

A report from the Rev. Jane Bearden upon the conclusion of her two-year residency at Gulf Coast partner Church of the Redeemer in Biloxi, Miss.:

As I come to the end of my two year mission on the Gulf Coast I am acutely aware of what is yet to be done. But there is also the awareness of how much we have accomplished together. Massachusetts sent hundreds of volunteers down to the Gulf Coast and even more in New Orleans. Some of these groups worked more closely with me than others, but almost all let me know that they would be here and thanked me for being available if they had need of me. I have talked and toured and run errands and clapped as one tired volunteer after another helped us restore dignity and hope to those who felt abandoned. My efforts have not been restricted to working with volunteers though. Last January, I presented a workshop at the Province 1 Stewardship and Evangelism conference. I spoke of building congregations through service in the community.

My focus with volunteers, this year, has been on the loss of the wetlands and the need to address human rights issues, especially racism openly.

- On several occasions I worked with the University of Southern Mississippi and with the Gulf Restoration Network to secure speakers for groups. These sessions sometimes included a real southern barbeque with a bonfire on the beach.
- In addressing human rights I worked with the Steps Coalition, Main Street Missionary Baptist Church, St Stephen's Episcopal Church in Lynn (BANA), and Redeemer to put together a racially diverse group of teens and adults to dialogue on issues of race and to engage in a service project in Massachusetts at Esperanza Academy. This project was tremendously successful and has continued into the fall of 2008 and hopefully, under new leadership, will continue on.

As the volunteers begin to decrease in number it is imperative that congregations in Mississippi take up the banner and continue the work. This fall Redeemer began working with St Rose de Lima and the people of Cameron Louisiana to help them recover from the devastation of Hurricane Ike. We resumed our place as members of the Interfaith Hospitality Network, securing funding from ERD to help purchase a home for transitional housing and serving as hosts for several families. Members of Redeemer worked shelters and provided disaster assistance after Gustav in several surrounding areas.

One half of my time was spent in working with The Church of the Redeemer. During the year I supported the rector's three month sabbatical. During most of the year my role was largely with the children. VBS, a Fall Festival, and developing a "Congregations for Children" network took up much of my time. And then there was always the routine of pastoral care, liturgy, and preaching.

As we move forward the bonds forged between Massachusetts and Mississippi will endure if we continue to listen to each other. Working with the Gulf Coast Partnership Task Force we can continue to be in touch and to learn from each other. It is my hope that we in Massachusetts will also learn how to be better prepared should disaster strike close to home.

I am grateful to the people of the Diocese of Massachusetts for supporting this mission. If you would like to have me come to your congregation to speak or to answer questions, or perhaps to make some really good gumbo, you can reach me at Trinity Episcopal Church in Haverhill, MA.