf Coast. At the end of August, Hurricane Katrina arrived with sustained winds of 120 miles an hour for five hours straight. Fifty miles of coastline was pummeled with the destructive force of the winds and the surge of the sea. We were told that nearly 200,000 homes were ruined by the storm in Mississippi alone.

Nine weeks after the storm, 18 volunteers from Hope, Cherryville, and Emmanuel, Emanuelsville, arrived in Ocean Springs and reported as volunteers at Christus Victor Lutheran Church. We unloaded boxes of supplies we brought on an 18-foot truck, adding our small cache of stuff to the mountain of supplies that filled the back parking lot of the church.

We joined volunteer crews from Seattle, Minneapolis, and dozens of other places. In our orientation we were told that volunteers have been there from 49 of the 50 states. Some of our volunteers stayed on cots in the church, while others were put up in private homes. A couple named George and Patti welcomed 11 men into their home, where we slept on the floor. We were warmly welcomed as they attempted to help us understand what we would see in the days to come.

Nearly 200 cars arrive each day at CVLC, waiting in line to pick up supplies. In a matter of days, all of the things we



brought were sorted by volunteers and handed out to people in need.

Homeowners repeated the same story over and over again. Their insurance companies offered little or nothing. FEMA supplied small camping trailers to some, and little or nothing to others. They called the church and help was promised.

When we arrived, we were greeted with open arms. In the words of one homeowner, "The insurance company gave us nothing. FEMA parked the trailer and left. You are the first people who have come to help us. Thank God for the Church."

Volunteers from Christus Victor distributed thousands of flyers offering free home cleanout and free supplies to those in need. Thousands have called and volunteers are going out from the church every day to offer real help to people who have nearly lost hope. Once again, the words of another homeowner tell the story: "We lost everything, and we have no money to rebuild, but we are blessed, because we are all alive."

I used to think that some of the value of life was measured by the stuff we have accumulated. One week in Mississippi has changed all that. The people we met were amazing, working alongside us, keeping faith and staying strong, thankful for life itself.

God is alive and well there, in the hands and arms of thousands of volunteers who are the living presence of Jesus, working tirelessly as they give hope to those who feel abandoned and hopeless. I am proud to tell you that every dollar you have sent, every item you have packaged and sent, is being used to help those who have lost everything. "You mean to say that y'all took off from work and came all the way down here from Pennsylvania just to help us?" said one homeowner, "You are a gift right from God. Thank y'all."



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From Ashley Piescienski

Dear Partners,

With the Christmas season upon us, I thought I'd take a moment to comment on the fortunes that we take for granted on a daily basis here in our blessed first world nation.

On September 11, I left this country for Tanzania, spending two-and-one-half weeks abroad with seven members of St. Paul Lutheran Church, Fleetwood. For nine days, I resided in the small village of Bulongwa, 600 miles southwest of where our plane had landed in Dar es Salaam and 7000 feet above sea level.

Throughout my stay, I suffered internal turmoil of moral conscience. I questioned these wonderful people — mentally questioned their happiness and control. I kept thinking, "How can they be happy? They have nothing except for the short end of the stick." For a few days I attributed it to the axiom, "ignorance is bliss." I couldn't have been more wrong.

Our arrival in Bulongwa was highly celebrated. The villagers waited alongside the road, singing to us in the most beautiful tongues I have ever heard. During our stay we feasted on quantities of food that I believe to be the equivalent of months' worth of food for the entire village. Throughout the trip we were supplied with more food than our group could



finish.

The people of Bulongwa are progressive people: happy, surviving with what God has provided them. They make the most of everything from clothing to toys to food.

The leaders of the village have big plans for their little community. The headmaster of the school wants to create an all-girls school to empower women and encourage them to pursue a career because, up to now, women have been considered second-class citizens.

Surprisingly, there is running water and electricity in the village when everything is in working order. When I was in Bulongwa, there was no electricity because their transformer in the village had been struck by lightning. Had this happened in the USA, power would have been restored with in a matter of days. These people waited patiently in the dark for eight months, until they were electrified again. Why did they wait? Because of the cost of repairs.

We are so blessed to have the opportunities we have here. I don't think anyone can appreciate fully what they possess until they experience nothingness. Throughout this season, I encourage everyone to give a holiday donation to inhabitants of a third world nation. It *is* Christmastime, right? It's a great time to glorify God in the spirit of giving.

