

Volunteers launch UM relief efforts in Southeast

Sam Hodges and Mary Jacobs, May 6, 2011

**By Sam Hodges, *Managing Editor*
and Mary Jacobs, *Staff Writer***

GRIFFIN, Ga.—The Rev. Sandra Fendley makes daily trips to what's left of Vaughan United Methodist Church after a tornado blew off its roof and punched holes in its walls, essentially destroying the 107-year-old frame structure.

She's the church's pastor, but at age 70, she's not taking the lead on debris removal. Instead, she's been cheering on the many volunteers who have arrived un-beckoned to help, learning their names and churches, providing effusive thanks and spontaneous hugs, and noticing with specificity their daily progress.

"Oh my goodness, we've got a driveway!" Ms. Fendley exclaimed on Sunday afternoon, May 1, during a visit after she led worship at the other church she serves as local pastor. "There was nothing here but big, old oak trees!"

This has been a treacherously busy season for natural disasters across the Southern states, and the toll includes the destruction of a handful of UMC church buildings, with many more damaged.

There has also, at scene after scene, been an outpouring of help. That's certainly been the case at Vaughan UMC.

"Honey, you can't believe the amount of volunteers," Ms. Fendley said. "Methodist church teams from all over have been here and cleaned things up."



UMNS PHOTO BY
THE REV. MIKE
CASH

Residents view
the remains of
a home
destroyed by a
tornado in
Griffin, Ga.



A wide swath

The April 27 storm cut a wide swath through seven states—Alabama, Tennessee, Mississippi, Georgia, Kentucky, Arkansas and Virginia—and left a million people without electrical power. Tuscaloosa, Ala., was among the hardest hit.

Federal officials noted the April 27 storm as the biggest on record for a single 24-hour period. Preliminary estimates counted 312 tornadoes, according to the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, well above the previous record of 148 twisters in 1974.

At press time, the death toll was at 340, with more than 200 still missing, making this the second deadliest day due to a twister in U.S. history.

That storm followed on the heels of another system that stampeded through eight southern states. It particularly impacted parts of North Carolina, when 92 tornadoes tore through that state on a single day.

The series of storms is straining the resources of the United Methodist Committee on Relief (UMCOR), the denomination's disaster relief agency. After years of relatively mild spring storm seasons and

heightened priorities provoked by “super disasters” elsewhere in the world, funds destined for UMCOR’s U.S. Disaster Response ministry were perilously low.

The Rev. Cynthia Fierro Harvey, UMCOR head, reported that the agency delved into a small reserve in order to respond to the spring storms emergency, with the approval of the organization’s board of directors grant committee.

As of May 3, UMCOR had made 12 emergency grants to 10 annual conferences: North Alabama, Alabama-West Florida, Holston,

Memphis, Mississippi, Arkansas, North Carolina, Oklahoma, Tennessee and Virginia. The agency also responded to requests from six of those conferences for immediate training in early response to disasters and the spiritual and emotional care of those affected.

UMCOR had collected about \$100,000 in online donations as of May 2. (Donations by way of local churches have not yet been tallied.)

“Right now, we don’t have enough money to get help beyond these emergency grants, so we’re counting on the connection to dig deeper,” said James Rollins, UMCOR’s director of marketing and communications. “Church members have always come through in the past and I’m sure they will come through again.”

Methodist-heavy area

The tornadoes cut through an area populated by a large number of United Methodists. The 11 annual conferences affected include more than 2.1 million professing members, about 28 percent of U.S. church membership.

Many United Methodist churches were destroyed or severely damaged. In the North Alabama conference, Bishop Will Willimon estimated that 15 churches had been destroyed, and 15 left unusable for the near future. (All were insured.)



The death toll included a number of United Methodists, including three members of Jackson Chapel United Methodist in Sawyerville, Ala., and three members of Mount Tabor United Methodist near Greeneville, Tenn., but no total figures were available at press time.

In some of the small rural communities affected by the tornadoes, United Methodist churches were virtually the only community buildings. Those that were still standing after the storm—even those without power or partially damaged by the storm—soon became centers of helping, providing meals, shelter and supplies. Some served as staging areas for supplies; others hosted volunteers who traveled into the area to help. One church in North Alabama, Holly Pond UMC, opened its doors to people who wanted to charge their cellphones so that they could contact friends and families.

United Methodists arrived on the scene “before the National Guard got there” in a number of places, according to Bishop Willimon. Church members in the conference were feeding over 10,000 people daily, and had dispatched five relief trailers.

Bishop Willimon, who noted that he’s been a critic of the denomination’s bureaucracy at times, said he was grateful for the denomination’s connectional system.

"I'm real thankful we didn't wait for a storm to get organized," he said. "How wonderful it is to have a structure in place and a means of responding."

"This has been the biggest challenge of my episcopacy, and the most inspiring," he said. "The worst times are also some of the best, when you really see the gospel."

