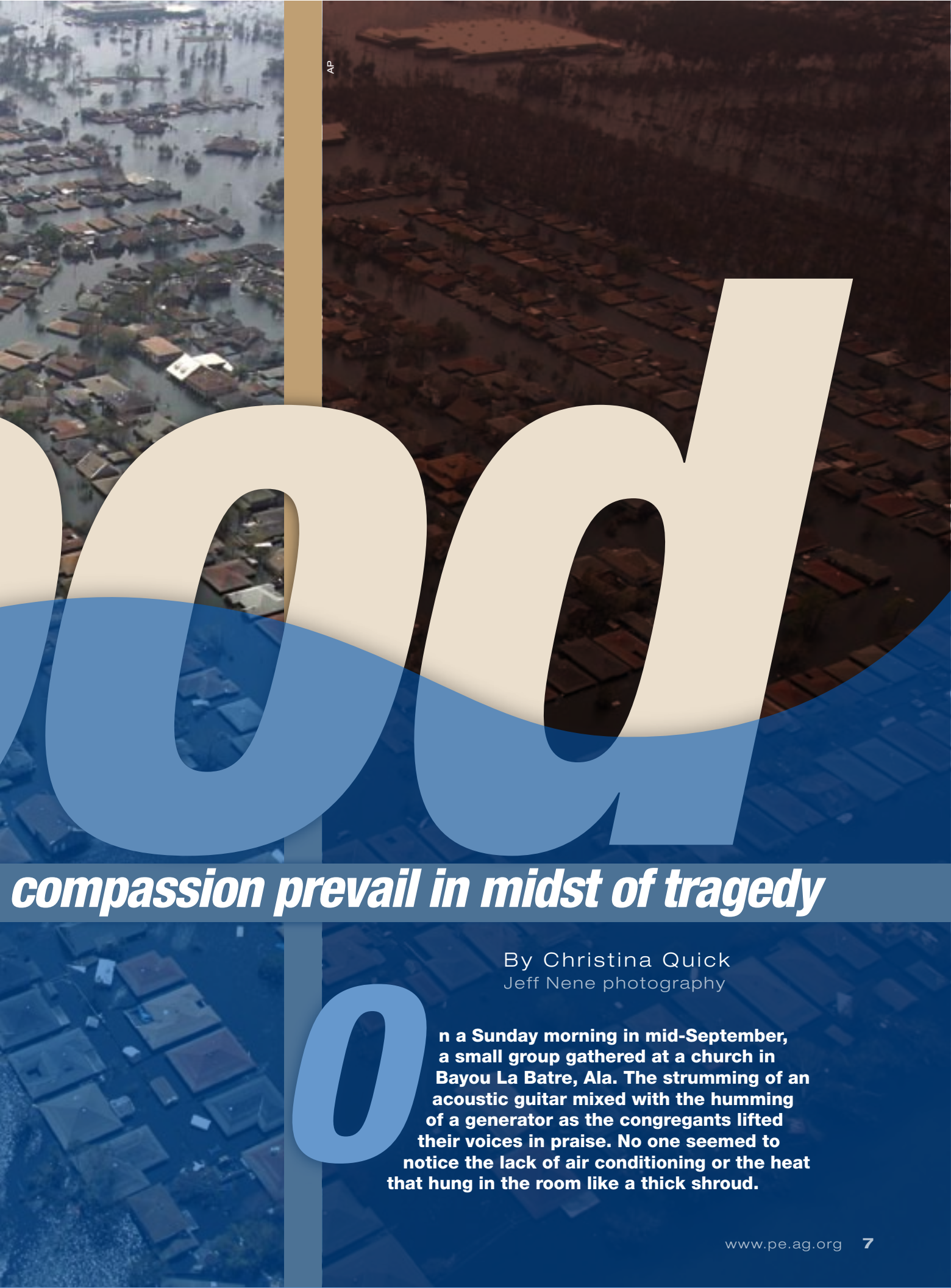




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compassion prevail in midst of tragedy

By Christina Quick
Jeff Nene photography

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On a Sunday morning in mid-September, a small group gathered at a church in Bayou La Batre, Ala. The strumming of an acoustic guitar mixed with the humming of a generator as the congregants lifted their voices in praise. No one seemed to notice the lack of air conditioning or the heat that hung in the room like a thick shroud.



Through the flood



Editor in Chief Hal Donaldson (right) visits with medical professionals from James River AG of Ozark, Mo., at the medical clinic in Slidell, La.

It didn't matter that the walls, which were little more than bare sheets of plywood, were stacked to the ceiling with boxes of bottled water, food and hygiene supplies. It was enough that families were together again, worshipping God in a sanctuary that had been flooded only two weeks before.

The aptly named Anchor Assembly of God has been a mooring of faith and compassion in a community rocked by devastation. The church plant was just four months old when Hurricane Katrina made landfall on August 29, flooding the town and strewing shrimp boats in the streets like children's toys.

The ceiling and baptistry were the only things that weren't ruined in the small, uninsured church. Most of the homes and businesses in the area were also destroyed, putting strain on an already depressed local economy.

