

ONE YEAR LATER

Disaster Recovery in Peace River Presbytery

Working in disaster relief and recovery can sometimes be a frustrating and exhausting experience. One of the events that uplift Ann and my spirit and one that we look forward to each day is our arrival at home and the greeting we receive from our furry family. First is Theresa, our Heinz Fifty-Seven little dog, who always greets us with a bouncing three-legged dance which seems to indicate that our return home is the most important event in her whole life. Then Norman, our mostly black cat, vies for attention with his loud, squeaky voice from atop the back of the sofa by the door, being careful to stay clear of Theresa's extremely active antics. Not to be forgotten, but always from the safety of the deeper background, our calico cat Rachel waits a bit more patiently, even somewhat aloof, for her opportunity to present her less enthusiastic greeting and receive some sign of affection in return. In that moment all is suddenly right with the world and much of the confusion and tiredness can be put aside for another time.



These frequent and exuberant moments remind me of the too infrequent, but no less joyful times when a home owner experiences the restoration of their property, home, and, to some extent, their life following the devastation from the hurricanes of 2004 and subsequent storms. For some it is merely putting things back in some semblance of order. For others it means being able to move from the truly uncomfortable environment of a small trailer, mobile home, or other living space, back into their home of homes. Although never quite the same as before the storms, being able to return to some kind of normalcy provides the opportunity for a celebration of the spirit, if not a more outward sign of jubilation, as with our furry family.

Some cases in point: the family who celebrated the installation of new shingles on their roof by praying with the work team in their front yard and the children drawing and coloring pictures to share with those who provided the means to have the new roof installed; the elderly man in Arcadia whose house was condemned and then rebuilt in a cooperative effort between the city and the Desoto Disaster Recovery agency. The keys

to the new home were handed over at a special celebration with the mayor, many city officials, family, friends, workers, and staff present; the man who only ventured from his leaking, rain soaked house to visit his dementia affected wife in a nursing home daily to feed her lunch, who was finally able to move beyond those walls to shake the hands of the work team from Pennsylvania as they boarded the bus for their return trip. Through tear moistened eyes he was able to mumble, "I'm going to miss you"; the couple, formerly from Canada, ripped off by several unscrupulous construction people, so afraid their newly shingled, but badly sagging garage roof would collapse that they blamed the wife's two recent strokes on that worry, shaking hands, smiling, and exhibiting genuine thankfulness for the work team from North Carolina for straightening and bracing that roof, replacing damaged sheetrock on the ceiling, and repairing a leaky lanai roof.



We in the various disaster recovery programs in southwest Florida have been blessed by the multitude of volunteers who have come from far and near to help rebuild in the recovery effort. More than 1200 people representing seven different church affiliations have worked directly through the Peace River Presbytery Hurricane Task Force to affect repairs on more than 100 homes and properties. Combining this with the effort of our sister agencies and collaborating partners, thousands of volunteers have donated hundreds of thousands of hours, and restored and rebuilt several hundred homes and properties in Charlotte, Desoto, Lee, and Sarasota Counties. The Desoto Disaster Recovery agency, the Rev. Ann Graham-Johnson Executive Director, the Interfaith Interagency Network of Charlotte County (IINCC), Dennis Celorie Executive Director, the Lee County Department of Human Services, Patricia Howell Director, FEMA, the Red Cross, Project Hope, the Council On Aging, and others are all working very closely to see that the rebuilding is moving forward efficiently and effectively and that no one slips through the cracks; that all have some means for having their needs met.

A major source of funding and other resources for these projects has been the Presbyterian Disaster Assistance office in Louisville, KY, which receives it's funding

from the One Great Hour of Sharing offering and from designated giving to this specific mission of the Presbyterian Church (USA). There are still funds available for this recovery which is predicted to take another three to five years. Whether this effort can be sustained for that length of time will be determined by the perseverance of the recovery leadership and workers, the availability of volunteers, and whether those who are able will continue to support this work with their contributions.

The availability of volunteers is currently our biggest challenge. Until mid August we were blessed with more than enough volunteers. However, now one year after August 13, 2004, we find ourselves without any registered volunteers through the end of this calendar year. What do we do?



One couple, who received funds for all the material they needed to rebuild their home, is now at a standstill at the point of installing the sheetrock and finishing the interior of the house. Seven roofs were dried-in in Desoto County on Saturday the 20th of August. One was completely shingled, but six remain to be completed. An elderly woman needs a new door to help her feel safe and secure. Another woman need the remaining sheet rock installed and the interior finished. She says she has waited so long to move out of the tiny trailer behind her house and back into her home. An elderly couple needs corrugated aluminum siding located and installed on the shed that protects the tools that are important to them. A ceiling needs “popcorn” finish to be complete. A bathroom floor needs particle board installed. A home needs a new roof, gutted, and all new sheetrock installed and finished. Another home needs to be demolished and rebuilt with a new technology construction. And the list goes on and is overwhelming at times.

Except we now have a history. We have a year of successful rebuilding and know we are capable of more, much more. Where will the next group of volunteers come from? Are there individuals and groups out there willing to fill the gap between now and the time when volunteers from up north will come down again for winter work? You, your congregation, your social group, work group, or community organization has the

opportunity to fill in the gap, make your presence felt in meaningful ways, make a difference in the lives of people throughout our area. Listen for the call and respond.

Peace,

Larry Graham-Johnson
Rebuilding Coordinator
Peace River Presbytery