Jesus loves you, and so do I...

Sincerely,

Ashley Piesciensi

apiesciensi@yahoo.com

[Editor's note: We received the following in an email from Bishop Manyewa following the visit by St. Paul, Fleetwood: "This is to inform you that the Transformer for the Electricity of Bulongwa Luth. Congregation has been fixed. The members of the Congregation, students at Bulongwa Secondary School and Elementary School and the Diocese as a whole are very thankful to St. Paul congregation for the rehabilitation of the Transformer. The Students can read the Books at night and finish their homework's. This week at Bulongwa we have a Seminar on HIV AID Epidemic. The Seminar is running smoothly because there is Electricity. The Engineer from Mbeya has started to change the line of Electricity poles to avoid lightning."]



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By Karen Matthias-Long, Synod Director of Ministry Resources

Last May, Judy Gifford, a member of Union, Neffs, and at the time a secretary at the Wescosville synod office, called several folks together to meet and discuss concerns that seemed to be cast to the wayside by our politicians and even by our church leaders. What evolved over the next several months of conversation was the start of an advocacy group.

Advocacy work is social ministry – but social ministry of a kind that is different from the social ministry in which most congregations are involved.

This familiar story may help to explain this better: A village was located along a river. One day a few villagers saw a baby floating down the river. Someone jumped in the river to save the baby. The village cared for the child and saw to the child's needs. A day or so later, another baby came floating down the river and the villagers saved the child. Soon, more babies were coming down the river.

The villagers began to organize so that they could save as many babies as they could. They set up systems to rescue them and care for them. It was exhausting work that seemed to never end. Finally, several villagers began walking along the river banks, heading in the direction of where the babies were coming from. The other villagers shouted, "You can't leave us! We need you here to help save the babies!" But



the villagers who were leaving shouted back, “We’re just going up the river to find out why these babies are being placed in the water and stop it from happening any more!”

Many of our congregational social ministry efforts, while extremely helpful, address only the issue of the care for the babies coming down the river. A missing step for some congregations is checking out why the babies are coming downstream to begin with.

The group that Judy helped to start addresses this “missing piece” of social ministry. After several meetings, the group named itself the “Micah 6:8 Group.”

Recently, Judy was asked to respond to some questions and share her hopes for the group.

Q: What inspired you to start an advocacy group?

Judy: There were a lot of issues – issues of today, societal and political – causing concern. After speaking with family and friends, I came to realize that many other people were having difficulty with these same concerns: war, peace, poverty, homelessness, education, environment, honesty/integrity in government. It seemed to be a good idea to gather together with others and talk.

Q: Where do you find a biblical mandate to do advocacy?

Judy: There are many places in both Old and New Testaments that speak of the need to “go to bat for,” to advocate for people, places and things. The ministry of Jesus was characterized by a deep concern for the outcast. He ate with sinners and healed the sick. He spoke of bringing good news to the poor and liberty to the captives. In the Old Testament one can find many examples of concern expressed for the vulnerable. The ethical standard is exemplified by the Ten Commandments that were, in effect, a social statement for justice. Perhaps the most succinct statement of all is Micah 6:8, “...and what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?” Indeed, this group has chosen the name Micah 6:8 not only for identification but as its primary guideline.

Q: How does the name Micah 6:8 explain what the group is about?

Judy: There were many influences in forming the group's direction and the choice of a name. We met with Kathleen Daugherty of Lutheran Advocacy Ministry in Harrisburg. The comments of Bishop Margaret Payne, New England Synod, at a NEPS 2005 assembly forum, and the writing of Jim Wallis in a recent book, "God's Politics: Why the Right Gets It Wrong and the Left Doesn't Get It," were influential. We learned in the passage from Micah that we are to love kindness and do justice. However, the two are often reversed – loving justice and doing kindness. Being generous (loving kindness) isn't enough. We need to **do** justice. That is, we need to be willing to speak up for the hungry, the homeless, the dispossessed, the disenfranchised.

Q: Is there room for disagreement in the advocacy group?

Judy: It is not disagreement as such, but room for persons to feel free and secure in sharing their thoughts and concerns even if those ideas differ from those of other group members.

Q: What are the goals of Micah 6:8?

