

New Orleans Journal – January 2006

Monday January 2,06

Home Depot in Metairie is the only Home Depot on the west side of the city of New Orleans within 15 miles of New Orleans. I would say that it most resembles my idea of an armed camp. It has a large fenced in area that serves as a staging area and an “official” inventory space. Between 7 a.m. and 4 p.m., finding a parking space is only exceeded in difficulty by finding a shopping cart. An example of the situation is buying drywall. From Metairie east to New Orleans virtually every home, church and business has had extensive water damage, which has meant tearing out moldy, weakened drywall and replacing it. Trucks from suppliers of drywall arrive literally every night at Home Depot. At 5 a.m. they are driven into the fenced area and become Home Depot inventory. A line forms almost immediately, first come, first served. The supply of drywall is normally exhausted by 9 a.m. If you don’t get your drywall, you can be put on a list to pick it up at 7 a.m. the next morning. One Good Shepherd parishioner talked about having almost been arrested when after waiting 35 minutes he was told he was in the wrong line and the “right line” when he found it went out the door and halfway around the store. When we left the store having spent an hour and \$600 and not finding a number of items on empty shelves, a very polite security guard checked our order and, seeing our decontamination suits wished us very good luck.

The Rev. Bill Ault, First Church of Templeton

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Tuesday AM: another day with glorious weather. After filling up on breakfast, creating our lunches, and gathering for prayer, song, and inspiration, most of the It sounds so depressing. And not just for this family, but there are thousands and thousands of homes, and lives, and families that have been devastated, that have lost everything, down to the bare walls or even the bare ground. But amidst all of this indescribable loss, the people here are infused with a remarkable spirit and determination. These are their homes. They will do whatever it takes to come back to this place. They are frustrated by the lack of government assistance, the slow response and the limited funding for reconstruction. They say that it will take at least five years to recover. Almost everyone we have talked to has lost his or her job. Businesses cannot find workers because no one is actually living in their homes. So our small band of missionaries has come to do what little we can to help out. And wherever we have been in the last three days, people have heartily thanked us for coming. From the moment we arrived - at the rental car counter, in the host church, at the supermarket, on the work sites – everywhere we meet people, they sincerely and repeatedly thank us for being here. They do not know who we are, or where we are from, or exactly what we are doing, but just that we have come to help. And so we are blessed to learn from them the enormous power of faith and hope and love.

Professor Holly Ault of WPI (also First Church of Templeton)

Wednesday

The work for the day for most of the crew was being “first in” to Beecher Memorial United Church of Christ Congregational in New Orleans. 15 of the Massachusetts crew, two from Ohio, and part of 24 folks from North Carolina spent the day doing the initial emptying of the church. The church was flooded to 6 feet. It sits in a neighborhood that, almost 5 months after Hurricane Katrina, still has no power and thus, no residents. It is a ghost town of at least one hundred blocks characterized by derelict cars, houses that range from relatively well kept to almost fully collapsed with the majority looking to be ready for bulldozing, and trash and debris of every description everywhere.

The Beecher Church building was built in 1965 after a previous building was lost in a hurricane. It is one of two historically African-American UCC churches in New Orleans and is a partner church, informally, with Good Shepherd Church in Metairie.

We spent the day emptying the church. This involved removing every item in the church offices, kitchen, hall, and sanctuary. Amid copy machines, drums and electronic equipment, hymnals, Bibles, commemorative plaques, we also removed all of the pews, the tiles on the floors, the sanctuary rug, and all of the walls up to 6-8 feet high. The rubble pile was roughly 40 feet long, forty feet deep and 5 feet high, roughly enough to fill 5 trailer trucks. The things salvaged took up a small closet.

The cost and effort required to restore the church, even nominally, is staggering. Good Shepherd Church’s sanctuary building sustained similar damage to the Beecher Church and the cost of removing the mold spores from the church, once the moldy drywall and contents were removed, was \$137,000 by itself.

The pulpit Bible, totally ruined, was turned to Psalm 33. Verses 20&21 of that Psalm read: Our soul waits for the LORD; he is our help and shield. Our heart is glad in him, because we trust in his holy name.

The Rev. Bill Ault

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On Thursday we were taken on a tour of New Orleans that has left me with a haunting and disturbing memory of the city. We drove through many parts of the city and saw countless homes that had been utterly destroyed by the hurricane. There are no words to describe what we saw when we came over a bridge and entered into the lower 9th ward. To the left and to the right were piles of rubble and debris that used to be neighborhoods full of life and vitality. It looked as if a bomb had dropped and what we were seeing was a war zone and not a community that people used to call home. As we drove through the area there were little signs of life other than the workers who were picking up the debris and the few people who had returned and were living in FEMA trailers set up in parking lots. It is four months after the storm and much of New Orleans is still without power and most of the people have yet to return to their homes. I pray that these people will be able to reclaim at least a piece of lives as they were. May God be there for them and may they hear and see the hope that can come when we lean on God in times of trial and pain. I can see God all over the place in the many hands that are here working and striving to bring New Orleans back to life, but my time down here has

shown me that we need more. We need more of God's hands, more of God's love and more of God's people working to restore life and vitality to this amazing city.

Josh Gray (Andover Newton Seminary student from Natick)

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The nation's media often fails to accurately show the human side of the news, perhaps never more so than with the terrible devastation of this hurricane called Katrina. One the other hand, perhaps words cannot describe the pain, suffering and despair of this city. Today, I got to see it. Today I got to feel it. Today I got to smell it. The piles of debris that contained the valuables, the possessions and the antiques of the people . . . piled along the curbs and yards ready to be hauled away and used as landfill in some distant swamp. Blocks and blocks of homes destroyed representing the hopes, fears and dreams of so many people. How sad. May God bless them in their search for hope and salvation.

Al from Ohio

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On Friday a group got up early to go to Waverly, Mississippi. Carol (Waverly is her home town) and her sister-in-law, Janelle, led 2 vehicles to an Elementary School. Along the way we saw devastation by Katrina, which included high water marks on roadway bridges and complete destruction of homes (from wind and water).

The school was just recently opened in portable classrooms. We went for the celebration of Three King's Day and supplied traditional Mardi Gras beads and small teddy bears for the children. We participated in a nursery rhyme recipe performance. I got to participate in the rhyme Hickory Dickory Dock by holding up the clock.

Despite the tragedy, everyone seemed to be upbeat.
by Russ Stanley

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Through the first three days of our trip I had talked with several New Orleans residents and it seemed like we kept coming back to fear and hope. When we were listening to Carolyn (Mains) talk on Monday morning she seemed to keep mentioning fear and hope. When the storm hit she was afraid of what was going to happen. She was afraid for her husband who has some physical limitations. She was afraid for her home and she was afraid for her church, Good Shepherd. She and her husband are now working on rebuilding their home that was damaged by mold caused by the standing water. Despite all that has happened to her she is here at Good Shepherd helping to coordinate the recovery efforts of others. In her woundedness she has been able to reach out and help begin the healing process for others. She has hope for a better today and a better tomorrow!

Josh Gray