

EVENTS

Heartbeat Jazz Band Concert • Sunday, August 27, 2-4 PM • The First Church of Portland • This is a benefit concert for Back Bay Mission, Biloxi MS. It will have been almost a year since Hurricane Katrina struck the Gulf Coast and although the news may have moved on, the recovery continues. The UCC-supported ministry provides a wide range of community services, including their stated current priorities of the issues of homelessness and affordable housing. • Contact: For information and tickets, call 860-342-3364 or e-mail mjcoe3@yahoo.com

Saving Paradise • Wednesday – Thursday, September 20-21 • First Congregational Church, 37 Main Street, Southington • An Educational Event for Clergy with Dr. Rita Nakashima Brock, founding Co-Director of Faith Voices for the Common Good, an organization dedicated to educating the public about the values and concerns of mainstream religious people. Many Christians believe in an apocalyptic end of the world with a rapture for the elect few saved by Jesus' crucifixion. However, the early church believed Jesus Christ saved the world by reopening paradise as an earthly life, lived with the Spirit of God within us and within the church. This series of lectures, filled with slides of ancient Christian artwork, will trace this paradise tradition and discuss how we might reclaim a version of it for life in a post-modern world. • Cost: \$30 • Contact: 860-628-6958, or www.firstchurchsouthington.org

Telling Our Lives In Spirit & In Truth – Wednesday, September 20, 7:30 pm • First Congregational Church, 37 Main Street, Southington • An Evening for Laity with Dr. Rita Nakashima Brock. This lecture will discuss the spiritual power of telling our life stories, the theological insights that can come from such telling, and what it means to live in the presence of the Spirit, no matter what happens to us. • Cost: \$5 • Contact: (860) 628-6958, or www.firstchurchsouthington.org

Haystack Bicentennial Celebration • September 22-24 • Williams College, Williamstown, Massachusetts • 200 years ago during a thunderstorm, five Williams College students held a prayer meeting in a Berkshire haystack. Within a decade their conversation had blossomed into the American foreign missions movement. Today, throughout the worldwide body of Christ we continue to ponder the nature of Christian mission, because it matters more than ever how we reach out in faith to the world. The Conference includes a keynote address by Lamin Sanneh; a panel with Dennis Dickerson, Ada-Maria Isasi-Diaz, Tim Tennent, and John Thomas; worship celebrations with Bart Campolo and more; Vespers

at the Haystack; global music by Michael Hawn and Patrick Evans; more than two dozen workshops, and more. Cost: \$50 registration; meals additional. Attendees are responsible for their own lodging. Contact: Williams College at 413-458-8220. (Please see related story on page 5.)

General Association • September 26 - 28 • Silver Lake Conference Center • The keynote speaker for General Association 2006 is the Rev. Dr. Susan Brooks Thistlethwaite, President of Chicago Theological Seminary. She will address "Reclaiming a Prophetic Voice—Preaching on Difficult Topics in Difficult Times." General Association is the longest standing ecclesiastical gathering in the United States, having begun in 1709. Throughout the years it has served as a time of spiritual renewal and a chance to network with other colleagues in ministry. This time of reflection and refreshment is held annually at our own Silver Lake Conference Center in the hills of Sharon, Connecticut, where all are invited to experience the presence of God's creative glory as we seek harmony within our hearts and among each other. • Cost: Registration \$40.00; Lodging \$25.00/night; Meals \$12.00 each • Contact: Rev. Ron Brown at 860-233-5564; or ronb@ctucc.org

Appreciative Inquiry • Learning Opportunity • October 2-4 • Framingham Retreat Center, Framingham, Massachusetts • Rev. Dr. Bob Voyle, Director of the Clergy Leadership Institute, will present a 3-day Introduction to Appreciative Inquiry for lay leaders and clergy. Appreciative Inquiry encourages healthy, hopeful change in congregations, beginning with loving questions about our best experiences in and as congregations, helping us create new possibilities rooted in those times and greatest vitality in congregational life. • Contact: Visit www.clergyleadership.com for registration and schedule information.

