

## **Mississippi Reflections**

**Brad Smith**

**January 15, 2006**

Good morning, I begin my remarks this morning with a quote from the Book of Confessions pg 138. “These good works, done in obedience to God’s commandments, are the fruits and evidences of a true and lively faith: and by them believers manifest their thankfulness, strengthen their assurance, edify their brethren, adorn the profession of the gospel, stop the mouths of the adversaries, and glorify God whose workmanship they are created in Christ Jesus thereunto that having their fruit unto holiness they may have the end, eternal life.” 6.088.

Out of Chaos, Hope. This phrase emblazoned upon our tee shirts along with Camp Hope titled on the banner at the entrance to our tent city home for the week, set the tone for what we spiritually were to get both our head and hands on for the work ahead.

This brief statement of faith sets the tone for and about our past trip to the Mississippi Gulf region. When we signed up at the information table, I don’t think any of Westminster’s band of seven, plus others throughout the Presbytery of Western N.Y. had any idea what we would face; both in terms of the physical strain and of the mental angst that each of us were to encounter throughout our brief stay.

**A question for us all this morning.** What did it take for you to make yourself ready to come to this room in order to worship God? The familiar drawer in the vanity where the

hair dryer and makeup lurk, the starched white shirt, tie and suit hanging in the closet where it always is, the omnipresent computer, Clie, Blackberry, etc. all within an arms length, means of transportation available at the ready in the driveway. We are ready, except for one thought; our sisters and brothers in the Gulf region have none of this. Consider for a moment an area here from North St. to approximately Sheridan Drive deep, and hundreds upon hundreds of miles long devoid of anything. In the area beyond that, lie homes, buildings, businesses and churches all in Chaos. Everything is upended, turned and stained with the mud of tragedy and the ensnarement of government intentions not able to match the fury of the storm with the boondoggle of politics.

Our job for the week was similar to that of a Habitat home termed a rebuild structure with a working toilet. Except for one thing, that home was at one time under fourteen feet of water. The home had been worked on and stripped out to the bare walls by a previous team. Our group of four proceeded to strip out all the electrical wiring and to fir out the walls leveling them for the application of drywall. It had a new roof applied.

After several trips to Home Depot and Lowes for material and tools, we set to work.

A man from Michigan, one from Sumter S. Carolina, Fred Cooley and myself.

We formed a great bond, not questioning, gently suggesting that this and that be done and went to our work. A great start, for when we began, there was nothing and when we left you could see the wiring and soon to be walled rooms take shape. But so, so much more to do.

The owners Susan and Lyndell Lepre had an onsite trailer for living space, and both had just gone back to work, she a dietician with the school system and he a barber.

Upon leaving on our last day Susan prepared a fudge and pecan tray for each of us with an accompanying thank you card. This woman was so sweet and so thankful that *we* had come, and not the rip off artists that are trolling the gulf area in search of unsuspecting home owners in need.

Housing for the volunteers was, to say the least, protective. Our plastic tent city complete with kerosene heaters and generators was flanked on the right by a FEMA trailer camp for those who are able to rebuild, and on the left by a FEMA tent camp, canvas platformed affairs for those who had nothing left and were awaiting some form of re-settlement aid and placement. Each area was cordoned off by fencing and the entire complex illuminated with spotlights on poles.

The Sumter, S.C. group prepared lunches and a CrabBoil, pronounced as craboil, one word. It was delicious!

Some impressions:

### **Ripples on the water**

Through all the swirling mass of debris, and a completely disoriented life style, there comes a sense of returning. Small efforts are making the larger picture begin to take

shape, helping the people struggle to put into place what once was, even though there is a 10+ year window of rebuilding on the horizon. The city of D'lberville is very organized in this resolve as its mayor Rusty Quave stated in his opening remarks to us. "This is the best of the worst on the gulf coast in all aspects of rebirth."

Baseball diamonds being re-groomed; baseball practice being held.

One small bird rooting in the yard as I whistled to it. It seemed to pause as if it enjoyed the sound, for no other birds were in sight.

Some schools have re-opened, some with portable trailers, to substitute for ones that have been completely destroyed

And lastly people so gracious, so slow and steady, as if what they have encountered has given them pause and a greater reflection on the meaning of life.

### **Thanks and praise**

To Associate Pastor Elena Delgado, for her constant strength and unwavering style of leadership.

To Mary-Diana Pouli Youth coordinator of the Presbytery of WNY

To Rev Stuart Buisch, staff worship liaison for the trip

To Presbytery Church U.S.A. in organizing the Presbyterian Disaster Assistance camp and teams

To Presbytery of W.N.Y. for using budget money to offset the financial cost of the trip

A special thank you to the Y.M.C.A. of Ocean City who opened its doors to all volunteer groups for hot showers.

### **Lastly, Praise and Prayers**

Praise to the strong citizens of the gulf region

Praise for the strength to get up every day and see the same upended landscape you saw yesterday

Praise for the strength to withstand the agonizingly slow recuperation

A prayer for wholeness, suffering and love, to love these people, to take hold of them, comfort them and listen to them, for it is in the telling that the healing begins