

## OUTREACH

## Four Atlanta Churches Assist New Orleans Church & School

Some 37 volunteers from four Atlanta-area Lutheran congregations journeyed to New Orleans recently to help St. John Lutheran Church and School in their recovery from last year's devastating Hurricane Katrina.



The trip was coordinated by Thrivent Financial for Lutherans representative Greg Sinatra, who believes that "faith must be expressed in action."

A native of New Orleans, Sinatra knew that many churches and schools in his hometown were still in need of major renovation following Hurricane Katrina. St. John, located on New Orleans' Canal Street, had been



Gail Goeddeke, church secretary of Timothy Lutheran Church & School-Woodstock, here painting a preschool bathroom.

devastated when its structures were engulfed by more than four feet of hurricane flood waters. The congregation's school, once home to 150 students, was in session just two days during the 2005-2006 school year because of Katrina.

Though St. John members and other volunteers had "largely removed debris from within the church and school, reconstructing and refurbishing the congregation and school's floors, interior walls, electrical and plumbing systems was still needed," said Sinatra. "Because of the work remaining to be done, hopes to reopen the school this fall were beginning to become as murky as the hurricane flood waters that had filled the school."

Sinatra learned of the congregation's plight from relatives and friends and began planning the May 26-June 4

reconstruction trip. He invited individuals from four area Lutheran congregations to join him. Responding were 37 volunteers from Rivercliff-Dunwoody, Faith-Marietta, Timothy-Woodstock and St. Luke-Atlanta.

Locating a place to stay in New Orleans was the group's first challenge. They had some access to recreational vehicles and tents, but St. John's campus could not accommodate all of the volunteers. The problem was solved when families from St. Stephen Lutheran Church, about 10 miles away, agreed to host about half of the Georgia visitors.

"This mission trip was a unique opportunity to connect members of the Lutheran community from Atlanta to those in New Orleans," stated Sinatra. "During our trip, I was reminded of the importance of being available to God to serve others, whether that was through reconstruction, encouragement or providing a place to stay for weary volunteers."

The Atlanta group "experienced good stewardship lessons from decisions made decades ago," Sinatra said.

"The sanctuary was built in 1924 and included long-leaf hard pine wood floors. The sanctuary floors were completely submerged in salty flood waters for two weeks after the hurricane as the water mark was over the tops of the pews. Yet, only a half-dozen floor boards were

ruined. St. John congregation benefits today from decisions made 80+ years ago to install a higher-grade flooring material," he elaborated.

Sanctuary floor repairs were done by Rivercliff Lutheran members. Youth from Faith and Timothy refinished the new school building's vinyl tile floors — and St. Luke members completed carpentry and painting tasks in the sanctuary and school buildings.

Some volunteers donated school supplies and worked with young children to replant a courtyard garden, while several volunteer teams provided skills in carpentry, painting, electrical, plumbing and drywall finishing.

"It is amazing to see first hand how much work there is," stated Tom Reese, an elder from Rivercliff Lutheran. "There is no way the local congregation could do this recovery on their own. It was so rewarding to help, and we had fun, too."

Kristen Bennett of Timothy Lutheran added, "I think we did an awesome job. You heard a lot about the damage down there, but it didn't really come home until you got down there and really saw it for yourself." Bennett cleaned and painted three school bathrooms with others in the group. They had to run extension cords to a neighboring building because the school still had no electricity.



Some of the volunteers shared their experiences and impressions from the trip, underscoring that they, too, benefited from the experience.

"Working in the school was both unique and heartbreaking," stated Marlene Snyder, Sunday School coordinator from Timothy Lutheran. "You go into the classroom and see the homework assignment that would have been due the next day, and it really touches you."

"We take every day for granted sometimes, and here these people were, expecting to have normal school day, and then everything is wiped out



Greg Sinatra, Eric Wendorf and David Hirschler — members of Faith-Marietta — are shown surveying a water line at St. John.

by a hurricane instead," Snyder concluded.

Euri Souza, Rivercliff's custodian, said, "Now I can tell my family and friends in Brazil what the United States is. When one state is in trouble, others help. People are helping New Orleans from all over the country."

"I hope that by going our family has been used by God to demonstrate to the people of St. John Lutheran that He is faithful and that no matter what the tragedy He will never leave or forsake them," Rivercliff

come and gone since February afford us the opportunity to reopen our school this fall."

Thrivent Financial for Lutherans provided financial assistance with a matching grant of \$1,000. The four participating congregations are on schedule to raise an additional \$4,000 which will be used to offset some of the costs of the trip and provide funding to St. John Lutheran for further renovation.

"When people of goodwill come together in common



Among the Atlanta volunteers who helped at St. John-New Orleans were Cheryl Reese, a member of Rivercliff Lutheran Church & School-Roswell, shown cleaning narthex light fixture.

member Marilyn Reese said. "I was also reminded while I was working of Galatians 6:2a: 'Help carry one another's burdens.'

"We need to help our Christian brothers and sisters bear their burdens and what a burden St. John faces as it rebuilds from Katrina," she added.

Sharing a local perspective was St. John Principal Bethany Gonski. "We were so blessed to have the group from Atlanta assist us for an entire week," she said. "Their efforts along with 150 other volunteers from across the country who have

cause, great things can happen even during difficult circumstances," concluded Ginny Hultquist, manager of Lutheran Community Services for the Southeast regional financial office of Thrivent Financial in Mt. Pleasant, SC. "Thrivent Financial is proud to support this effort through our Care in Regions program."

For more information on St. John Lutheran Church & School in New Orleans, visit [www.sjlno.com](http://www.sjlno.com) or contact Bethany Gonski at 504-488-6641. □

### Program Connects Students To Congregations

What can pastors and congregational leaders do to connect their members away at college to a Lutheran Word and Sacrament ministry? How can parents connect their sons and daughters at college with a Lutheran campus ministry fellowship group?

Now there is a fast and simple solution: the College – Congregation – Connection.

The campus ministers of the Florida-Georgia District have designed this on-line enrollment initiative. College students who are enrolled in this program will be connected to a campus ministry. The campus ministry will serve as a welcoming presence on behalf of the church on the university campus.

To enroll, go to [www.flga-lcms.org](http://www.flga-lcms.org), the homepage for the Florida-Georgia District. There you will find the College-Congregation-Connection icon on the front page. This link will take you to a form which can be completed and submitted on-line. The information will be transmitted to a Lutheran campus ministry or congregation near the college you specify, and your son or daughter will be contacted and invited to participate in this college ministry.

If you do not have internet access, or would prefer to enroll on the phone, please call Cindy Hammerstrom at 877.457.5556, extension 5. □