

THE LOG OF THE GUINSTON GUTTERS I

These are the journeys of the Guinston Gutters: ordinary people giving a week of our time, travelling to New Orleans to help victims of Hurricane Katrina. We do the dirty, tedious work of debris clearance and house gutting in order to help one family at a time with rebuilding their homes, lives and community.

When the results of Hurricane Katrina and the inadequate response by government agencies became apparent, the congregation of Guinston Presbyterian Church decided to send a mission team to provide direct aid to the victims of the disaster. Pastor Daniel Moore called for volunteers, and we made contact with the John Calvin Presbyterian Church of Metairie, Louisiana on an internet disaster bulletin board. Sonia D. Lee, their Director of Christian Education, offered directions to John Calvin Church, and quarters in their Fellowship Hall. She then compiled a work list of church staff and members, neighbors and other residents of the greater New Orleans region in need of help.

The First Trip - October 2005

On a windy Friday evening early in October, we loaded our trucks in a pouring rain. Saturday morning we headed south-west to the Shenandoah Valley in a mix of rain and fog. After a hundred miles, one of the trucks had a battery failure; for the rest of the first day, it was a “push to start” after each pit stop. We drove down Interstate 81 until darkness, rain and driver fatigue brought us to a halt for the night near Lookout Mountain (Chattanooga, Tennessee). Sunday morning we continued onward, with a foggy morning stop at Wal-Mart in Bessemer, Alabama for a new truck battery. We started seeing storm damage at Meridian, Mississippi, with blue plastic FEMA roofing on houses, and trees broken off like matchsticks and blown down along the sides of the highway.



Our last pit stop before entering the New Orleans area was in Picayune, Mississippi, where we discovered that neither cell phones nor landlines could connect us to John Calvin for a current road condition report. A northbound aid worker advised us that we could enter the city from the East on Interstate 10, but when we arrived at the bridge we found that the inbound span was closed since several sections were on the bottom of Lake Ponchartrain. After a sightseeing tour around three sides of the lake, we approached New Orleans from the West on I-10. In heavy traffic we found that all of the direction signs and exit markers had been removed by the storm. Our only recognizable landmark was the airport control tower; we exited towards Metairie, and providentially found Transcontinental Drive and a warm welcome at the John Calvin Church.



On Monday morning, we started in on our first project: a three-story house owned by Sally, a teacher in the church nursery school. The ground floor had been her college-age daughter's apartment; it had been completely submerged and was a total loss. The second floor (newly remodeled) only had a few inches of water in it; it needed the kitchen appliances pulled out and the new carpet and hardwood flooring ripped up. Clearance of all the ruined contents and the gutting job required two complete days.





Wednesday we had the opportunity to do a floor-to-ceiling gutting job on a large single-story house in the Lakeside district. The owner had just had it remodeled in anticipation of his upcoming marriage. The good news was that he had cleared all of the ruined contents before we arrived. The bad news was that he had installed massive amounts of fiberglass insulation in the walls and over the dropped ceilings; storm damage to the roof combined with flooding 7 feet up the walls made it a perfect growth environment for black slimy mold and colonies of microbes and insects.

Thursday we were lucky enough to spend the day outdoors, removing a large oak tree which had been blown down in the yard of a house across the street from the church.



Thursday evening we went out to the French quarter for dinner and sightseeing. The notorious Bourbon Street area was more tacky than sin-ridden, and somewhat more subdued than expected (possibly due to the heavy concentration of police in riot gear and National Guard patrols with automatic weapons.)

Friday morning we did more tree removal and cleanup work around the church, then packed up and hit the road for home after lunch. After 500 miles in congestion and heavy Friday evening traffic, we stopped for the night near the Tennessee-Virginia border. We arrived home in Pennsylvania late Saturday night, after 2580 miles, nine days, and an education in service to people in need.

