

Description of AFSC Joint Service Project
in Terrebonne Parish, LA in Early January
January 12, 2006

From January 3 to January 18, 8-20 F/friends worked together on disaster relief projects in a rural area, 70 miles southwest of New Orleans, near Houma to help several families who suffered from Hurricanes Katrina and Rita. Sponsored by the American Friends' Service Committee-InterMountain Yearly Meeting Joint Service Project [AFSC-IMYM JSP], volunteers worked with members of the Isle a Jean Charles and Dulac bands of the Biloxi-Chitimacha [Choctaw], located in the bayous about two hours south of New Orleans. This project, co-led by Mike Gray, Tom Kowal, and Amy Wagner, worked with a new community for the JSP, and provided much opportunity for practicing patience, team building, and worship sharing.

The project expenses for travel, food and building materials were made possible in large part by grants from the AFSC, supplemented by IMYM Monthly Meetings and contributions from F/friends. The initial request for volunteers went out by email and about fifty people responded. Of those, about 21 or so were able to make the trip for all or part of the two weeks the project operated in Louisiana.

As is typical of AFSC projects, we took our lead from the native community, doing the work that was requested. This included demolishing a house and constructing a new building from the ground up in Dulac, patching roofs on some area homes, priming and painting a kitchen ceiling, knocking down moldy dry wall for a single mother with two children, distributing food and paint, and constructing kitchen cabinets. JSP crews also sorted donated clothing and supplies, including unloading a semi truck load with gallon cans of paint and primer, labeling and restacking. Electrical repairs were made on a couple of homes, and general clean-up and salvage work went on at several job sites. The project tried to reuse materials but also helped families to purchase new materials when required so that the work could be completed.

Participants came from California, Oregon, New Mexico, Arizona, Colorado, New Mexico, Texas, Minnesota, Illinois, Virginia, Pennsylvania, and New York. Those who managed to arrange the other responsibilities in their lives to work together on this project were graciously hosted by Kim and Vanessa Voisin (co-pastors) and the Bourg Foursquare Church community in Terrebonne Parish, Louisiana.

The Foursquare Church provided prayers for our work, several delicious home-cooked Cajun meals (including working up 44 pounds of fresh shrimp and crab one evening), floor space for sleeping, hot showers, laundry service (!), and a bond of loving, common cause. They opened their food pantry to our group and those we served. We were impressed by the warm hospitality of these fine people, who invited us to attend all of their Foursquare services and made us feel so welcomed and appreciated. We were also able to attend worship with the New Orleans Friends, who clearly appreciated our support as much as we appreciated their fellowship.

An especially emotional afternoon was spent visiting the Ninth Ward, with a member of New Orleans Friends Meeting, Dorian Hastings, guiding us. The extent of the devastation stunned us all. Seeing the television reports and photographs did not prepare us for what we found: mile after mile of homes in rubble, people's possessions torn apart and thrown to the four winds, whole houses moved entire blocks away from their foundations, boats in the middle of roads, cars upended and the silence of steps leading to no homes and foundations swept clean by the water and winds.

Nearby where there were houses still standing, high water mark lines were visible from the streets--indicating that everything under that water line was ruined. Most homes are mere shells, awaiting demolition or complete tear out and repair jobs for those lucky enough to have the resources to rebuild. Where there are homes still standing, there are block after block of empty, silent homes just sitting there.

In whole sections of the city, it is extremely rare to see anyone, adults or children. There are no schools, and no hospital in operation. Dorian Hastings told us that 80% of the people have not returned to New Orleans, perhaps because 150,000 homes are either demolished or uninhabitable in their present state. We felt as if we were visiting a burial site, and in many ways, that is the honest truth. We felt overwhelmed and silenced by the whole experience.

The Internet offers information about the Houma Tribe and Native American bands in Terrebone Parish, the impact of the hurricanes on the Indian communities, their struggles to establish and maintain tribal land and identities. This tribal website is Biloxi-Chitimacha.com. The ongoing ecological and bureaucratic challenges faced by all residents of the coastal

and bayou areas will be chronicled as LA and other communities struggle rebuild.

Another JSP group under the direction of Tom Kowal will be returning to the Houma area in March. Both skilled and unskilled volunteers are invited to email tomandannette@comcast.net if interested.

For more information on the AFSC Joint Service project, please email Mike Gray at mgray@afsc.org. 520 907 6321 (cell)

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