

December 12, 2005

Dear friends:

Thanksgiving has passed and Christmas now beckons, but for the Mississippi Gulf Coast this is a distinctly different holiday season. Gone are the stately coastal homes that once boasted such dazzling light displays. Gone are so many neighborhoods rich and poor that housed generations of family celebrations and traditions. Gone too are thousands of jobs that granted economic security and made Christmas giving a confident and joyful act. So much gone.

More than 100 days into this new post-Katrina reality, dozens of statistics are being released that help to characterize this mind-numbing experience. 230 who perished in Mississippi because of Hurricane Katrina have now been identified. Five remain unidentified and 68 others are still considered "missing". Unemployment hovers at nearly 25%. Over 64,000 homes in the three southernmost counties in Mississippi are totally destroyed, and another 65,000 homes are heavily damaged. It is estimated that 44 million cubic yards of debris will have been removed when all is said and done, but more than half of that remains at this date. 23,000 families now call FEMA trailers home, but at least 10,000 more families still await them. The numbers are absolutely staggering, but for those who live here those numbers are extremely personal.

Yet life endures, and people here have gradually settled into some kind of humble acceptance of this new reality. FEMA trailers sit in bleak circumstances, but some of their inhabitants make efforts to decorate them for Christmas with red bows and twinkling lights. People relish the simple things: the first time you set eyes on a colleague or friend you haven't seen since before the storm... a day when traffic moves almost normally... phones that work and mail that's delivered. These are the seemingly huge blessings of life after Katrina.

We are also finding our way again at Back Bay Mission. Although we continue to be overwhelmed by the enormity of what's been lost as an organization... buildings, staff, friends, and a certain ministry momentum... we are slowly embracing this new path we're on. Our remaining staff members have been a tremendous source of pride and inspiration, as they have managed our transition with great grace and patience. Our operations out of two construction trailers (which will likely be our agency home for another 12 months or more) have taken on welcome routine, and we are serving the community once again, which helps to re-establish a sense of purpose and hope.

Our emergency assistance and case management services re-opened on October 24. By the end of November, we had assisted nearly 400 individuals with over \$16,000 in emergency relief. Most persons were desperate for help with their utility bills, and such aid was granted by working directly with utility companies. In December, we have allocated another \$23,000 for emergency relief, and every appointment on our case worker's schedule is filled through year-end. We are also preparing to provide Christmas toys and other gifts for 427 children later this week. Ministry in abundance! Meanwhile,

we have hosted a few UCC disaster relief groups utilizing alternative and modest housing elsewhere along the Coast. And, joyfully, we seem to be on the lips of many in the area, as people begin to consider which local organizations might take the lead on community issues that are now more critical than ever, such as affordable housing and neighborhood redevelopment. Back Bay Mission seems to come to mind for many! In response, we continue to ask ourselves how God may be calling us to serve in new ways while remaining faithful to our core mission. The Board and staff are discussing ways we can “re-tool” in order to most effectively minister in this new time and respond to the community’s need of us into the future. Stay tuned!

While we work to discern how we can best be of service in this post-Katrina world, much still eludes us and prevents us from fully planning our future. Insurance settlements remain largely unknown. Contractors are too busy to even offer bids on needed repairs and construction. The fate of several buildings is still in question. And the few definitive decisions we’ve attempted to make about temporary workcamper housing and other structures on our campus are frustrated by protracted bureaucratic processes with the City. Everything here moves agonizingly slow. Patience is not only a virtue but an absolute necessity... and the subject of many a prayer!

As the New Year advances, many prayers are uttered. We pray for wisdom enough to discern Back Bay Mission’s ministry in this challenging new day. We pray for love enough to conquer pains and sorrows...compassion enough to minister without fail. We pray for hope enough to set our eyes and hearts on things as yet unseen, and faith enough to travel a road never before trod. And we pray for all of you, beset with your own unique worries and concerns, and yet generous enough to remember us in numerous and life-giving ways. Your blessings on us continue to flow, and we remain deeply grateful. ***Thank you*** for your companionship and care on this challenging new journey.

God’s peace to each of you. May your Christmas and New Year be laced with joy and tinged with love!

Shari Prestemon
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