With help and support from Assemblies of God volunteers, Pastor Dan Brown steeled his resolve and went to work. When he wasn't handing out supplies or praying with families in the ethnically diverse community, he was removing water-soaked carpet from the church sanctuary.

"I've felt kind of like Nehemiah," Brown says. "We're rebuilding the church with one hand and reaching out to the community with the other."

The disaster has created opportunities for Brown to minister to people he might not have reached before the hurricane, including a Buddhist priest who came to the church in need of drinking water.

"People are talking about the fact

that Christians care about them," says Brown. "God is using this tragic situation to accomplish good."

Like so many other pastors from the Gulf Coast, Brown remains optimistic in the face of loss. He is confident that God will somehow turn this great tragedy into an even greater triumph.

Miracle Assembly of God Pastor Max Latham of Buras, La., doesn't know when he will be able to hold another service in his church — or even return to his hometown.

The entire community, located 65 miles southeast of New Orleans, was submerged in 12 to 15 feet of water when the hurricane hit. In a matter of hours, homes, schools and jobs were lost. The church and parsonage, both of which are uninsured, were swallowed up in the floodwater.

The families in Latham's congregation are scattered in various shelters and homes throughout the South. Some may never return. Yet the long-time church leader's voice rises with expectation as he speaks of the future.

"I'm just believing that the Lord is going to have His way," Latham says. "Even though this looks like a great tragedy, God was aware of it before it happened and He's going to turn it around."

This isn't the first time the small church has been devastated by a hurricane. It had to be rebuilt after Hurricane Betsy in 1964, only to be wiped out again by Hurricane Camille in 1969. For years, Christians in the community have gathered on June 1, the official start of hurricane season, to

pray for protection from the storms.

Latham, who has lived in Buras for 50 years, recalls several times when hurricanes veered off course at the last minute and spared the vulnerable community. He is convinced that prayer made the difference.

"This time, in spite of our prayers, the Lord saw fit to allow the hurricane to come," Latham says. "So I'm confident that He has a plan."

At least 88 Assemblies of God churches in Mississippi, Louisiana and Alabama were affected by the high winds and rising floodwaters brought on by the Category 4 hurricane. (For an overview of the church locations, see the graphic on page 27.)

Many churches and parsonages will have to be rebuilt completely, often without the benefit of insurance settlements. In some areas, flood insurance was unavailable. In others, it was too costly or seemed unnecessary.

"With 17-foot levees we thought we'd never see water in there," Latham says. "But Katrina topped the levees completely."

House of Prayer Pastor Jon Smith is determined to rebuild his flooded church, even though there will be no insurance check. Located on Canal Street near downtown New Orleans, the Assemblies of God church ministers to low-income, inner-city families.

"We still feel the same burden that we left with," Smith says. "We are going back unless God tells us specifically not to. He hasn't released us from what He called us to do."

Smith held an evangelistic service at



A SHELTER IN THE STORM

Churches minister to Katrina's homeless

With hundreds of thousands of people displaced from their homes since Katrina, a number of Assemblies of God churches across the country have participated in the effort to house and minister to those without permanent shelter.

Pastor Don Hutchings of Evangel Temple (AG) in Fort Smith, Ark., received a telephone call in early September from Arkansas Governor Mike Huckabee, who asked if the church would be willing to take in 250 Gulf Coast evacuees.

The church gladly accepted the challenge, giving up its gymnasium, fellowship hall and Sunday School classrooms to provide temporary living space for the evacuees. Congregants and others in the community donated cots, bedding, toiletries, food and other supplies.

"Our people have been blessed just as much as we've blessed other people," says Carol Hutchings, the pastor's wife.

The church helped a hurricane victim get the dialysis he needs, assisted individuals in locating lost family members, handed out department store gift cards, and purchased plane and bus tickets for people needing to get to other parts of the country.

Evangel Temple also gave cars to some of the 65 families who have opted to remain in Fort Smith.

The church has provided furniture and household supplies and helped people find jobs and apartments.

"We're just helping them get on their feet again, whether here or in another place," Carol Hutchings says. "It's been an amazing thing."

She says a number of the evacuees accepted

Christ during their stay at Evangel Temple.

Similar stories have been repeated in shelters across the nation. Facilities as far away as the Los Angeles Dream Center provided temporary housing for evacuees from Louisiana and Mississippi.

In Houston, a number of Assemblies of God churches assisted with housing efforts at the Astrodome, Reliant Center and George R. Brown Convention Center.

Several Assemblies of God campgrounds became temporary housing centers, including those in the Louisiana, Mississippi and North Texas districts. In addition to other evacuees, the Mississippi campground took in several students from a women's Teen Challenge center in Pascagoula.

New Life Assembly of God in Marksville, La., adopted the residents of a shelter located at a nearby casino. The church installed showers and laundry facilities for evacuees to come and use. The congregation also opened a store in which people could shop for food, hygiene supplies and household items at no cost.

