

Volunteers in Mission Disaster Relief and Recovery Team

Background

In September of 2005, a team of 15 members of First United Methodist Church (FUMC), Lexington traveled to Pascagoula, MS five weeks after hurricane Katrina made landfall on the Gulf Coast (Figure 1). This trip constituted the formation of the Volunteers in Mission (VIM) Disaster Relief and Recovery Team at FUMC. Since that time the team has grown substantially and traveled twice to western Kentucky following tornados in the fall of 2005, to Gulfport-Biloxi and McComb, MS in 2006, and most recently returned to Pascagoula in October of 2007. In addition, the team has participated in projects unrelated to Disaster Relief such as helping the Children's Ministry team with minor renovations and painting the Children's wing at FUMC.

The team is not a collection of 15-20 members that is focused on this particular ministry, but rather, is a large collection of active and engaged members of FUMC (Table 1). From this cohort, anywhere from 10 to 15 members respond to the call for people willing to travel and enter the mission field. The team continues to grow and is actively recruiting from within and outside FUMC. The growth and activities of the team have also benefited from generous financial support from the FUMC congregation and specific donations of trailers and equipment from Joe Bryant, David Marshall, Scott Prince and others.



Figure 1. Members of FUMC that traveled to Pascagoula, MS in October, 2005. Back Row: Greg Graf, Ann Estes, Ron Berry, Chuck Sanborn, Shane Dixon, John Brumfeld. **Middle Row:** John Higgins, Paul Brunstetter, Danny Faulconer, Ken Harvener. **Front Row:** Peggy Ray, Jan Byrd, Kristen Clark, Debbie Smouse, Marsha Berry.

Table 1. Participants in VIM Disaster Relief and Recovery Missions

Marsha Berry	Danny Faulconer	Peggy Ray
Ron Berry	Kristen Fisher	Chuck Sanborn
John Brumfield	Mike Fisher	Alexis Scott
Paul Brunstetter	Gregory Graf	Frank Scott
Jan Byrd	Tanya Graf	Drew Slayton
Kristin Clark	Kevin Hale	Michelle Slayton
Todd Clark	Ken Harvener	Debbie Smouse
Ken Creech	John Higgins	Jan Sullivan
Lauren Dixon	Adam Holt	Kathy Sullivan
Shane Dixon	Ken Klemme	Paul Sullivan
John Elder	Craig Olive	Jamie Svec
Rita Elder	Keith Polly	Andrew Walker
Ann Estes	Hunt Ray	

Pascagoula, MS

On our first trip to Pascagoula, we stayed at Eastlawn UMC as a part of the United Methodist Committee on Relief (UMCOR) disaster recovery effort. The church provided lodging and bathroom facilities for relief workers. In addition, it served as a relief station which housed a food bank, supply depot and a disaster relief VIM team from Kansas that served hot meals to anyone in need (Figures 2-4). Two years later, UMCOR is no longer operating in Pascagoula, but continues to support Katrina relief in other ways. Information on the UMCOR relief activities is available on the UMCOR Katrina relief website (<http://www.katrinaaidtoday.org/>).



Figure 2. Image from outside Eastlawn UMC in September, 2005



Figure 3. Food bank and supply depot inside Eastlawn UMC gymnasium



Figure 4. FUMC VIM team is fed by Kansas VIM team serving hot meals.

For reasons that cannot be explained beyond a “call”, the team was compelled to return to Pascagoula. The staff of Eastlawn directed us to Art Moss. Art is a member of Eastlawn UMC where he served as a site-manager for the UMCOR recovery effort based there. Following the discontinuation of the recovery effort based on the Eastlawn campus, Art was recruited to serve in the same capacity at First Presbyterian Church (FPC) of Pascagoula. Travel arrangements were made through Art and Melanie Moore, the volunteer coordinator for FPC.

A team of 13 members of FUMC traveled to Pascagoula, MS October 14th-20th (Figure 5). We departed following commissioning during the 8:30 service and arrived at FPC, Pascagoula Sunday evening. A member of the church greeted us and provided a brief tour of the building. FPC is well equipped with a commercial kitchen, sleeping quarters, showers and laundry facilities. The congregation of FPC provided frozen meals, breakfast items, snacks and drinks. Their hospitality is unparalleled. In addition, the ladies of the FUMC Faith Works Sunday School class prepared four frozen meals to feed our team evening meals for most of our stay.