Called to Be Associate Clergy: A Distinctive Ministry • Thursdays in October (5, 12, 19, 26) from 9 am to 1 pm • Hartford Seminary • There is no "one size fits all" ministry. As varied as the congregations and the diversity of calls they extend, ministry as an associate is unique in its demands and rewards. Come consider, learn, name, claim and celebrate your contributions to the spiritual health and practical viability of the congregation God calls you to serve. This 4-week seminar is facilitated by Rev. Dr. Karen Bailey-Francois, with presentations by Rev. Dr. Ron Brown of the CT Conference of UCC, Rev. Linda Lea Snyder of the American Baptist Churches of CT,

and the Right Rev. James Curry, of the Episcopal Diocese of CT. Cost: \$185 for registration and materials, including luncheon conversations with peers and guest presenters (lunch provided). Contact: For more information, please call Hartford Seminary at 860-509-9555 or write to events@hartsem.edu.

We're 50

Silver Lake Reunion

August 19, 2007

Be part of the 50th anniversary celebration at Silver Lake. Young people of all ages are invited to tell stories, play, sing and laugh. Come and share the joy! Stay for the day or the week!

Sign up to make sure you receive full information about the reunion. It's a party you don't want to miss!

Sign up at <http://silverlake.ctucc.org/alum/reunion>

Ecumenical Suffering, Endurance, Character and Hope • Tuesday, October 17, 5:15 to 8:15 PM • St. Thomas Seminary, Bloomfield • Professor Martin E. Marty will be the 2006 Archbishop John F. Whealon Memorial Lecturer. Marty is one of the most prominent interpreters of religion and culture today. The event begins with a reception at 5:15 followed by the lecture and a discussion time beginning at 6:30. • Cost: \$19 per person, \$13 Student and Senior Fee; \$10 for the Lecture only • Contact: Christian Conference of Connecticut, 60 Lorraine Street, Hartford, CT 06105; 860-236-4281

Sacred Intention: The Spiritual in Daily Life and Ministry • November 3-4, Friday, 3 PM - Saturday, 3:30 PM • Silver Lake Conference Center • A week-end retreat open to pastors, deacons, lay church leaders, religious educators, and spiritual directors - and all who long for a deeper grounding of their personal spiritual lives as well as the desire to cultivated the spiritual life of the congregation. The retreat director is Dr. Debra Pallatto-Fontaine, a Commissioned Minister of Spiritual Formation and a certified spiritual director. • Cost: \$90 per person, includes meals • Contact: Contact Silver Lake Conference Center to register. 860-364-5526

Stewardship Workshops with Rev. William VanderWyden

"Your Operating Budget Campaign" • September 22, 23, and 24, 2006

The Rev. William VanderWyden is formerly a member of the national staff of the United Church of Christ, President of VanderWyden Consultants, and Consultant to the Connecticut Conference Campaign, "Now for the Future." Churches that have participated in his Operating Budget Campaign Program have experienced 10-35% increases in giving and seen members change habits of minimal giving to "Attitudes of Gratitude." Bill will offer operating budget workshops for our churches in each of the five regions of the Conference on the weekend of September 22-24, 2006. Look for his workshop in your region:

For Registration information check www.ctucc.org or call Jan Bittner, (860) 233-5564 ext. 114

Friday, September 22,
7:00 - 9:00 p.m. Park
Congregational Church in
Norwich

Saturday, September 23
9:30 - 11:30 a.m. Spring Glen
Church, Hamden

Saturday, September 23
1:00 - 3:00 p.m. Monroe
Congregational Church

Saturday, September 23
4:30 - 6:30 p.m.
Congregational Church of
Naugatuck

Sunday, September 24,
1:30 - 3:30 p.m. First Church
in Windsor

COST: \$10.00 per person or
\$25.00 for three or more from
one congregation.



ConnTact

United Church News
God Is Still Speaking,

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Volunteer Opportunities: A Win-Win Story

BY REV. RICH GROBE

Here we are with another hurricane season. That is not news to anyone after the past two summers and the devastation that has impacted the lives of people in Florida and the Gulf Coast. Along with the challenges of the winds and water, it also challenges us to respond in positive ways to the needs of individuals left with little or nothing.

