

# The Times-Picayune

## **Katrina aid delay blasted by clergy group**

**'What's wrong with today or tomorrow? It's too late in June'**

Saturday, March 18, 2006

By Keith Darcé, Staff writer

With angry tones in their voices, clergy from more than 100 cities called on Washington lawmakers to end their squabbling over \$4.2 billion in federal money earmarked to rebuild hurricane-damaged housing in Louisiana, and to direct more money to evacuated residents trying to return to the New Orleans area.

"We stand here in solidarity in New Orleans to say that something has to be done to change things," said Monsignor Robert McDermott of St. Joseph's Cathedral in Camden, N.J.

McDermott decried recent reports that U.S. Senate leaders might hold up consideration of the housing assistance until June. "What's wrong with today or tomorrow? It's too late in June. It has to happen now," he said.

The clergy, representing 30 church denominations, gathered on the steps of Mount Moriah Baptist Church in the 9th Ward following a three-hour bus tour of flooded neighborhoods in the city. They were in New Orleans for a summit organized by People Improving Communities through Organizing, or PICO, a national network of interfaith organizations that work to improve living conditions in poor neighborhoods. Most are relatively unknown in New Orleans.

Wrecked houses line the street around Mount Moriah, and the surrounding neighborhood that used to be home to the church's 500 members remains largely abandoned. The Louisa Street church suffered about \$500,000 in damage and remains closed, said the pastor, the Rev. Donald Robinson.

The clergy members said Congress has moved too slowly to put money into the hands of evacuees for repairing their homes and reviving their communities.

"Not a penny of federal aid has reached families to help them rebuild," said the Rev. Heyward Wiggins III, pastor of Camden (N.J.) Bible Tabernacle.

Others said the personal needs of hurricane victims are getting lost in the deal-making that guides much of what happens in Washington. "What is happening in New Orleans is not about morality or spirituality," said the Rev. Timothy McDonald of Atlanta's First Iconium Baptist Church. "It's about politics."

The religious leaders promised to use their congregations to launch grass-roots lobbying efforts supporting more federal aid for housing reconstruction in New Orleans. The campaigns will target key lawmakers who hold sway over congressional purse strings, such as Sen. Kit Bond, R-Mo., who is a member of the Appropriations Committee and chairs the Subcommittee on Transportation, Treasury and Housing and Urban Development. Bond is among the 59 senators who have yet to visit New Orleans since the hurricane.

The Rev. Rayfield Burns of Kansas City, Mo., said he will lead an effort in his home state to persuade Bond to travel to New Orleans and to support the proposed housing reconstruction appropriation. "We need to get Sen. Bond on our side," he said.

Messages left at Bond's Washington office were not returned Friday afternoon.

The group wraps up its visit today when it joins members of All Congregations Together New Orleans for a 10:30 a.m. meeting with local and state officials at Our Lady of Guadalupe Catholic Church, 411 North Rampart St.

Keith Darcé can be reached at [kdarce@timespicayune.com](mailto:kdarce@timespicayune.com) or (504) 826-3491.