Judy: The goals of the Micah 6:8 group are (1) to be a forum for the exchange of views; (2) to regularly study and discuss current social issues in light of the gospel; (3) to provide support, encouragement, and guidance to others in their thinking, action and follow-through as they respond to the call in Micah 6:8; (4) to develop other advocacy groups – primarily in congregations – on behalf of hurting members of society; (5) to make advocacy materials available to interested people; and, (6) to conduct workshops/courses that would enable others to be involved in meaningful social ministry, and (7) to advocate through letter writing and phone calls and other means. Aside from the study and discussion, a goal of the group is to DO advocacy and support one another as we do this. Writing letters to the newspaper and to our representatives and making phone calls are part of this goal.

If you are interested in participating in the Micah 6:8 group or have questions about it, you may contact Judy at judygiff@earthlink.net.



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By Catherine Arne, Family Life Services

For a program ostensibly about “Women and Friendship,” it was surprising that nary a word was said about friendship until midway through the weekend retreat put on by Diakon’s Family Life Services last February at Mariawald Renewal Center.

The retreat leader, Leslie Vernick, a nationally recognized speaker, author, and counselor, instead focused on a seemingly unrelated topic: self-esteem.

Leslie, whose participation was made possible through a generous grant from Thrivent Financial Services for Lutherans, noted that most women’s self-esteem is based on either performance or popularity, both of which are shifting sands, always subject to the whims of fate and the caprice of others. “It works for those who can perform or please, while they can,” she said, but warned that acceptance on these grounds was conditional and, thus, esteem built upon it, insecure.

She then explored an alternative foundation for self-esteem: a biblically based self-image. Citing scriptures such as Romans 8:31-39, Leslie said, “Authentic love is a gift, not a reward for good behavior. It isn’t conditional; it’s not earned or deserved, so there is nothing you can do to lose it.”

It was only in the last session on Saturday afternoon that



Leslie finally turned to friendship with others. Under her patient tutelage, the group began to understand how the previous sessions were relevant to the topic at hand.

Having self-esteem secure in God's love and independent from what others think of us, Leslie explained, "frees us up to love others well without having to be guarded, manipulative, fearful, or controlling." She wrapped up with some other ingredients necessary for good friendships: acceptance, understanding, commitment, faithfulness, forgiveness, comfort, encouragement, prayer, and speaking the truth in love, all of which are more likely when we are in "right relationship" with ourselves and God.

Even more important than discussion about friendship, however, was the invaluable opportunity to experience it. Some of the 38 participants came with friends they already had and appreciated the chance to spend time together and deepen their relationships.

"I really enjoyed connecting with women from my congregation," said Deborah Graf, who came with five other women from Trinity, Reading. "The retreat provided us with an opportunity to have conversations about faith and life that we normally would never have had!"

Still others made new friends. Sharing rooms and meals served by the nuns and participating in intimate small group discussions brought the women an easy familiarity that could take years to develop in most settings. Several women exchanged numbers and email addresses, vowing to keep in touch after the weekend. Still others took advantage of the peace and solitude at the convent to develop their most important "friendships"-- those with themselves and their God.

Registration is now open for the 2006 retreat, "God's Call to Simplicity." The retreat, again to be held the last weekend in February at the Mariawald Renewal Center in Shillington, will explore how we can escape the rampant busy-ness and consumerism of our culture and make time for what really matters. Multiple presenters will share their personal journeys toward a more simple life and what they've learned as they "walk the walk."

As always, there will also be time for relaxation, recreation, worship and an increased focus on fellowship. Retreat fee of \$120 includes room and all meals, and the registration

deadline is February 3, 2006. For a brochure (including registration form) or more information, call Family Life Services at (610) 682-1337 or (888) 499-2699 (toll free).





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By Charles Henry, St. John Lutheran Church, Farmersville

Just prior to Advent and Christmas 2004, the Growth Committee of St. John, Farmersville, decided to do something to alert members of our community to our worship schedule. We paid particular attention to the new housing communities being built near the church.

One of the tools we selected to use was a package of welcoming materials and worship schedules. We decided to go door to door and greet people, if possible, or leave materials for them to review when they got home.

My faithful walking companion, Bosco the Chocolate Lab, was enlisted as my assistant for this project. His job was to walk along, greet people that we met, and provide companionship during the sometimes cold evening walks.

Along the way, I fielded such questions as, What is his job? Is he being trained to help with evangelism? Did he volunteer for this work? One couple playfully asked me if he attended worship services.

Bosco has not shown any talent for caroling so far, but possibly by next Christmas, he will break into song. That should bring people out on their porches!