We in Connecticut have been fortunate that recent hurricanes have not directly hit us, but they have influenced how we feel about the people affected by Katrina and other devastating storms. People ask, "What can I do?" For many, the answer has been to join a volunteer work crew organized by ServCorps, Inc., the ministry I founded after years of leading week-long mission trips for Asylum Hill Congregational Church in Hartford.

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Signs of Hope Amid Devastation at Back Bay Mission

BY JIM MORGAN

In late May, I traveled to Back Bay Mission in Biloxi, Mississippi, along with Rev. Donna Manocchio, co-leader of the Conference's Back Bay Mission response team, and Barbara Adams, response teams coordinator. We met with Back Bay staff and got a first hand look at the post-Katrina situation along that stretch of the Gulf Coast, as well as an appreciation for how we can continue to best support the long-term relationship between Back Bay Mission (BBM) and the Conference that the last year's events have only deepened and strengthened.

The BBM campus was hard hit by the storm. Six of its seven buildings were so badly damaged that they must be torn down and replaced. At the same time, the community that BBM serves was itself reeling from the devastating blow to housing, social services and the general economy, and in great need of the ministry that it provides. In the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, BBM seeks once again to creatively respond to those needs.

We arrived to find BBM at the center of much activity, which seems to be the norm. Our two days accompanying Rev. Shari Prestemon, Back Bay's Executive Director, on her rounds, included attending a City of Biloxi community meeting the first evening, joining a meeting with a representative from Oxfam America, touring East Biloxi and points west along a 25-mile stretch of the ravaged coast, and walking the BBM campus while Shari spoke excitedly about rebuilding plans.

Since Katrina, BBM has received a great outpouring of support from across the UCC and beyond. Connecticut has been a particularly strong contributor, with approximately \$177,000 sent either through the Conference or in direct gifts from churches and individuals. Such resources, combined with insurance payments and even some potential money from FEMA, which deemed Back Bay Mission "an essential community service," have allowed it to move forward confidently with rebuilding efforts.

Shari and the Board of Directors have worked quickly to develop plans for a new, enhanced Mission campus that will serve the

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A Canopy of Sacred Space



We sat in a circle under an ancient tree in the midst of war-torn Colombia.

It was 3:30 p.m., 90 degrees, 90% humidity, two hours south of Cartagena, in an area called Montes de Maria. We'd just had an amazing lunch of soup followed by rice, beans and beef at a farmhouse being reclaimed from the violence by members of area churches. Like every

other home in the town, it had been shot up, destroyed and abandoned some years ago. The people had decided to return from the city where they had lived in displacement for years, without basic human services and without a way to earn a living. The government had established a permanent military presence there in the hope of enabling the village to reestablish itself. No one knows whether or for how long it will work.

We sat under an ancient tree, with signs of armed conflict and death all around us, with devastating poverty so graphic our minds reeled. And yet as we sat there for worship and the dedication of that

farm, we knew we were under a canopy of sacred space. We encountered that sacred space constantly during our nine-day visit to the churches of Colombia.

Sacred space of peace in the midst of conflict, of generous hospitality in the face of poverty, of courage while severe danger surrounded, of hope where others would despair, and of the powerful witness of the tiniest churches in the midst of their villages, towns and cities.

Four years ago I visited Colombia. I came away with a kind of desperate hope that the vision and work of Ricardo Esquivia through Justapaz (the partner program for our Conference) would bear fruit. He had told me that God was calling him to move to Sincelejo in the Montes de Maria (one of the most conflicted regions) to help the churches restore hope, peace and self-development among the people. My response: I burst into tears, fearing for his life. I wanted to believe, but I was scared. I did tell him I'd support him with prayer and anything I could do. I've tried.

