

Church support workers affected by gulf oil spill: General gloom and anger

News in the [June 29, 2010](#) issue

As oil continues to spill into the Gulf of Mexico, churches and religious organizations along the Louisiana coast are providing food, money and support to parishioners whose livelihoods hang in the balance.

Millions of gallons of oil have contaminated the gulf since an oil rig explosion on April 20, bringing the region's fishing industry to a screeching halt. It's been particularly hard for churches like St. Patrick Catholic Church in Port Sulphur, Louisiana, where many parishioners are fishermen.

Pastor Gerard Stapleton and his staff at St. Patrick's have distributed food and \$100 vouchers to 300 families in his congregation affected by the oil spill. "It could very easily . . . destroy our way of life, which generations have enjoyed," Stapleton said. "This is one of the top ten areas in the United States for fishing."

One of St. Patrick's parishioners is fisherman Vincent Frelich, whose family has owned Frelich Seafood and Bait for about 35 years. When at its best, the business brought in more than 3,000 pounds of shrimp and seafood a week. In May they were lucky if they got 100 live shrimp a day, Frelich said. "Right now, we don't even know how long . . . the damage is going to last."

At First Baptist Church of Chalmette, Pastor John Dee Jeffries is trying to lift the spirits of the 180 people in his congregation through sermon. "God is a God of hope," said Jeffries, who has been with the church for 20 years. "I don't understand how God will work this together for good, but I'm confident that he will."

About 40 percent of the church's members are unemployed and still reeling from the devastation of Hurricane Katrina, Jeffries said. They were not ready for the oil spill.

“It’s a pretty tight-knit web of pain and despair that has been here for awhile that is starting to lessen, but this is really complicating things,” Jeffries said. “There is a general gloom and anger across the metropolitan New Orleans area. . . . They can’t believe this is happening again.”

The ecological tragedy nevertheless helped some who lack expert work skills.

In an unusual United Methodist program that trains low-income workers and brings them to the gulf coastlines to deal with oil-spill hazards, about 75 workers—from two UMC-related black colleges— who are schooled in hazardous-waste removal have been brought to the area.

Cleaning up are certified hazardous- waste workers trained at Clark Atlanta University’s Environmental Justice Resource Center and Dillard University’s Deep South Center for Environmental Justice in New Orleans, according to the United Methodist News Service.

Freddie Redmond, 40, once homeless on the streets of Atlanta, is a trained worker preparing to apply his skills on the beaches of Mississippi. Another recent graduate, India Bass, 25, praised the program. “I have gained a career; it really opened my eyes to some things,” she said. The graduates work for companies cleaning beaches in Alabama, Mississippi and Florida.