All in all, we covered 10 to 12 miles over a few nights and met many nice people. My affectionate 95-pound buddy



proved that he has the personality and temperament to be an effective evangelism aid. He wants it to be known that he liked all the people we met.

He awaits further assignment.

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By the Rev. Martha Sipe, St. John, Fullerton

When Kate Murtaugh heard about the devastation that Hurricane Katrina caused along the Gulf Coast, like so many others, she wanted to do something to help. When her congregation had a brainstorming session before worship the following Sunday for ideas on how they could get involved in the disaster relief efforts, Kate had an idea: She would organize a walkathon.

A junior at Whitehall-Coplay High School and a member of St. John Lutheran Church, Fullerton (Whitehall), Kate got to work on the details of her plan right away. She began by writing a letter to the superintendent of the school district, asking him for a meeting to discuss her ideas and propose the use of the school track.

After meeting with the superintendent, the principal, the vice principal, and the director of operations, Kate addressed the entire school board at their meeting. The board was so impressed with her idea that they offered the use of the track without charge.

Kate handled all the other details of the event, too, including developing and distributing the sponsor sheets, soliciting donations from two local grocery stores for snacks, and enlisting the help of her mom and sisters in making baked goods for the event.



Finally, on a sunny Saturday morning in early November, two dozen members and friends from St. John's gathered at the Whitehall-Coplay track. For three hours they walked and cheered one another on (and listened to the marching band as they practiced), all to raise money for Katrina relief. For Kate, the most memorable part of the entire event came when she figured out the total miles walked – 83_! “I was shocked that we did such a great job!” she said. The event raised over \$1,200.00.

Kate is modest about her efforts. “I think it's very important that we recognize that the church collected tons of other donations through other benefits – like the bake sale and yard sale, for example. This was a whole-congregation effort, and I think we did a fantastic job representing what a big difference a caring, close-knit church can make.”

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By Lori Brawn, Director of Learning Ministries and Mission Response
Chairperson

At Ziegels Union Church, Breinigsville, a number of creative activities helped the congregational members address the disaster that took place along the Gulf Coast this fall.

The Sunday following Hurricane Katrina was designated "Bring Your Wallet Sunday." An offering was taken to benefit the victims of the disaster and the union church collected over \$6,000.00. These offerings were sent to Lutheran Disaster Response and the UCC Disaster Relief fund.

On October 9, the Learning Ministries Committee sponsored "Pajama Sunday." Children and youth were asked to bring a new pair of children's pajamas or a new or "gently used" storybook for the children affected by Hurricane Katrina.

Teachers and helpers in the Sunday school also participated in the event and our lay reader for that morning read the scriptures wearing her pajamas, big fuzzy slippers, and a bathrobe.

The students were excited about helping the children who had lost so much. At the final count, we sent 75 pairs of pajamas and 115 storybooks to Pajama Project in New York, who sent them on to the Astrodome for distribution.

A Hurricane Katrina Benefit Breakfast was held on October 30. This event was sponsored by the Fatzinger family and



\$1,300.00 was given to the congregation's Mission Response Team to purchase tents, blankets and other necessities for their disaster relief trip to Biloxi, Mississippi, in November.

The Learning Ministries Committee also sponsored "Pennies for Pets." Students in the Sunday school were asked to save their loose change during the month of October. On November 6, \$100.03 was sent to the Veterinary Medical Foundation in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, where volunteers and staff have been providing for the needs of animals left homeless by the Katrina.

The congregation sent more than cash, pajamas, and books to the Gulf Coast. On November 5, the Ziegels Union Church Mission Response Team left for Biloxi, Mississippi, to work with Bethel Lutheran Church through November 12. Earlier in 2005, members of the Lutheran congregation had relocated to Biloxi and have been attending Bethel since their arrival.

Bethel is providing an important ministry in their community, devastated by Hurricane Katrina. They supply meals for 25-30 volunteers each day, see as many as 25 families per day in their medical facility, and provide food and blankets and other necessities as donations are received.

The Mission Response Team was formed in 1999, when they provided disaster relief assistance to the Del Rio, Texas, area. Earlier in 2005, the team traveled to Port Charlotte, Florida, to assist in hurricane cleanup. They sponsor yearly work trips to places such as David, Kentucky, and Camden, New York. In addition, the team volunteers at the Allentown Rescue Mission and provided help to people in their own community during the flooding of the last two years.