

Two years after Katrina: Starting over

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Pastor R. C. Blakes has two flocks in two different cities. On Sunday mornings in New Orleans, services are packed at his New Home Family Worship Center, which is working to get all of its ministry programs up and running two years after Hurricane Katrina.

Blake's other church is 300 miles away in Houston, where hundreds of his former parishioners relocated. Earlier last month, they broke ground for a new church there.

"A lot of them are struggling with the loss of their culture. Even though many of them have been able to assimilate into that culture there, it's not New Orleans, and I see a lot of times that they are grieving for what they know to be home," Blakes told *Religion & Ethics NewsWeekly*, the PBS television program.

For now, Blakes commutes back and forth twice a week. The traveling is taking a personal toll, he said, but he feels that both congregations need him right now.

"There've been a lot of things that I have preached prior to Katrina that I've actually had to live, and I've found that it's harder to live it than it is to preach it. One of the great lessons that I've learned is that we have to totally depend on God," he said. And so it goes as hurricane-devastated churches struggle to rebuild and rebound—but not always in New Orleans.

[Church World Service, the ecumenical relief and development agency, noted that after \$7.4 billion was donated in 2005, the 2006 total reported by Giving USA Foundation dropped to \$1.2 billion. Homeowners awaiting insurance money have often found that lawsuits against major insurers have tied up payments. The companies argue that Katrina's damage came from flooding and therefore is not covered. The most common form of housing sought by people of limited means is rental. What few units are available are more costly than before Katrina. A two-bedroom apartment in the New Orleans area now rents for about \$978 per month,

compared to \$676 in 2005.]

New Orleans native Pastor E. J. Scott had a thriving Baptist church until Katrina hit. Now he hosts a daily radio show and prays for people who call in with requests. He also has a fledgling church 500 miles away in Dallas.

“Two days after the storm . . . is when God spoke to me and told me to start another church [in Dallas],” he said.

Scott and his wife, Dee, fled New Orleans just before Katrina and came to Dallas to stay with a friend. They eventually connected with Gaston Oaks Baptist Church, a predominantly white congregation that wanted to help victims of Katrina.

Gaston Oaks is supporting Scott as he launches the Temple of New Life Baptist Church, which holds services on Gaston Oaks’s second floor. Temple of New Life already has a small core group of members, including other evacuees from the Gulf Coast.

Scott says that though God has given him an ambitious vision for the future, he has been on an “emotional rollercoaster” since leaving New Orleans. His old church, Shiloh Christian Fellowship Baptist Church, has a new pastor, but the building remains boarded up. Many church members are upset that Scott didn’t return.

“Those that were very close to us have kind of disowned us,” Scott said. “And we understand that. . . . They probably feel forsaken.” He said if he didn’t believe that God had other plans for him, he would have returned to rebuild.

About 60 percent of the pre-Katrina population has returned to New Orleans, but in the devastated Lower Ninth Ward, only a small percentage of residents are back and only a fraction of the damaged churches have been rebuilt. One of them, St. Paul Church of God in Christ, was deluged by nearly nine feet of water. Now it stands as an oasis in an area dominated by deserted houses and overgrown bulldozed lots. The church was rebuilt by volunteers from a faith-based relief group called God’s Pit Crew.

Pastor Ernest Dison said that the restored church is a testimony to what compassionate generosity can accomplish. But money is tight. Only about 60 of his 250 members have returned. Few of them have regular jobs or receive post-Katrina government aid. Tithes and offerings are sparse, and the church isn’t getting outside

contributions.

“Salary? Well now. Well now,” Dison said. “I’m going right along with the church. We do what we have to do to make it, so that’s a great challenge for us.”

Still, Dison said he wants St. Paul’s to be a beacon of hope for the entire Lower Ninth Ward and to reopen its drug rehab center, feeding program and school of theology.

“We’re going to continue to do exactly what we feel we’ve been called to do by God,” he said. -*Kim Lawton*, Religion & Ethics NewsWeekly