New Life Pastor Doug Bergeron says the church's efforts made a life-changing impact on many of the evacuees. One young man came to the church with his mother to do laundry and ended up receiving Christ while he was there, the pastor says.

"We've had some unbelievable doors to walk through," Bergeron says. "One man said, 'I've never been treated this good in my life. You don't even know us, but you have loved us.'"

"That's how they've seen Jesus — it's the love we've shared, one person at a time."



The gym at Evangel Temple Assembly of God in Fort Smith, Ark., housed Hurricane Katrina evacuees. Classrooms on the church's second floor were converted into living quarters for families.

his church three days before the storm hit. Thirty local residents attended, and 11 of them accepted Christ. Smith marvels at how God was working in the lives of individuals in the hours before disaster struck.

"Even then God was giving grace," Smith says. "He was still drawing people to Him. Some of the people who came to the altar that night probably didn't make it out of the city before the hurricane hit."

Smith, his family and several congregants evacuated to the Louisiana District AG campground, which was set up as a shelter for hurricane victims. Like thousands of other New Orleans residents, Smith lost his home, income and possessions. Still, the pastor says he looks forward to returning to the battered city.

"So many things have been displaced and shaken in New Orleans," he says. "We believe the grace of God is going to rest on that city. We're expecting great things."

Even the most optimistic church leaders understand that recovery won't happen overnight. It will likely take months for some sites to be made ready for rebuilding. With church members unemployed and displaced, it may be a year or more before some pastors will receive a regular paycheck from their churches.

The Mississippi and Louisiana districts have established funds to help pay pastors' salaries, but it may not be enough to cover all the long-term needs.

"As people come home they may be able to go to the church and become



Through the flood

General Treasurer James Bridges, Pastor John Lindell (James River AG, Ozark, Mo.) and General Superintendent Thomas Trask pray for pastor Dan Brown (left) and congregation.

involved, but I don't know how much income is going to be there," says Louisiana District Superintendent Douglas Fulenwider.

In addition to senior pastors, many other church staff members, such as associate pastors and secretaries, may go unpaid.

Nonetheless, Mississippi District Superintendent Walter L. Davis says he has been encouraged by the massive outpouring of compassion and support he has witnessed.

"I've been overwhelmed at the response we've received from our friends and brothers and sisters from all parts of the country," Davis says. "People are here working and ministering to meet needs. It has been amazing."

Convoy of Hope distributed 16 million pounds of food, water, ice and other supplies along the Gulf Coast in the first three weeks following the disaster.

In addition, thousands of AG congregations and individual adherents across the country have participated in the collective relief effort by donating money and supplies, offering prayer support, sending volunteers, and housing evacuees.

An AG church in Orange Beach, Ala., that was damaged in 2004 by Hurricane Ivan dipped into its building fund to give nearly half a million dollars to the Katrina relief effort. Christian Life Church Pastor Rick Long says his church plans to contribute at least \$1 million over the next 12 months to help clean and rebuild the small community of Waveland, Miss.

"People came from places like Waveland to help us last year," Long says. "We're trying to do what we feel the Lord's told us to do there."

The money was slated to cover a \$6 million church addition, including a new worship center. But the pastor says his congregation has been supportive of sending the funds to Waveland instead.

"If you're not going to be the church and do what you're supposed to do at times like this, then building one is just a lie," Long says.

Churches and Christian organizations in the heart of storm-ravaged areas are also helping others. The School of Urban Missions in New Orleans, jointly owned by the Assemblies of God and the Church of God in Christ, was not damaged by the hurricane and has served as a staging area for Convoy of Hope. In addition, the campus has been a mobilization center for Jefferson Parish and the City of Gretna.

Police officers and city officials have taken up residence in the dormitories and held meetings on campus. The workers have been fed by MAPS RV teams and attended church services organized by school officials and volunteers. Students and faculty members have helped with such things as food and water distribution and street cleanup.

George Neau, the school's chancellor and founder, says there have been countless opportunities to share Christ with hurricane victims who are seeking help.

"There has been a dark cloud over New Orleans for years," Neau says.

"For a season it seems like that has broken and we have a window of receptivity. All the things people have trusted in — the government, the levee system, their jobs — have collapsed all around them, and they're searching for answers. It's powerful to be in there sharing the gospel of Christ."

Assemblies of God General Superintendent Thomas Trask, who toured the Gulf Coast in September along with General Treasurer James Bridges, says the church is functioning just as it should.

"Down through history the church has always been the agency to be able to demonstrate the compassion of Christ," Trask says. "The Assemblies of God, through its body of believers, has again responded overwhelmingly with a desire to become His hands extended to those who have suffered as a result of the Katrina tragedy."

Bridges, who likens the area to a war zone, says he is grateful for the way people have responded.

"Pastors are connecting with pastors, and churches are connecting with churches to begin the process of healing and restoration," he says. "Thank God for such an outpouring of compassion and volunteerism to get the job done."

Though the task is far from over, faith and compassion will continue to lead the way as believers join hands to pass through the flood. ■

Christina Quick is staff writer for Today's Pentecostal Evangel. E-mail your comments to pe@ag.org.