We met our local job site coordinator (Art) at 7:00am Monday morning. They have at least six homes in various stages of reconstruction. We worked on four of them. After a short briefing, the team departed to the home of Mona Lisa Mattos where we completed the installation of drywall and began the finishing process. The team completed numerous projects during the week. These are outlined in Table 2.

I cannot say enough about the work ethic of this team. Consistent with previous VIM trips, the team was on the jobsite just after sunrise and generally worked into the night. Lunches were on-site, on-the-go, or both. Their effort did not go unnoticed. The team earned the unofficial “Hustle Award” from Melanie Moore.



Figure 5. Members of the VIM Disaster Relief and Recovery Team that traveled to Pascagoula in October, 2007. Back Row: Frank Scott, Todd Clark, Paul Sullivan, John Higgins, Ken Creech, Ken Harverner. **Front Row:** Ann Estes, Alexis Scott, Rita Elder, Jan Sullivan, Keith Polly, Greg Graf, Shane Dixon (not pictured).

Greg,

...Thank you for all your hard work. Your team wins the "Hustle Award." Please come again, if you are able. It was a pleasure getting to know you and your friends.

*Sincerely,
Melanie*

Beyond the labor, there is a kinship that invariably develops within these teams. It is difficult to put into words, but perhaps, is best illustrated by the giggles of four ladies eating ice-cream straight from the container as if they had snuck into the kitchen at summer camp, the uncontrollable laughter after supper when no one can remember what the joke was, the pats on the back as the team is packing and loading upon completion of a job, or the hugs as the team disperses

after our return home. Although it has been said many times, the statement that VIM teams get more than they give through service in Christ is no cliché.

Table 2. Projects completed by mission team

Day	Home Owner	Project
Monday	Mattos	Trim Windows with drywall, mud 1 st coat
	Walker	Install railing system on deck and stairs
Tuesday	Mattos	Finish mudding 1 st coat
	Walker	Complete deck, re-frame front windows for installation of sliding-glass doors, install and wrap sheathing along front of house
	Magee	Remove ceiling tiles in living room and front bedroom, install paneling in kitchen
Wednesday	Mattos	Sand 1 st coat of drywall mud, begin application of second coat, install cement backer board for installation of tile flooring
	Magee	Complete installation of kitchen paneling, install ceiling tiles, begin hanging drywall in living room and front bedroom
	Olsen	Remove existing drywall and prep studs for new drywall installation, install insulation in exterior walls
Thursday	Mattos	Complete application of second drywall mud coat,
	Magee	Complete installation of drywall in living room and front bedroom, remove ceiling tiles in hallway and begin installation, begin mudding 1 st coat
	Olsen	Construct framing for deck
Friday	Mattos	Sand 2 nd coat of drywall mud
	Magee	Complete installation of hallway ceiling tiles and replace trim and crown molding, complete 1 st coat of drywall mud, prep doorways for installation of new doors
	Olsen	Complete construction of deck

It should also be noted that this team could not have accomplished nearly as much without the efforts of the staff at FPC. Their relief effort is the most organized we have encountered. Upon arrival, we received a file of each project that contained the name of the homeowners, maps to the construction sites, and descriptions of the project and its status. The Presbytery provides funding for building materials, but given the scale of the need, these funds are insufficient. In addition to direct giving from the congregation, FPC has a staff member that is devoted to assisting homeowners in procuring funds in the form of grants and loans for the purchase of building materials. As a result, the VIM team spent very little on building materials, resulting in a substantial savings of our VIM Disaster and Recovery Missions budget. In short, they have competent and dedicated people at all levels. We learned a great deal from them.

In addition to the organization, they were incredibly hospitable. Upon arrival we were instructed that anything in the kitchen was available for our use. We were treated to a home-cooked meal at the home of Melanie Moore on Tuesday evening. They shared a video of their town before and after the storm. It also showed images of the local townspeople and volunteers forging ahead with reconstruction and images of a new phenomenon called a “slab party” in which families and friends celebrate holidays and birthdays on what remains of their homes. Afterwards they fielded questions, the answers to which still evoked emotional responses despite the passage of two years. However, there is a steely determination in these people. I shared that UMCOR’s early estimates of the recovery would be 10 years. Melanie was quick to scoff at the idea and chided the Presbytery for their 7-year plan. They are thinking four to five years. Perhaps they will not make it, but it will not be due to a lack of effort.

