

New Orleans Community of Shalom Promotes Post-Hurricane Renewal

by Barbara Wheeler

Before Hurricane Katrina:

First Street Community of Shalom ministered in an African-American community at the juncture of New Orleans' Central City, Uptown, and Garden District neighborhoods. It helped the people face economic challenges and worked with the community to provide after school tutoring, community forums, and a health fair. Poverty and crime were major problems.

One year ago the Community of Shalom celebrated the opening of its "Grandparent House," which is a five-unit apartment complex that provides housing and support to grandparents who are raising their grandchildren. The city of New Orleans assisted in funding this facility. The house was the brainstorm of one of the First Street Community of Shalom committee members who read about the "grandparent house" concept in JET magazine and wanted to emulate the model in New Orleans. First Street United Methodist Church had already donated a building to the Community of Shalom and Grandparent House seemed a good use of the space.

The Community of Shalom also engaged other partners, including local businesses, the YMCA and neighborhood residents, in working for community improvement. Church members and neighbors volunteered as tutors and also met for prayer breakfasts at First Street Church.

Since Hurricane Katrina:

Katrina and Hurricane Rita drastically changed the area but the First Street Community of Shalom is still in ministry. The neighborhoods seek "shalom" – peace and justice – as



Rev. Lance Eden, pastor of First Street UMC in New Orleans, with Dr. Alonzo Campbell, Louisiana Annual Conference Communities of Shalom Coordinator.

Image by: Barbara Wheeler

Source: Community and Institutional Ministries



One of thousands of fallen homes in New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina.

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never before and it needs new partnerships, strengthened relationships, and creative vision. Poverty is intensified by the added physical and psychological devastation of the storms. Homes are destroyed or damaged, and families are trying to cope with the losses of jobs and a sense of place and home.

The presence of the First Street Community of Shalom made the neighborhood a natural choice for one of the Hurricane Disaster Relief Centers operated by the Louisiana Annual Conference after the storms. "Shalom impacted the decision to bring the relief center to First Street Church," said Dr. Alonzo Campbell, Louisiana Annual Conference Communities of Shalom Coordinator. "The church and Community of Shalom were already proven partners with the community."

First Street Community of Shalom sees a great opportunity to strive toward its goals of wholeness and renewal in the continuing relief and rehabilitation efforts. Members of the Shalom committee recently met with Dr. Campbell and Rev. Jackie Harewood, Louisiana Annual Conference Communities of Shalom Assistant Coordinator. Flora Jean Jones, a member of First Street United Methodist Church shares her vision for holistic ministry through the Grandparent House and referrals to counseling agencies that will support resident families. In moving toward recovery, the committee plans to develop a resource center to provide computers, phones and fax machines to neighbors who are now pursuing insurance claims and seeking employment.

"The greatest opportunity Communities of Shalom have following the hurricanes is to use our ability and experience to build community," said Rev. Harewood. "Communities of Shalom have been practicing these skills for years."

Communities of Shalom put their faith into action by practicing asset-based development, implementing collaboration, and working toward systemic change. These ministries embrace the concept of shalom that describes the experience of collective and individual health, wholeness and security.

The Communities of Shalom theme passage from Jeremiah 29:7 reverberates in New Orleans: "Seek the shalom of the community for it is in its shalom that you will find your shalom."

While some New Orleans neighborhoods were completely destroyed and the residents are dispersed, the area around First Street Church is coming to life again. First Street Community of Shalom is part of the rebirth. As the days unfold, the ministry remains faithful to its original goals and is even more strongly committed to meeting the challenges of the present and future.

The Communities of Shalom is a program of The United Methodist Church coordinated through the General Board of Global Ministries. The locally-based ministries work to restore and renew communities, building healthy relationships, meeting human needs, and addressing systemic change.

Barbara Wheeler is program associate for Communities of Shalom at the General Board of Global Ministries. She visited First Street Community of Shalom shortly before Christmas 2005.