

Feature Section: Faith & Values

Ramona man coordinates efforts to help churches damaged by Katrina

By: GARY WARTH - Staff Writer

As Chip Rumis watched the devastation of Hurricane Katrina from his Ramona home, he felt an urge to help in some way, but did not want to just write a check.

Rumis, 51, saw the breached levees, flooded streets and stranded people in New Orleans, where he knew the recovery effort would be concentrated. But what about the smaller cities in surrounding areas?

"All of the TV coverage was about New Orleans, New Orleans," he said. "And basically, my view was, 'You're not going to help anything there, because it's just going to take forever.' But these smaller communities"

Rumis, the retired president and CEO of the Poway-based technology company Tiscor, said he is "the type of guy who would get things done now." He set his sights on where he thought he'd be most effective: the towns outside the area hardest hit by Katrina.

A Christian already active in John 8:31 Ministries, which provides discipleship training and studies for churches, Rumis focused on helping to rebuild damaged churches in Mississippi.

"Those churches were the relief centers for the people in the community," he said. "If you didn't get those things back in line, they weren't going to help the community. If I helped a church get itself re-established and get its congregation back together, then that congregation could help other people and their needs."

Rumis and his friend, Karl Higgins of Vista, flew to Jackson, Miss., on Sept. 2. They then drove south to offer help to whoever they found.

"When we got into the actual city area of Hattiesburg (Miss.), that's where we saw a lot of damage," he said about the city about an hour's drive northeast of New Orleans.

"We drove up to a church, knocked on a pastor's door and said, 'We're on a mission from California and would like to see how we could help.'"

The men were told to call Bobby Shurden, the sheriff's chaplain for Forest County, Miss.

"He understood what my passion was and said he would help me anyway he could," Rumis said.

After a full day of assessing damage and making contacts in Hattiesburg, Rumis and Higgins went to Houston and caught a plane back home.

"What I learned was these people were exhausted," he said. "It was hot, they were tired and they needed help."

Back in Ramona, Rumis created the nonprofit Adopt-a-Church to help coordinate volunteers and raise funds for the relief effort. Promoted largely through word of mouth and the group's Web site, www.Adopt-a-Church.com, Rumis has recruited volunteers from Tennessee to help repair one church and is interviewing other churches from as far away as Pittsburgh for help in other projects.

A drag and hot-rod racer in the National Hot Rod Association, Rumis also has found supporters in Racers for Christ, a faith-based group whose members pray for each other's safety and study the Bible together.

The group so far has coordinated reconstruction projects at Trinity Church in Petal, Miss., 65 miles from the Gulf Coast, and in Hattiesburg churches Miracle Temple Holiness and Crestview Baptist, where Shurden is the pastor.

"Chip has really been a hustler and a go-getter," said Jimmie Garrard, pastor at Trinity Baptist Church. "He's really been a blessing to us. He's been able to keep things organized around here."

Garrard said Rumis coordinated the reroofing of his church and other work on the ground, done with the help of 14 students from Carson Newman College in Tennessee and seven men from Fisherville First Baptist Church in Tennessee.

"They could have been visiting with their families, but they came down to help us, and they really worked hard, too," Garrard said of the college students, who volunteered to work during a break from school.

About two-thirds of the houses in Petal lost their roofs, and the church itself took a beating, he said.

"It tore almost all the roof, boards, windows," he said. "We had water inside and some sheet rock damage. It lifted our steeple up, but it didn't fall. It raised it up I reckon a good two, two and a half inches."

Garrard said the church has a new roof, but there still is about four weeks of work left to do on the property. He credits Rumis and the Adopt-a-Church volunteers with getting this far.

"He's worked hard, he and his wife, Jean," Garrard said about Rumis. "Chip's a good organizer, and he tries to make work sort of a joyous time. And he did. He just kept things going, and the way he talked to them all made it a fun time rather than a work time. I've never seen college kids work as hard."

The damage at the church caused the congregation to miss two Sundays of worship, but regular services are back and attendance is building back up, he said.

Besides volunteers from the South, Rumis also has traveled to Mississippi with people from San Diego County.

"Steve Arnold from San Diego owns Legends Home Furnishing and brought a group down last week," Rumis said. "Pat Strafford (a roofing contractor from San Diego) donated materials for Trinity Church and Miracle Temple that were driven from San Diego to Mississippi."

Rumis was in town for business last week but flew back to Mississippi on Oct. 28. He and his wife are living in a mobile home next to Shurden's church, Crestview Baptist Church, in Petal.

"What we're needing right now is volunteers to come down," he said about the ongoing effort. "We're looking for as much skilled labor as possible, and donations are needed for churches that didn't have insurance policies."

Rumis said he hopes to keep Adopt-a-Church active even after churches damaged by Katrina are repaired.

"This is a mission that's going to continue," he said.

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