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Posted on Mon, Oct. 31, 2005

## New Orleans churches try to reassemble their flocks

By Brian Brueggemann  
Knight Ridder Newspapers

NEW ORLEANS - The Rev. John Finn typically sees almost 600 people in the pews during Mass at St. James Major Catholic Church on Gentilly Boulevard.

On Sunday, he felt blessed to see 41.

The church still had no electricity, which meant no organ music. Its only light came from candles at the altar and sunbeams through stained-glass windows. Outside, the church bears a spray-painted symbol that shows that rescuers checked it for bodies.

Finn expected only a handful of people to be around on Sunday, maybe a few checking their homes, but he decided to hold Mass anyway - the first at St. James since Hurricane Katrina hit.

"The reason we're open here is to give the people hope for the future," he said.

Ministers in and around New Orleans are taking leading roles in tracking the nearly 500,000 residents who scattered across the country after fleeing the hurricane. The churches also are trying to help those people return and help decide how the city will be rebuilt.

Churches have set up Web sites where members can register and get information. They're putting notices in church bulletins in places where many of the evacuees landed, such as Texas. And church leaders are holding community meetings and getting the attention of the political leaders who will make decisions on rebuilding.

But the ministers' first goal is reassembling their flocks.

"I got calls from Ohio and everywhere: 'Have you seen so-and-so or so-and-so?'" Finn said. "I really hadn't a clue."

Finn said he knows the whereabouts of a few of his church members and that one elderly woman died in her home. Some at the Sunday service were members of neighboring churches that suffered heavy damage, and Finn expects attendance to grow as word of his church's opening spreads.

"Let us look upon today as a new beginning," Finn told the congregation.

Many other churches didn't fare so well.

At Church of The Epiphany in New Orleans' Seventh Ward, flooding destroyed pews and prayer books. The Rev. Ray Bomberger said the church's insurer and contractors must weigh in before cleanup can begin. Bomberger held Mass the past three Sundays in the convent of another church he serves, Corpus Christi Catholic Church. Those services are drawing in people.

Attendance has grown from about 25 the first week to more than 50 on Sunday, Bomberger said. He's heard from more than 100 members of the two churches, which serve about 1,450 families.

"You talk to somebody, and they're in communication with somebody you haven't talked with before. The number kind of grows," Bomberger said. "Every day, it becomes more people."

He added: "I think a lot for people happens around the church. I think just the sense of encouragement, the sense of community, just to see each other and be with one another, that's a big thing."

All Congregations Together, a church coalition headed by Mary Fontenot, is serving as a conduit between residents and

government officials by holding community meetings. The goal is to get residents' opinions on how the city should be rebuilt.

Fontenot is also a member of the PICO LIFT (Louisiana Interfaiths Together) grassroots group, which formulated a "Covenant to Rebuild Louisiana" with input from residents. She's pushing for support from New Orleans Mayor Ray Nagin and the city, and has met with members of Congress. In October the covenant was signed by Louisiana Gov. Kathleen Blanco and several state representatives.

"The beauty of it (the covenant) is, this came from the mouths of the people who were directly affected," Fontenot said.

The covenant calls for adequate levees and protection from future hurricanes, jobs for displaced families and assurances that churches will have a voice in the rebuilding. Everybody who looks at the covenant favors it, Fontenot said. "It's just a matter of getting them in the room."

At a recent community meeting about the Ninth Ward, she told residents that if they let others decide how New Orleans will be rebuilt, "it will never be the same."

Churches are focusing on reconnecting families to those community institutions, Fontenot said. "We firmly believe that if we can get our churches up and running, then our communities have the best chance to be rebuilt."

In the Lower Ninth Ward, the Rev. Gilbert Scie has been in contact with most of his congregation at Greater Little Zion Missionary Baptist Church.

"I had all of my church members' phone numbers, but I had their home numbers. I had to wait until they called me," he said. "It was a period of about two weeks before I heard from the majority."

Established in 1900, the church was the oldest in the area, he said, but it was damaged by the hurricane. Scie hopes a new church can be built and said most members of his congregation are eager to return.

He's also hopeful that politicians will listen to church leaders.

"They have to at least listen to what you have to say, but that doesn't mean they're going to take it into consideration," Scie said. "Power and money have always ruled, and the government has both."

The Rev. Joe Campion of St. David Catholic Church in the Lower Ninth Ward worries about what people will have to do to return, such as possibly elevating their homes. The church's school is probably damaged beyond repair, but he hopes the church building can be restored.

"The church and school have always been a very stable element of the neighborhood. It's a good, stable parish," Campion said. "I want it to come back."

Those who've been able to return to their home churches say it's a step in the right direction.

St. James Major Catholic Church member Kitty Montz served as the scripture reader for Sunday's service and said she was reassured by the subtle details, such as how the priest enters and how the donations are collected.

"It felt really good to have that home Mass," Montz said. "It's those very simple things that make Mass in your parish feel like home."