Among team members that traveled to Pascagoula in 2005 and/or 2007, the connection with the community is tangible. Although it is not known if the FUMC VIM team will return, many members of the team have expressed a desire to continue to support the relief effort in this community. FPC is running an excellent recovery operation. It is clear that the reconstruction projects supported by FPC represent a clear need and are the result of hurricane damage. Funds are being well utilized with minimal administrative costs. The ability of FPC to sustain the recovery effort is dependent upon two factors: 1) the willingness of volunteers to travel to Pascagoula and 2) the availability of funds for building materials. Mission teams from churches all over the country are scheduled for each week through February of 2008. Within our own VIM team, there has been discussion about a return trip to Pascagoula in late spring of 2008, but definitive plans

have not been made. Although I have not spoken with each member of the team, there has been unanimous support for a donation to FPC. Following previous VIM trips, FUMC has made a donation to the church that hosted our team. It is my recommendation that we continue this practice.

Future Directions

The last two hurricane seasons have been quiet. It has been nearly two years since strong thunderstorms in the state of Kentucky have left damage sufficient to warrant a trip by our team. To this point, the team has made scheduled week-long trips to the Mississippi Coastal region and day-trips within the state following thunderstorms. At present we are ill-equipped to respond quickly to deliver aid following natural disasters. However, we continue to actively learn, garner resources and develop plans for relief and recovery with the ultimate goal of being able to travel within 48 hours to provide assistance and supplies. In other words, when the cameras leave and the real work of recovery begins, we want to be there to deliver meaningful aid and healing in the spirit of Christ.

To that end, a new Sunday School Class, "Faith Works" was formed in the summer of 2007. In addition to Sunday morning bible study, this class is focused on the support of local and domestic missions (see attached mission statement). Most of its members have traveled to at least one of the VIM destinations and others have provided logistical support for mission trips such as planning, preparing meals, and making arrangements with UMCOR and host churches. However, it should be noted that most of the VIM Disaster Relief and Recovery Team members are not enrolled in this class and that without the spiritual and financial support of the FUMC congregation this team and these trips would not be possible.

Mark 9:35 Sitting down, Jesus called the Twelve and said, "If anyone wants to be first, he must be the very last, and the servant of all."

Luke 9:62 Jesus replied, "No one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for service in the kingdom of God."

James 2:14-17 ¹⁴What good is it, my brothers, if a man claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save him? ¹⁵Suppose a brother or sister is without clothes and daily food. ¹⁶If one of you says to him, "Go, I wish you well; keep warm and well fed," but does nothing about his physical needs, what good is it? ¹⁷In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead.

Faith Works

Class Description: "Faith Works" is a class with a focus on local and domestic missions. Members generally range in age from 30s-40s, most of which are married with young children; however, it is open to anyone with a mission spirited heart. The class is taught in 4-6 week sections. It is led by members of the class that may teach, select a study guide or arrange for someone with a unique perspective to lead the discussion. Members of the class support domestic missions by organizing, participating and providing logistics for mission teams.

Mission Statement:

- We will engage in an active study of God's word and Christian living
- We will share God's love through local and domestic mission projects
- We will be faithful stewards of God's resources
- We will equip and deploy mission teams for projects that include but are not limited to:
 - Local Missions
 - Aldersgate Camp: Family work weekend
 - Ronald McDonald House: Evening meals and light cleaning
 - Rescue Mission Construction projects as needed
 - Others as the spirit moves us
 - Annual mission trip
 - Generally a week-long VIM trip through UMCOR (presently Katrina Relief)
 - The next scheduled trip is to the Mississippi Gulf Coast the 3rd week of October
 - Disaster Relief
 - We will obtain the required materials, resources and leadership to field a Disaster Relief team on short notice. It is not expected that members of the class will make all (or any) of the trips, but rather provide logistical support for a team in the field. When a disaster (natural or otherwise) occurs, we will determine if our involvement is warranted, feasible and desired. We will coordinate the response by gathering the appropriate financial resources, supplies, and volunteers from within and outside the church.
 - This is a long-term goal. At present, we are ill equipped for rapid response. Our long-term objective is to have the ability to have everything ready such that we can "call" volunteers, provide them with a quick briefing, and have them ready to travel.