A year later he gave up his personal income and went back to the region where he was born to an indigenous mother and an Afro-Colombian father. We'll tell some of his story another time, but it is a perfect example of why devastating poverty and racism cannot be allowed to continue: the greatest gifts of God are lost as a result. In his case, the Mennonites, founders of Justapaz, saved him – literally. A canopy of sacred space.

Within a year, Ricardo had begun over 150 associations of local churches to pray and take action together to reclaim Colombia for peace and for

development. Their churches have dirt floors and palm roofs, and they are powerfully faithful to Christ's call. Together they take stock of the greatest needs. They develop local leadership. They learn the political process (which changes constantly). They use each others' best gifts, apply for small grants from a foundation Ricardo and three Roman Catholic bishops have created, and begin to build sustainable communities in the face of great odds – canopies of sacred space.

We saw art, drama and music being used to help children and youth deal with the terrible toll the wars take on them. We met articulate, gifted, courageous people who have lost everything and risen to lead their people. We heard from pastors and members who had always believed that faith was only about "spiritual" things but who had come to a deeper understanding of the call of Christ to attend to the work of justice, development and peace. We encountered women who share in leadership, despite the challenges of a culture that has traditionally not honored their potential, and men who eagerly share their belief that women's development is community development. We found pastors struggling to find their way through the displacement of their entire church from countryside to city barrio, through circumstances in which former paramilitary members come face to face with those who lost everything because of them.

In each, by the power of the Holy Spirit and the sheer persistence of the human spirit, sacred space is being created and sustained. I give thanks to God for the leadership of people like Ricardo, who instead of sitting in the shady protection of the great trees of security venture out to create new canopies of sacred space for all the people.

UCC Affirms 2007 Synod Will Be Held in Hartford

The Executive Committee of the United Church of Christ's Executive Council has confirmed that the Hartford Civic Center will be the site for the 50th Anniversary

General Synod in 2007. The announcement follows considerable anxiety over the possibility of moving the event out of the city due to unresolved labor conflicts at the Connecticut Convention Center, a move which would result in the loss of the estimated \$5 to \$10 million in economic activity anticipated from Synod's visitors.

Initially, the Civic Center's fees were too expensive. On June 2, the Connecticut Economic Development Authority announced a \$100,000 grant to the Greater Hartford Convention and Visitors Bureau, which offered to use the money to offset the Hartford Civic Center's fee. The purpose of the grant was to provide incentives for groups to hold conventions in Hartford.

"This type of incentive program is a common occurrence, a way of doing business," said Edith A. Guffey, associate general minister of the United Church of Christ. "We appreciate the collaboration between the governor, CEDA, and the Hartford Visitors Bureau, and their efforts to keep the UCC meeting in Hartford."

"CEDA took action to assist the City of Hartford, not the UCC - the UCC is not benefiting financially through this arrangement," said the Rev. John H. Thomas, UCC general minister and president. "In fact, if we had gone elsewhere, we might have done better financially. But we wanted to maintain our commitments to Hartford and the people of the (UCC's) Connecticut Conference."

"While we continue to hope that a 'labor peace' agreement can be reached between corporate and union officials regarding the convention center and hotel, we are glad to have the option of remaining in Hartford for our General Synod," Guffey said.

"As we have done in the past, the UCC continues to support the rights of labor to organize, especially its most economically-disadvantaged workers," said Thomas.

General Synod 2007 Volunteers Needed

The United Church of Christ's General Synod 26 will play host to as many as 10,000 delegates and visitors next June 22-26. And we need your help to offer them the best Connecticut extravagant welcome and hospitality!

Volunteers are encouraged to sign up now to serve in one of five general areas:
Operations
Hospitality
Environment/Worship
Service Project
Heritage and History

To learn more about this exciting opportunity, including a video preview of the 50th Anniversary General Synod and registration, or to volunteer, please go to www.ctucc.org/synod2007 or e-mail the Organizing Committee at synodhosting@ctucc.org.

Let It Shine!

New England Stewardship Meeting

BY BETSEY REID

"Appreciating Value" was just the beginning of wonderful play with words, building energy and solid examples at the annual gathering of the New England Stewardship Development Network, May 3 - 5 at Mercy Center in Madison. It was a beautiful experience in a beautiful location. Weeks later, I am still generating ideas based on the various themes offered by the leaders.

