

# HOPE

# SHALL BLOOM

# AND BLOOM IT DID!

Summer 2011 — A post-hurricane report from the United Church of Christ

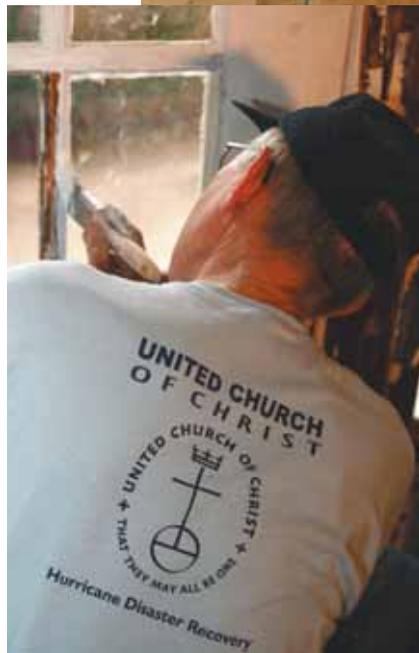
## Thank you!

Six years ago, when three hurricanes in succession blasted their way across five states, from Florida and Alabama to Mississippi, Louisiana and Texas, the UCC responded within hours by sending \$25,000 as an initial response.

Since then, UCC contributions have totaled \$6,127,193.20.

"UCC members and churches have been very generous," says Florence Coppola, UCC Executive for National Disaster Ministries, "and as we wrap up our work on the Gulf Coast, we want to express our thanks. This special report shows how UCC dollars and volunteers helped with rebuilding and recovery.

"The UCC's initial commitment was to be on the Gulf Coast for five years," she says, "but now it will be for six years. At the end of 2011, the UCC office in New Orleans will close, but the work will continue. We are searching for a local agency partner who is rebuilding homes so that UCC volunteer work groups may continue the work that was started."



W. Evan Golder photos (except as noted)

## Helping to put lives back on track

When the hurricane swept through, it destroyed more than people's houses. It sapped their strength and their faith.

Linda lost her business and her remaining family as well. These people used to lead comfortable lives, which was a major difference from all the other mission trips we have been on. And while we were doing what we could for these people by fixing their houses, our real ministry was to help put their lives back on track. There was more of an element of spiritual healing with this mission work than others.

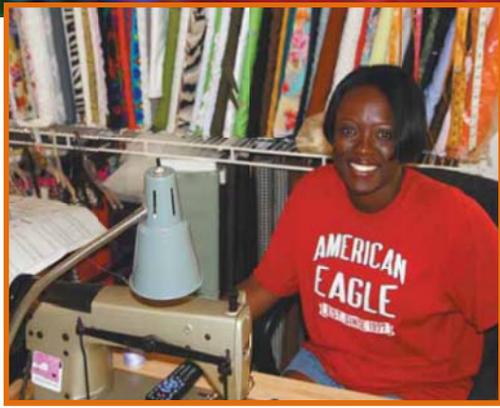
I feel that we helped Linda take several steps in the right direction. There was a sense of newness during our time spent there. A colt was born, a sign of her horse farm re-growing. We emptied out rooms of trash and treasures, signifying a time for a new life. And the blue FEMA tarp, the symbol of dependency and destruction, was thrown away.

Jesus said, "In my father's house, there are many mansions," and Linda's house will be a mansion by the time it's finished. Not that it will be large or luxurious, but it is being repaired by the values of love and fellowship. It is an example of the strength of faith and what faith can accomplish.

Kevin Geyer, Volunteer  
Center Congregational UCC  
Manchester, Conn.

"Your gifts do make a difference. I've seen with my own eyes the real, concrete, tangible difference your generosity has made in the lives of people."

The Rev. Geoffrey A. Black,  
UCC General Minister and President



## One from two

Hurricane Katrina left New Orleans' nine UCC churches in various states of disarray. Most of Central Congregational UCC, an African-American church, was unusable, under two feet of water with much mold. St. Matthew UCC, founded by German

immigrants, suffered very little damage. Central re-opened its AIDS clinic and child care center at the old site, but began to worship at St. Matthew. Gradually the congregations grew together, and on Palm Sunday this year the Rev. Chris Mereschuk preached his first sermon as their new pastor. "Central St. Matthew lives into the vision of what could be," he says. "They are not operating out of scarcity invested in the community, and looking to be more so. And doing some fantastic work." Here hands a palm frond to Carol Etter before worship.



## Partnerships

The American Red Cross, the Salvation Army, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), the United Methodist Church, the United Way, and others besides the UCC—what do they all have in common?

