

Faith-based coalition helping with Louisiana storm recovery

by [Joey Butler](#) in the [April 20, 2022](#) issue



Peter L. Yoder (right) talks with Bill Howell about the progress of repairs to a home in southwest Louisiana. (Photo by Mike DuBose, United Methodist News Service)

Louisiana residents trying to recover from more than a year and a half of weather disasters are benefiting from a unique faith-based coalition formed to help with recovery and rebuilding efforts in storm-ridden Lake Charles.

The coalition consists of the Louisiana Conference of the United Methodist Church, Mennonite Disaster Service, and Fuller Center Disaster ReBuilders, a Christian nonprofit organized in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina to help those who have no other means to repair their storm-damaged homes.

Western Louisiana in particular has endured a string of weather events that has made recovery difficult. From August 2020 to September 2021, the area was hit by

Hurricanes Laura, Delta, and Ida; a winter freeze; and a local flood caused by over 12 inches of rain. All of this happened during the coronavirus pandemic, which hampered the work of volunteer teams.

Bill Howell, director of missional engagement and outreach for the UMC Louisiana Conference, was training to become a missionary before COVID-19 emerged. The pandemic prevented his mission team from a work trip to the Caribbean, so he contacted the Louisiana Conference to arrange a trip there instead.

Howell, who is retired from the chemical and energy industries, said he certainly wasn't seeking a job, but "somehow my resume got into the hands of the bishop, and here I am. It's all been God stuff."

In November 2021, Howell found an ally in Phil Helmuth, volunteer coordinator for Mennonite Disaster Service and equally bad at retirement—Helmuth said he and Howell have "five failed retirements" between them.

"We drove through the city and there was no one working here, yet you have blue tarps and disaster all over," Helmuth said. "COVID created a bottleneck in terms of response. The way things were in November 2020 is the way they were in November 2021; nothing had changed."

Helmuth coordinates volunteer work teams from Amish communities, and Howell inquired about whether a team could come to Lake Charles in January 2022. A week later, he received a call from an Amish team. He said the coalition was formed even more quickly: a Zoom call to discuss the possibility of a partnership ended with an agreement to work together.

Each group has a different responsibility. The Louisiana Conference handles case management and helps with some funding through the United Methodist Committee on Relief. Mennonite Disaster Service provides the Amish work teams. Fuller Center handles permitting and materials and connects members with local subcontractors.

"That's how we complement each other, and we're much stronger working together than any of us are separately," Helmuth said.

With contractors in high demand and short supply, normally it's the people with either insurance money or personal means to pay contractors who are given priority. The uninsured and renters fall through the cracks, and this is where the coalition

steps in.

“Homeowners have tried themselves to do some repairs, and we’ve had to come behind them,” Howell said. “They’ve had no help, just trying to do what they could do.”

In addition to using a crisis hotline to find people in need of help, Howell spoke to local churches for referrals and even went through neighborhoods with door hangers containing contact information. He said they went from having zero cases to more than 50 in six weeks.

“Everything is moving so quickly, I don’t think I can keep up with all the doors God has opened,” Howell said.

One of the door hangers led Debra Duhon to call the coalition.

“I told the Lord that I needed help with this house, and God sent me the right people to get it done,” she said.

Like Duhon’s, many houses in the area are on piers to protect from flooding, but they tend to settle, and the floors aren’t level. Much of the work the Amish are doing is leveling floors and ensuring the house is structurally sound before other repairs begin.

Work crews rotate out every two weeks. Many come by bus from Ohio, New York, and Pennsylvania, and they stay at University United Methodist Church in Lake Charles, with church volunteers transporting them, since most Amish don’t drive cars.

“My perception of the Amish has changed so much from what stereotypes you may see on TV. They’re very sociable, they laugh and have fun,” said volunteer Elmer Roach. “The one sad thing is I spend two weeks developing relationships with these people and then they go home.”

At the end of each team’s two weeks, the church hosts a celebratory dinner cooked by Amish volunteers at which the teams get to spend time with the homeowners they’ve helped. If they’ve finished the home, the keys and a housewarming gift like a Bible or prayer shawl are presented to the homeowner.

Duhon was able to thank the crew that worked on her home.

“All I can do is give it up to God, because I never gave up on this little raggedy house,” she said. “Y’all put a smile on my face.”

With their retirement home over 700 miles away in Jacksonville, Florida, the Howells are living in a converted classroom at St. Luke-Simpson United Methodist Church in Lake Charles. They’ve been there since October 2021, and Bill Howell said they’ll be there “for the duration.” —United Methodist News Service