Against a background of real concern about the financial underpinnings of church and its broader agencies, they demonstrated a variety of models that could be reproduced at home. Rev. Maren Tirabassi coordinated the sessions with witnessing, prayer, singing and, finally, communion, around the theme "appreciating value." We explored both the semantic and emotional meanings of these essential concepts in our faith. Through humor, surprise, recognition and energy flowing anew from a familiar subject, she turned things on their heads, enlightening us time and again with a fresh view of the world of money and the world of faith coming together in new ways.

Rev. Kenneth Samuel, pastor of Victory UCC in Stone Mountain, Georgia, and preacher at General Synod 25 in Atlanta, spoke of the cost of Christian spiritual integrity when he brought his

"megachurch" into the UCC about six years ago, losing more members than most New England churches have to begin with. In two sessions, he discussed his call to listen for God's continuing Word and to give strong leadership to his congregation to remain true to the integrity of the teachings of Jesus Christ. He spoke about the church budget as a moral document, a picture of appreciation and a statement of what we value, and suggested that we don't really know the spirit of people until we deal with them in a time of scarcity. He asked if we are willing, in response to God's extravagance of grace, "to be an answer to your own prayer?"

Another fresh look at the urgency of our story was presented by Prof. Warren Goldstein, a teacher at the University of Hartford and author of a new biography of Rev. William Sloane Coffin. He spoke the first evening about the powerful history of the UCC and liberal Christianity in the 20th century, a legacy that he feels is being lost amidst the growing strength of the conservative, evangelical Christian churches. There was a lively and challenging discussion the next morning about speaking out and the interpretation of "God is still speaking." Prof. Goldstein recognized that many UCC churches struggle with the newer con-

cepts, but can be helped to see where the church leads by looking back to abolition and the development of democratic processes of the early Congregational churches. He also spoke about the use of humor in stewardship as a need to hide one's discomfort, but with care not to belittle the topic or those expressing a need.

There were also a series of three sessions about "Tools for Appreciating Value" in which we heard from the Rev. Karen McArthur, UCC pastor in Amherst, Mass., the Rev. Alice O'Donovan, pastor of Second Congregational in West Stafford, and the Rev. Jonathan New of Vermont. They addressed several topics, including accurate Financial Reporting for churches; Appreciative Inquiry as a Stewardship tool involving respectful questioning and active listening among church members; and Narrative Budgets as an important and effective way to explore the "who, where, when, why and how" of stewardship to show the unity of caregiving (mission) with caretaking (stewardship).

A final thought: The church doesn't need money; the church needs ministry and mission, and ministry and mission require money. You can avoid intruding on the spirit of church by making stewardship central to the story of the church and its mission.

Betsy Reid serves as the Chairperson of the Finance Board at North Haven Congregational Church.

NEAUCE Gathers on Cape Cod

BY SANDY CALLINAN

"To Everything There Is a Season" (Ecclesiastes 3:1-8)

NEAUCE, the regional affiliate of the National Association of United Church Educators, held its 35th annual New England gathering at the Craigville Conference Center on Cape Cod May 9-11. Like other regional UCE associations, NEAUCE is devoted to advocacy for Christian Education and Christian Educators of all types within the life of the United Church of Christ. This event provides education, support, and spiritual renewal to educators and youth leaders throughout New England.

The Rev. Matthew Boulton, Assistant Professor of Worship and Preaching at Andover Newton Theological School, was keynote speaker for the event. He helped us consider the great themes of the liturgical year, engaging us in dialogue about the ways Christian Educators can tap into those themes for programs. The Rev. Elizabeth Myer Boulton, pastor of Hope Church in Jamaica Plain, Massachusetts, led us in worship, preaching in her distinctive style that drew us into the personal and biblical stories she artfully wove together. Together, Matthew and Elizabeth provided a nourishing blend of ideas, worship, and music that sent us forth excited about new possibilities for our own ministries.

