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Juno's Clever Political Balancing Act

By the Thousands, Faithful Toil to Resurrect Gulf Cities

Sojourners in the South Leave Behind Jobs, Schools, Lives

By *Jacqueline L. Salmon*

Washington Post Staff Writer

Sunday, February 5, 2006; Page A01

BILOXI, Miss. With drywall, two-by-fours and a patient faith in a sometimes-exasperating God, Burke resident Bart Tucker is trying to raise a small neighborhood from the dead.

But in this Gulf Coast city of 50,000, a slender thumb of land smashed by the winds and waters of Hurricane Katrina, nothing comes easy -- least of all miracles.

Since arriving in Biloxi with a convoy of supplies and volunteers from his Fairfax County church, Lord of Life Lutheran, shortly after Labor Day, Tucker has spent a total of eight weeks here. He goes home only to raise more money and recruit more volunteers.

His efforts have rippled across Northern Virginia. Other faith organizations have joined in -- churches, Habitat for Humanity, Bible study groups -- sending members and money, forming partnerships with Biloxi churches and adopting families.

But Tucker's crusade is hardly solitary. More than 10,000 religious people across the country have poured through the stricken Mississippi Gulf Coast in an unprecedented volunteer effort.

They sleep in church sanctuaries, RVs and tents. They leave behind jobs, schools and retirement for labor pilgrimages of days, weeks or months. Some have taken drastic measures, selling their homes and leaving family to move to the crushed Gulf Coast to devote themselves full time.

For Tucker, a lifelong Lutheran, his is a spiritual mission best described by the Biblical admonition by which he lives: "Faith by itself, if it is without works, is dead."

Beyond that, he doesn't question God's purpose for his presence.

"I'm just here," he said. "Whether I'm called in this direction, I'm not sure. I'm here."

The volunteers' focus: a seemingly endless horizon of destruction that stretches 70 miles. In Mississippi, 35,000 homes owned by residents who had no flood insurance were destroyed. Tens of thousands more were heavily damaged. Beyond this is Louisiana, where 77,000 homeowners with no flood insurance saw homes destroyed.

"We know that we will be there for a minimum of five years," said Pamela Burdine, a spokeswoman for Presbyterian Disaster Assistance, which has launched its largest response to a disaster -- more than 2,000 volunteers in weeklong shifts.

These missions are concentrated mostly among Christians -- Methodists and Catholics are doing case management -- but they have been joined by the faithful from other religions. Last month, for example, 150 Jewish college students bunked at a Presbyterian church in Gulfport, Miss., while they repaired homes after koshering the church's kitchen.

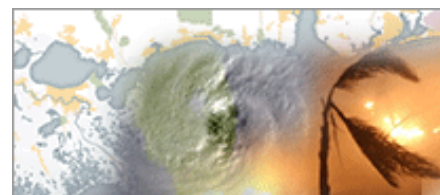


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[Restoration From Patient Faith](#)

In a land demolished by the winds and waters of Hurricane Katrina, when all else is silent, faith screams aloud.

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A Devastating Season

The Gulf Coast was hit hard by two massive hurricanes in the fall of 2005.

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