



# Church calls on congregations to help with hurricane relief

A UMNS Report

By Tamie Ross

Veteran United Methodist disaster specialists are descending upon hurricane-weary Florida with a force mightier than the multiple storms. Armed with clean-up supplies, food items and other essentials, these volunteers are working to ensure every individual affected by the deadly string of hurricanes is safe and prepared for what forecasters predict is coming.

First Charley. Then Frances. And now Hurricane Ivan is clearing a path toward some of the same communities hit so hard in recent days. The Florida Keys evacuation order Sept. 9 began yet another round of probable trips to shelters for millions in the coming days.

Those on the ground in Florida are calling upon United Methodist congregations to help in different ways – from sending volunteers to make needed repairs, to writing donation checks, to assembling supplies that will help residents return to their homes.

Tom Hazelwood, head of emergency services for the United Methodist Committee on Relief, toured the state Sept. 9. He was struck by the magnitude of the devastation.

“Everywhere we go, there’s an incredible amount of work to be done,” Hazelwood said. “Homes are flooded, people have lost all their belongings. Right now the big issue in Palm Beach County, where I am, is that people are without electricity. And yet there’s all this destruction and so much cleanup needed.”

Hazelwood stressed that volunteers would be prepared and sheltered if Ivan hits the area. “No one will be put in harm’s way, but the fact that a third storm is coming underscores our need even more.”

After watching powerful winds and seemingly unstoppable rains batter their homes and churches, United Methodists in Florida said they’re grateful for the chance to regroup and thankful for the help they’ve received.

Though his church was struck by Hurricane Frances, the Rev. David McEntire said the damage wasn’t bad enough to stop plans for Sunday worship services Sept. 12 – as long as Ivan didn’t interfere.

“We’re very, very anxious about Ivan,” said McEntire, senior pastor at the United Methodist Church of the Palm Beaches in West Palm Beach, Fla.

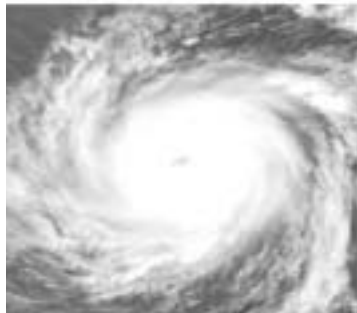
The church has been fortunate so far, he said. It lost about 500 ceiling tiles and sustained other damage from Hurricane Frances, which also took out 40 or 50 trees on the property.

The church’s electricity was restored Sept. 7, but

power was still out in much of the area. “I would say 98 percent of our people lost power,” McEntire said of the church’s 1,400 members. “It’s slowly coming back on.”

Working with a food bank, the Church of the Palm Beaches has been giving out food to people who come by and serving as a hub for distributing supplies to other churches. McEntire’s congregation also planned to send a church bus into neighborhoods and provide food, water and ice to the poor and to residents unable to get out.

Additional efforts include putting tarps on homes to dry out roofs and having chainsaw crews clear trees off houses. “Palm Beach has a million residents, so the need is massive,” McEntire said. “This is not a time when we need to have people come to the church so much as have the church go to them,” he said.



**For information on collecting flood buckets, visit <http://gbgm-umc.org/umcor/>**

McEntire said he is concerned about the church’s covenant partner, Brionnes Montoto Methodist Church in Cuba, which was hit by Hurricane Charley. In Fort Pierce, Fla., hurricane damage caused a roof to collapse at a Haitian ministry that McEntire helped start in 1990. He wants to send teams to both places as soon as possible.

Eyes everywhere, but especially in Florida, are darting from the widespread destruction to Hurricane Ivan, which as of Sept. 16 had killed eight people.

“The anticipation is that Ivan could come in and is on a path to hit some of the same places, like Punta Gorda,” said Linda Beher, communications director for the United Methodist Committee on Relief. “So yes, there is a race. We’re working to make sure people are safe, secure and dry so they can withstand another big storm.”

The relief agency trains church members to be case workers within their communities after disaster strikes – assessing needs, organizing volunteers, overseeing supplies and much more. UMCOR is best known within relief circles for its attention to detail and its staying power: When “the chain-saw brigade” departs, UMCOR remains for months and often years to meet long-term needs.

Working with the denomination’s Florida Annual (regional) Conference, UMCOR is establishing

offices to help hurricane victims. A stay of three to five years is expected.

United Methodist case managers are still working in New York with victims of the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks – three years after the fact, said Kristin Sachen, an UMCOR staff executive.

“With devastation of this magnitude, and considering that some of the communities hardest hit are some of the most economically challenged, we have a long road ahead of us,” Beher said. “We’re focusing tremendous resources on the very vulnerable farm worker communities in Arcadia area, and the Haitian communities are around the Fort Pierce area.”

With oranges and grapefruit littering the ground, many workers won’t have jobs to sustain them through the coming months, Beher said. “We’re expecting a lot of individuals needing help with family expenses like rent, doctors’ bills and utilities.”

How can the public help? Beher said the possibilities are limitless.

Volunteers are needed to work with Florida residents, replacing windows and repairing roofs and siding on homes. Those who can help with physical tasks are asked to call ahead for locations and updates on a toll-free hotline: (800) 282-8011, Ext. 149. Beher said calling first enables coordinators to give advice on tools to bring and what volunteers should expect in terms of work to be done.

Financial contributions are another urgent need. Donations pay for everything from trained disaster workers to supplies to assistance for survivors and victims. “I can’t stress enough how important these donations are for us,” Hazelwood said. “I’m seeing at this moment the impact individuals anywhere in the country can have.”

Beher and Hazelwood said flood buckets are critical for Floridians attempting to return home only to find inches of standing water inside their front doors. More than 3,000 of these 5-gallon, supply-filled buckets – containing everything from sponges to mops to disinfectants – have been distributed since Hurricane Charley battered the state Aug. 27.

Details on assembling the 5-gallon buckets can be found at [umcor.org](http://umcor.org) online by clicking on the “Kits” link. Beher said this is an ideal service project for congregations and especially children’s groups.

“Long after folks are done writing about these triple storms, UMCOR will still be on the scene, rebuilding,” Beher said. “With this level of destruction, the needs will go deep. We’re ready to help, and we’re ready for Ivan.” ■