In keeping with the theme from Ecclesiastes, the three sessions of workshops each featured a variety of "A Time for/to..." offerings, including "A Time for War/Time for Peace" (looking at Christian resistance and accommodation to war, including the current tension between our desire for national security and our call to biblical community), "A Time for the Holy Spirit" (with Pentecost as the focus), "A Time for Rest, Renewal and Readiness for the New" (intentionally exploring union with God), and "A Time to Spread Your Wings" (getting excited about mission).

There were many other options for workshops. Here is a brief description of those I attended: "Serving the Shepherd, Engaging the Family," led by the Rev. Dr. Carolyn Landers Pettigrew of the UCC

national staff, was a special Family Ministries event on the first day. Countless ideas, resources, and websites were provided. A website that was highly recommended with resources on family values to add to a family newsletter is www.nccusa.org.

"A Time for Banners", led by Barbara McLeod from the Maine Conference Resource Center, provided us with what we need to know to make banners for our church, with our church, and how to use them at our church. Among the excellent ideas she shared was to have classroom banners created by each class that will follow with them to Confirmation. After the class is confirmed, the banners are displayed.

"A Time for Celebrating the Seasons at Home", led by Rev. Chris Braudaway-Bauman of the Wellesley Congregational Church in Wellesley, Massachusetts. We discussed how Christian formation happens at home as well as at church. Topics included the ways families can observe the seasons of fasting and feasting, the holy days and the ordinary ones at home, and what the church can do to more fully support and equip parents to add ritual and richness to everyday family life.

"A Time for Transformation," led by Sue Dickerman, Associate Minister for Leadership Development for the Massachusetts Conference, was the last workshop of the conference. She shared with us the concept that our Christian Education committee, with the help of Bible study and faith sharing, can become an effective small group ministry while providing the support and care necessary for an effective Christian Ed. Committee.

I am grateful each year for the opportunity to attend this Conference on Christian Education and the valuable networking with other church school educators. I plan to use the many resources gathered at the conference throughout the church year and look forward to implementing many of the new ideas and programs throughout the church school year. For those of you who have not attended in the past, this is a MUST DO on your TO DO list, offering many opportunities for rest, renewal, and spiritual fulfillment.

Sandy Callinan is co-Director of Christian Education at First Church in Madison.

Signs of Hope at Back Bay Mission *continued from page 1*

needs of a hurting community now, as well as anticipate the needs of a growing ministry.

The Board recently approved a \$2 million re-construction plan, to include two new facilities and the repair of the one remaining building, the main administration and service center. Phase I focuses on the repair work, including 11 staff offices, a small kitchen and meeting area food pantry, and client service lobby area, which will allow BBM to resume full operations of client-based programs, now being conducted from cramped, on-site trailers.

Phase II calls for construction of two new buildings - a 4,600 sq. ft. facility that will provide flexible space and necessary amenities for short and long-term duration housing, with a total capacity of approximately 60 persons; and a 4,000 sq. ft. community service/meeting hall, featuring a large group meeting hall, two smaller conference rooms, a catering kitchen, break out area, restrooms and two offices.

First Impressions

Some first impressions were only reinforced by what we witnessed. First and foremost, Shari and her staff have gifts and talents — energy, vision, intelligence and commitment — necessary for the challenges ahead, challenges that include a non-functioning public social services sector, broken by Katrina.

Shari and Back Bay Mission are well known and very well respected, and so have voice among many different constituencies in Biloxi. For example, for the last five years, the city of Biloxi has partnered with BBM, providing funds and working collaboratively through the city's community development office. Shari describes the partnership as "primarily financial, but also collegial." She also is on the boards of the Open Doors Homeless Coalition, which serves six counties, the Interfaith Disaster recovery taskforce, serving three counties, and the Mayor's Commission on Reviving the Renaissance (a reference to the era ushered in some 15 years ago with the arrival of the casinos).