During the six years since the hurricanes, these groups have partnered with each other in different combinations to rebuild homes. "Everybody's funds have a certain restriction," says Ellenor Simmons, former executive of the Orleans Parish Long Term Recovery Committee. "If Seventh Day Adventist funds can only go so far and Red Cross or Salvation Army funds can only help so much, partnerships make it happen. What I appreciate about the UCC is their

flexibility based on the needs of people who are trying to rebuild their lives." Earlean Johnson (pictured here) had her home rebuilt, including her studio/workshop where she designs and sews clothes, because of such partnerships.

## New Orleans

**"Hope Shall Bloom is a reminder of the covenantal connection we have as a church."**

The Rev. Douglas Anders  
South Central Conference Minister

## Volunteers

## Rebuild Center

Often when people lose their homes, they lose more than just a place to live. They also lose their sense of worth, self-esteem, and identity. That's why the UCC's Hope Shall Bloom

funds helped to establish the Rebuild Center, a collaborative endeavor of three agencies where homeless guests can receive a variety of critical services: e.g., meals and mail, assistance with legal documents, access to showers, laundry, and restrooms, phones, legal aid and medical care. "The real gift we give the homeless is a place where they feel like they matter to someone," says Don Thompson, executive director of the Harry Thompson Center. "The UCC has played an invaluable role in helping to get our center open and in providing funds to offer these services. We are a better space and a better place because of the UCC."



Without volunteers, the Hope Shall Bloom funds could not have accomplished nearly as much. According to the Rev. Alan Coe, Minister for Disaster Recovery in the UCC's South Central Conference, as of mid-May 2011, 6,752

persons had volunteered in New Orleans and worked a total of 170,143 hours. He valued their overall labor at \$3,612,420 as they cleaned out 847 houses early on and later rebuilt 110 buildings. Most volunteers came in groups, but a few, like Marjorie Flowers (pictured here), came on their own for a long term. Marjorie, a member of Trinity UCC in Chicago, quit her corporate payroll position and became a UCC Partners-in-Service volunteer for most of 2011. And when the year ends? "I'm going to wait and see which way the Lord directs me," she says. To learn about volunteering with Partners-in-Service, contact the Rev. Mary Schaller Blaufuss (216-736-3214) or <a href="mailto:blaufusm@ucc.org">blaufusm@ucc.org</a>.



# Florida

**"The UCC has truly been a blessing, for a lot of reasons. I'm just so grateful for the UCC's expertise and support."**

Bessie Griffin, New Orleans homeowner. Led Bible study in their FEMA trailer for three years

**"We saw in Florida how every arm of the church reaches out to make the world a better place for everyone in it."**

Justin Metheny, Volunteer  
Center Congregational UCC,  
Manchester, Conn.



For the "snowbirds" who flee frozen winters from New England to the Great Lakes, Florida is the "Sunshine State," offering warm sun, sand, and surf from Pensacola to Amelia Island. But for homeowners and businesses—and churches, during "Hurricane Season" from June 1st to November 30th that same 1,200 mile-long coastline is a disaster waiting to happen.

"We are an 'at risk Conference,'" says the Rev. Kent Saladi, Florida Conference Minister. "We have two coasts. So we're twice as likely to suffer damage if a hurricane strikes."

Since 1851, only 18 hurricane seasons have passed without a major storm. In 2004 and 2005 alone, seven storms slashed their way across Florida: Charley, Frances, Ivan and Jeanne, Dennis, Katrina and Wilma.

During Hurricane Charley, the couple who lived in one mobile home (see photo below), members of Congregational UCC in Punta Gorda, Fla., rode out the storm in their home. Two days later, they were two of seven members who showed up for worship. The church had about \$479,000 in repairs and completed everything by its April 24, 2005 re-dedication service.

Hope Shall Bloom fund

Much of the post-hurricane recovery and repair was made possible by UCC contributions to the Hope Shall Bloom fund. These funds were "amazingly helpful," says the Rev. Bill Wealand, Disaster Response Coordinator for the Florida Conference.

"Many families were caught without adequate financial resources to recover," he explains. "They were under-insured or uninsured. But thanks to Hope Shall Bloom funding and volunteer mission groups from all over the eastern half of the U.S., we were able to help these families get back to the quality of life they had enjoyed before the storms."

"Because of volunteers, we were able to leverage these funds and accomplish a lot more for a lot less money," says the Rev. Karen Georgia Thompson, former Conference Disaster Response Coordinator.

Even though the worst hurricane damage occurred six years ago, volunteer teams still offer help. Rick Clay, a certified appraiser in Pennsylvania, has taken eight groups of UCC volunteers to Florida. He vacations in Florida, and sees volunteering as a chance to "give something back" to a favorite place. "This is not a 'feel good' trip," he says, "but a chance to do God's work. That's what keeps me going."