Facebook-powered

The Rev. Tom Hazelwood, assistant general secretary for UMCOR's U.S. disaster response, traveled to Alabama to assist in training volunteers as emergency responders. He watched in fascination as a group of United Methodist men served up hot food in the parking lot of a Wendy's restaurant in Tuscaloosa. Group members were able to feed thousands, even though they'd spent only about \$700.



"They were using Facebook," he said. "They'd post a request, and within a half an hour, someone would deliver it." One request went out for coolers, to allow the group to carry meals to people in the community; within hours, a van pulled into the parking lot with boxes of nylon coolers donated by a local business.

Because many churches now have Facebook pages, linking them to millions of Facebook users, social media played a key role in the disaster response.

In one spectacular, grassroots example, fans of Auburn University's football team established a "Toomers for Tuscaloosa" Facebook page on the day of the storm. Within days, the page had 75,000 fans, and countless donations of needed supplies poured into Tuscaloosa, home of Auburn's fiercest rival, the University of Alabama.

Mr. Hazelwood thinks that UMCOR and other relief agencies need to plan ways to use Facebook and other social media even more effectively in the future.

"Social media is absolutely making a huge difference, and we as organizations have to grapple with the question of how to incorporate that into our response system," said Mr. Hazelwood.

Grace returned

Because of their proximity to the areas affected by Katrina, many United Methodists in the area struck by the tornadoes had, in recent years, generously supported rebuilding efforts in Louisiana and Mississippi with donations and volunteers. Most of the annual conferences are part of the Southeastern jurisdiction, a leader in donations to UMCOR in the past.

Now, they're on the receiving end of United Methodist generosity.

Smithville United Methodist in Smithville, Miss., near the Alabama border, was one example. The entire town, including the church, was flattened by an EF-5 tornado on April 27.

Smithville had sent volunteers and donations to help with rebuilding after Hurricane Katrina at St. Paul United Methodist in Ocean Springs, Miss. The two congregations had family connections, and St. Paul had served as a staging ground for three years, hosting a constant stream of thousands of United

Methodist volunteers who came to help rebuild.

When St. Paul's pastor, the Rev. Chris Cumbest, heard of the devastation in Smithville, he issued an email blast to members of the church on Friday morning, April 29.

The congregation didn't need much urging—donations of cash, water bottles and other supplies had already begun flowing into the church.

Having experienced the devastation of Katrina, "We understand fully the need," said Mr. Cumbest. "We wanted to offer the grace and love back in whatever way we can."

"Katrina was our hour of need and now it's their hour of need," said church member Chris Duke.

Similarly, churches along the Gulf Coast affected by Hurricane Ivan in 2004, and last year by the BP oil spill, began returning the favor of help they'd received by setting up collection sites for donations.

"Those disasters helped prepare us for what was unfolding . . . and we were immediately able to put a plan of action together," said Mary Catherine Phillips, Alabama-West Florida's communications director. "We're getting calls now from people all over the country who want to help."

Trained volunteers

Having responded to previous disasters in nearby states, several of the affected annual conferences also already had large numbers of people trained. The North Georgia conference has about 800 trained volunteers, for example, and many stepped up to help.

"Thank goodness, we've been inundated with trained volunteers in our local area," said Mike Yoder, the conference's disaster response coordinator.



Ms. Fendley, pastor of Vaughan UMC, recalls her reaction as she saw the church for the first time after the tornado had left it in tatters.

"I came up the hill crying and screaming," she said.

The recovery will go on for years, given the extent of the damage.

But she and the 35 members of Vaughan UMC quickly regrouped, and now see opportunity arising from misfortune. The church was insured. When the settlement comes through, and if it can be combined with help from Methodist sources, the plan is to rebuild nearby—but on property that's for sale right by the highway and would provide greater visibility.

Ms. Fendley smiled often on May 1 as she moved around the damaged church, thanking volunteers.

"God is good," she said. "And he's going to make things better."

How to help

UMCOR is urgently in need of monetary donations for UMCOR Emergency Advance #3021326. To donate, visit www.umcor.org, call (800) 554-8583, or mail UMCOR, P.O. Box 9068, New York, NY

10087-9068. Make checks payable to UMCOR and specify "Spring Storms 2011" in the memo line. (With all donations to UMCOR's Advance, 100 percent of donations go directly to the designated emergency.)

Trained volunteers are needed, but, as always, volunteers should call ahead before they go to a disaster site.

North Alabama's website has details at www.northalabamaumc.org/news/detail/885. There is also a call center for those interested in volunteering: 1-855-862-8657.

Alabama West Florida Conference's website will post regular updates with needs for volunteers and supplies at www.awfumc.org.

The North Georgia Conference established a call center to match cleanup and repair needs with volunteer teams. The number: (678) 533-1443.

Cleaning buckets are in low supply at UMCOR's Sager Brown and UMCOR West supply depots, and are urgently needed to ship to tornado victims. For details, visit <http://new.gbgm-umc.org/umcor/getconnected/supplies/flood-bucket>.