

North County Times

Pastors return from Louisiana to urge greater relief efforts

By: GARY WARTH - Staff Writer
The Rev. Michael Henderson and the Rev. Mike Ratajczak returned from Louisiana outraged.

"We have a big government and a lot of bureaucracy but nothing seems to be getting done in that region," Henderson said. "I'm just totally outraged at this and would like to encourage people to contact their government leaders and let them know of this travesty that is occurring. Those folks need help now, not months from now."

Henderson, pastor of Oceanside's Shiloh Church of God in Christ, traveled to Louisiana last weekend as part of a coalition of 150 church leaders who toured the area devastated last year by Hurricane Katrina and the flooding that followed after the city's levees broke. Ratajczak, of the Church of St. Thomas More in Oceanside, also went on the trip organized by PICO National Network, formerly the Pacific Institute for Community Organizations.

"It was a real eye-opener," Ratajczak said. "You hear the president say that things are progressing nicely, and they're not. It was just unbelievable. There's 128,000 private homes that were destroyed and 133,000 rental units, but not one penny of federal government money has come to help these people in over six months. There seems to be a real disconnect."

The two local clergymen are members of the Escondido-based Congregations for Civic Action, a nonprofit organization representing 10 area churches and an affiliate of the PICO National Network.

The three-day trip, dubbed the National Clergy Summit, gave church leaders a firsthand look at the devastation caused by Katrina and the flooding that followed. The trip included a press conference, where clergy united to call for a greater federal response to the disaster.

"It was a little gut-wrenching," Henderson said. "Prior to going, I was under the impression that things were getting better, that things had begun to progress there. But



Clergy from across the country gathered in Louisiana last weekend to tour the neighborhoods damaged from Hurricane Katrina and flooding last year. On Friday, they gathered for a press conference in front of Mount Moriah Baptist Church in the Ninth Ward and called for Congress to pass \$4.2 billion in supplemental housing funding.

Courtesy Photo

totally the opposite. I was really taken back by what I saw."

Henderson returned Saturday, in time to talk about his trip to his congregation on Sunday morning, but he still has more to say.

"They're asking us to come back to our local area and, No. 1, inform our congregations about what's happening in the region," he said. Next, he said, clergy members were asked to write opinion pieces for their local newspapers and letters to Congress, urging a quicker and greater response to the crisis.

Church leaders representing 30 denominations from 80 cities met in front of Mount Moriah Baptist Church in Louisiana's Ninth Ward on Friday for a press conference, where they called for Congress to pass \$4.2 billion in supplemental housing funding.

The clergy also asked Congress to support a bipartisan plan to restore the Louisiana coast with tax revenue generated from offshore oil and gas drilling. The House of Representatives last week passed \$19 billion in funding for Gulf Coast restoration, but refused to earmark the full \$4.2 billion for housing requested by Louisiana.

The Senate is expected to consider housing funding before Easter, but congressional leaders have said the debate might not be resolved until Memorial Day.

"It seems unreal, because we can spend \$7 billion a month in Iraq, but they can't spend it here," Ratajczak said. "New Orleans is a casualty of the Iraq War. I saw a T-shirt down there that said, 'Make levees, not war.'"

Ratajczak and Henderson said they will urge their congregations ---- and others in North County ---- to push for federal aid by speaking out and writing to Congress, especially to the House Appropriations Committee responsible for funding.

"We came together to talk about how we can begin to impress upon the hearts of federal government leaders ... the great need that is going on there in that region," Henderson said. "There are thousands of displaced residents who want to come back to their city, who want to be involved in the process of rebuilding their communities, but they've been unable to do so because there's been no help or aid in temporary housing or rebuilding their homes."

Ratajczak said the government should help Katrina victims because the federally funded levees that failed did more damage to New Orleans than the hurricane.

Funding for housing also must come soon, he said, because the situation probably will get worse with time.

"The weather is going to start getting warmer," he said. "The stench, the disease. It's going to be a cesspool for disease, and that's maybe a month or two away."

Henderson said he experienced a spectrum of emotions while touring the wrecked area.

"We toured one gentleman's house, and his house has been gutted and stripped," he said. "We saw the water marks where the water had his house about eight feet under water. Then we went next door, where we saw another house that was the same way as the people had left it. Furniture, appliances still in the house, toppled over where the water had knocked them over. Mold and mildew just everywhere. For miles and miles, just whole communities in that kind of shape."

Henderson said clergy also met with displaced residents who return to their homes on weekends to try to clean them, but who spend the rest of the week out of state.

"They don't feel like they're receiving the help they need," he said. "They know these things take time and there's a process involved, but they feel the government has abandoned them and left them with no hope. These are people who want to come back, who don't want to live in Texas. They want to live in the place where they raised their families."

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