

Storms wreck churches, clergy salaries: Over 900 churches affected

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More than 900 houses of worship on the Gulf Coast have been destroyed, seriously damaged or forced to suspend services by hurricanes Katrina and Rita, leaving many clergy without salaries.

Interviews with more than a dozen faith leaders by Religion News Service indicate that hundreds more congregations had at least minimal damage.

And that was before careful tallies were made after Hurricane Wilma swept through southern Florida October 24. At least two Baptist churches reportedly were destroyed in Florida and 21 others damaged, according to an initial report by Associated Baptist Press. Wilma was blamed for ten deaths in Florida, while total damage to property was estimated to exceed \$10 billion.

“One reality of these storms that is different from other recent hurricanes is that many of our churches will not be meeting for several months,” wrote Robert H. Bohl and Rick Ufford-Chase of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) in a fund-raising letter.

One of the biggest challenges is providing salaries for clergy. That’s why mega-church pastor and best-selling author Rick Warren is leading an initiative that involves 500 small groups from his Saddleback Church in Lake Forest, California. Each of them is adopting an affected church and paying the pastor’s salary for at least six months.

“It’s very easy to raise money for bottled water,” said Warren, author of *The Purpose Driven Life*, in an interview. “It’s very easy to raise money for blankets. Nobody wants to pay the salary of a pastor. Our philosophy is help the caregiver so that they don’t have to worry about themselves.”

He said almost 3,800 “Purpose-Driven” churches connected to his interdenominational network are located in the region hit by Katrina and Rita. Of those, at least 500 were flooded, damaged or destroyed.

Bohl and Ufford-Chase, both former moderators of the PCUSA General Assembly, recently wrote a letter to the denomination's larger churches to encourage them to contribute to a Presbyterian Disaster Assistance fund that will provide salary support for pastors and other church staffers. They estimated that about 62 Presbyterian churches were severely damaged by Katrina and Rita.

"Their church buildings need to be completely rebuilt, and their members have scattered all across the nation," wrote Bohl and Ufford-Chase. "This means there are no offerings being taken, no income stream to pay salaries of pastors and other church employees."

The African Methodist Episcopal Church has raised more than \$1 million for relief efforts, including tens of thousands of dollars to supplement clergy salaries.

"It's like the office being torn down," said Bishop C. Garnett Henning, leader of AME churches in Louisiana and Mississippi and manager of his denomination's hurricane response. "These pastors have been driven out of their place of leadership in the community and there's a void."

William Maestri, superintendent of schools in the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of New Orleans, said about 70 of its 151 parishes were operating by mid-October. Others were not, due to destruction or a lack of services such as electricity, water and sanitation. "Our goal is to open schools and churches as soon as possible," said Maestri. -Reuters