Back Bay is distinguished from other agencies in that it is both involved in direct service and engaged in justice advocacy. We were impressed with Shari's descriptions of the capabilities of the current Board of Directors, and the re-thinking that she and the Board have engaged in concerning Back Bay's mission and call to serve in light of new and daunting realities.

BBM has a long and successful record of community organizing and education around particular issues, identifying a social service need — especially ones that are controversial, such as low-income, affordable housing — organizing and funding and ultimately spinning it off as an independent 501c3 organization. This is how it created the Gulf Coast's first shelter for abused women, the first Free Clinic, an AIDS Task Force, a Loaves and Fishes kitchen, and the Open Doors Homeless Coalition.

As a result of this experience, and based on capacity and its government and business relationships, BBM was approached about becoming a Community Housing Development Organization (CHDO) by creating a non-profit housing corporation. BBM is in the initial phase of assessment, including talks with the United Way and the city. The stated goals are 1) to conduct a thorough needs analysis of affordable housing in Harrison County and 2) develop BBM-specific plans for non-profit affordable housing development.

Oxfam will fund an Affordable Housing Specialist position for the next several months, describing BBM as "the place where communities are built." Shari hopes to convene a two-day CHDO summit, establishing and coordinating inclusive, on-going round table conversations that include non-profit developers with a commitment to the community, as well as county officials, housing authorities, current CHDO personnel, realtors, developers, potential investors, and private citizens.

The thousands of houses that were blown or washed away are among the greatest losses to the

hurricane. Many were the homes of low-income people who have also lost their jobs and now have no place to live. Into this vacuum, moneyed interests, including the casinos that state law previously restricted to off-shore sites, have moved to grab prime coastal land at bargain rates. The social justice concerns of this speak to the heart of Back Bay's mission and ministry.

Shari repeatedly expressed her amazement at the resiliency of people and the signs of hope amidst the struggle. We can BE the covenantal church in mission, showing our generosity and compassion to those in need with our continued spiritual and financial support for Back Bay Mission, and work teams traveling to serve at Back Bay. Let's continue to build our partnership together! For other ways that you can be involved, please see below.

Disaster Recovery Blitz! Compassion Explosion invites skilled plumbers, electricians, roofers and those with general construction skills for either of two weeks, October 29-November 11. Up to 75 people can be accommodated each week. A modest participant fee will cover lodging and other program-related expenses. To register or for more information, contact Back Bay Mission's volunteer coordinator at 228-432-0301, or by e-mail to bbvol@datasync.com Sign up today!

The Back Bay Mission response team is developing an Ambassadors program in conjunction with the Central Congregational Church UCC team, to share the story of our partnerships. Ambassadors will travel to local churches, share a newly produced video, and talk with churches about how they might join or deepen their commitment to be in mission and service together with our partners. The BBM response team is also exploring sponsoring shrimp boils around the state.

Anyone interested in finding out more information about the BBM response team or how your church can be involved in the partnership, please contact Lorelle Foulds (lvfoulds@aol.com) or Rev. Donna Manocchio (associate@rhccucc.org).

Volunteers *continued from page 1*

This year we've sent two work teams to engage in disaster recovery. In Biloxi, Mississippi, a crew of ten people rebuilt a house for an elderly woman who had four feet of water in her house from the storm's tidal surge.

We also worked in Florida — for many of us a distant memory — with the Interfaith/ Interagency Network of Charlotte County, rebuilding homes in Port Charlotte damaged by the hurricanes of 2004. In March, ServCorps organized 29 individuals to work on four different homes there. Volunteers ranging in age from 25 to 84, and at all levels of building ability, including some with no previous experience, came together for a week of work, fellowship, and worship. The primary house we worked on was a total rebuild: roof, walls, insulation, wiring, plumbing, and sheet rocking.

Volunteers who engage in hurricane recovery work say they get back more than they give. They find it liberating and meaningful to spend a week away from the familiar comforts and responsibilities of home to focus on working hard for a stranger. A strong intergenerational camaraderie develops among the volunteers as the more skilled patiently tutor the less skilled. This group spirit carries over into the evening activities that involve cooking, laughing, discussing, and worshiping together.

