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Religious leaders will focus on needs

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One hundred religious leaders from across the country are scheduled to gather next week in New Orleans for the final phase of a campaign aimed at focusing national attention on South Louisiana's post-hurricane needs.

Beginning Thursday, participants will spend three days visiting the city's most devastated neighborhoods and taking part in strategy sessions expected to focus on issues including a lack of adequate infrastructure and affordable housing that are keeping many displaced residents away six months after Hurricane Katrina.

Thibodaux resident Sharon Gauthe, director of Bayou Interfaith Shared Community Organizing, the local affiliate of Louisiana Interfaiths Together, which is organizing the summit, is one of about 10 area representatives planning to attend.

"We just can't leave behind the destruction that happened in this storm ... through the natural disaster as well as the disaster of the levees," Gauthe said Thursday of her organization's involvement. "We want to put out the information about what's happening in New Orleans and in our areas to people from throughout the United States so that they understand the enormity of the situation."

Organizers hope that those in attendance from elsewhere in the country will "hear the cries of the people here," Gauthe said, and "they will be able to share with their congregations what they've seen and encourage these people to contact their congressmen."

The Rev. Wilmer Todd, president of the board of BISCO, will also attend.

"I'm just going to try to show these people who are visiting here from all over the United States the condition out here and also the help we need," he said. "We need a lot of massive help and we just need to make people aware of that."

Even living as close to the disaster zone as Thibodaux, "you sometimes forget. Our lives are going on and everything seems fine."

But that notion is quickly dispelled, he said, by a trip through a neighborhood such as New Orleans' Lakeview.

Gauthe and other local representatives, meanwhile, also plan to stress matters of direct interest to Lafourche and Terrebonne parishes, particularly the need for coastal restoration, improved flood protection and money for those in southern Terrebonne who lost their homes to Hurricane Rita.

"We don't want to see the same thing happen to us as what happened in New Orleans, which could happen to us in three months," Gauthe said, referring to the start of hurricane season. "The big thing we said in the beginning is that if the pastors come down, they will see this as a moral issue, not just an economic issue."

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