Being prepared

The Florida Conference is in the process of developing a disaster response network, with training for a representative from each of Florida's 98 UCC churches.

"This will help us equip ourselves and become better prepared for the next disasters," says Saladi, "whenever they come." The network also will arrange for someone in each county to relate with that county's long term recovery agency now, so that relationships are in place before a disaster. And it will work with other faith groups to see which agencies bring what skills and experience to the recovery efforts.

"Partnerships are crucial," says Wealand. "For example, following a disaster Baptists have a history of doing debris removal very well. Seven Day Adventists are experts in warehousing."

And the UCC? "We are known for being there for the long haul," says Saladi. "Long after the glitter and the glamour are gone, we are still here for the long, hard work yet to be done."

**"Hope Shall Bloom helped us feel connected to the larger denomination, in a way that without it simply could not have happened."**

The Rev. Jim Hightower, Pastor  
Little Farms UCC, New Orleans

**"The heart of disaster ministry is about rebuilding lives, instilling hope, and believing in the resurrection: that from devastation and destruction new life can come."**

The Rev. Karen Georgia Thompson, Florida Conference UCC  
Former Minister for Disaster Response and Recovery

# Biloxi, Miss.



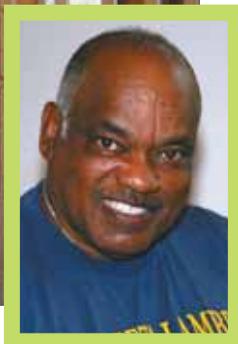
Arguably, the UCC's best-known volunteer, week-long, mission-trip attraction is Back Bay Mission in Biloxi, Miss. Because of the hurricanes, Back Bay Mission's number of volunteer work teams per year has doubled, from 20 to 40.

A wide range of tasks is involved in restoring a home, and work teams tackle just about all of them, from mold abatement to roofing to installing dry wall to electrical and plumbing work. As BBM's web site <thebackbaymission.org> describes it, their model of work camping "places equal emphasis on productivity (home rehabilitation or construction) and learning, using an action-reflection model."

Once BBM decides to restore a home, it makes a commitment to completing the project. Here are two examples of homes that BBM volunteer work teams have restored using, in part, Hope Shall Bloom funds from the UCC.

**"We sense the urgent call of God to step forward in bold faith to be of service to a hurting and overwhelmed people."**

The Rev. Shari Prestemon  
Executive Director, Back Bay Mission



## Richard Campbell

had his house completely damaged by the hurricane—and then fell in between the cracks of the Mississippi Development Authority. For four years he was homeless, living with his sister. When BBM took his case, they had to completely gut the house. "I just prayed about it and left it alone," he says. "Finally, I decided to buy a FOR SALE sign. I was in the parking lot of the hardware store when I got the phone call from the Mission."

Bob DiGiacomo photo (far left)

## Patricia Bartholomew

lives in a "historic home" in Biloxi. A BBM volunteer saw the house and thought it needed painting. After Mission staff saw the inside of the house, they convinced her to come to their office and fill out an application. "Everybody in Biloxi knows the Back Bay Mission," she says, "but I never thought I would need any help from the Mission. I love Back Bay Mission. I never met a single person who didn't have a smile on his face."

Bob DiGiacomo photo (far right)



Here's what your contributions to  
**"HOPE SHALL BLOOM"**  
helped accomplish

"The main role of the church in this disaster, as in all disasters, is long term recovery," says Florence Coppola, the UCC's National Disaster Ministries Executive. "This means that we are not 'first responders.' We are there for the long term, for as long as the funds hold out and we are able to be helpful."

A significant amount of Hope Shall Bloom funding went to rebuild homes. In addition, the funds also supported:

- Local long-term recovery committees
- The Rebuild Center in New Orleans
- Food banks
- Those who did spiritual care
- Those who did case management
- Initial costs to repair local churches
- Temporary pastoral needs
- Moving costs into temporary offices
- Initial fees and costs to rebuild homes
- Long-term volunteers
- Temporary site coordinators
- Spiritual retreats for church women
- Spiritual retreats for church staffs
- Interns to provide legal assistance

This special **"HOPE SHALL BLOOM"** report prepared by  
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**"When the homeowner tells us their story, we look in their eyes and see despair. But as we describe how we can help, we see flashes of hope. And once we're finished, there's joy and gratitude."**

Bob DiGiacomo, Back Bay Mission  
Assistant for Housing Recovery

### Back Bay Mission (Biloxi, Miss.) Summary of Housing Recovery Accomplishments 2006-2010

Number of homes completed (extensive recoveries or new construction)	162
Number of volunteers	7,464
Hours of volunteer labor	240,199
Value of volunteer labor	\$4,323,582