This October, we will travel back to Mississippi to partner with the LeMoyne Boulevard Baptist Church in Biloxi to build a house from the ground up in three weeks. Individuals will work in one-week blocks to accomplish this seemingly impossible task.

We ask all churches in the Connecticut Conference, regardless of their size, to get volunteers involved in the rebuilding process. By sharing our resources and working together, we can accomplish a great deal, be it in Florida or on the Mississippi-Louisiana Gulf Coast.

If you are interested in working as an individual on an already developed team, or if you would like to be part of planning a work team from your church, contact Rich Grobe, at 860-674-8576, or servcorps@aol.com.

Spring Annual Meeting

BY REV. ERIC S. ANDERSON
AND JIM MORGAN

Over 500 delegates, authorized ministers, and other church members gathered Saturday, May 13, at the First Church of Christ Congregational, United Church of Christ, in Middletown, for the Connecticut Conference's Spring Session of the 2006 Annual Meeting. The participants enjoyed superb preaching and a fascinating keynote, learned in workshops, and heard about the progress of *Now For the Future*. The Campaign for Silver Lake, preparations for General Synod 2007, and support of Our Church's Wider Mission.

Conference Preacher the Rev. Denise Esslinger of the Gilead Congregational Church, UCC, delivered a powerful and rousing sermon on the importance of inviting all people "to the party," the Church. Her timely words and engaging style prompted a standing ovation.

The Rev. Dr. Beth Nordbeck, professor of church history at Andover Newton Theological School, presented the keynote and led a forum on "The United Church of Christ: An Exciting Way and a Creative Walk." She talked about some of the hallmarks of Congregational heritage, including engagement with the world, willingness to consider change, a cautious approach to emotion, and the centrality of Christ. In the forum, she went on to consider characteristics of the United Church of Christ. Participants found her presentation engaging, punctuated with wisdom and good humor.

Richard and Paulette Timpton of Central Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, in New Orleans greeted and thanked the delegates for the Conference's aid to their hurricane-ravaged city and congregation. They led us in singing their church's gathering song, "The Jesus in Me Loves the Jesus in You", in a moment that touched everyone's heart.

Conference Minister Rev. Dr. Davida Foy Crabtree addressed two difficult issues

with the gathering. In a detailed presentation, she reviewed the continuing decline in local church contributions to Our Church's Wider Mission (OCWM), the undesignated gifts which support Conference, National, and International ministries of the United Church of Christ. She celebrated the enormous generosity displayed by local churches, including over \$680,000 in 2005 disaster response donations sent in response to the Asian Tsunami and Gulf Coast hurricanes. Basic mission support, however, fell by some 9%, about \$220,000, and for 2006, the Conference Board of Directors anticipates a further 7% decline in OCWM Basic Support, which, when combined with other revenue decreases, will result in a \$132,000 shortfall. The Conference has reduced staff and mission support in order to close the gap. Two full-time positions have been cut to part-time, and support for most mission programs has been substantially reduced.

Rev. Crabtree also reviewed the Conference Board of Director's decision to require that just labor relations exist at venues for Conference meetings. The issue emerged because of the labor organization conflict at the Connecticut Convention Center at Adriaen's Landing in Hartford, where the Waterford Group is acting to prevent union organization, and has prompted the city of Hartford to reconsider tax exemptions should Waterford fail to move toward "labor peace." As ConnTact went to press, we learned that in light of the continued labor conflict at the Connecticut Convention Center, the fall session of the 2006 Annual Meeting will gather at South Congregational/First Baptist Church in New Britain.)

The coordinators of the *Now For the Future*: The Campaign for Silver Lake described the effort's progress to date: \$600,000 in pledges so far in the "Quiet Phase," including commitments from the entire Board of Directors, Silver Lake Board, and Conference senior staff. To help local churches understand the ministry and the need of Silver Lake, the planners presented a nine-minute video, produced by Conference staff, which will be distributed to the churches later in the campaign. Three presenters — Jesse

Knust, Sue Latourette and Lee Moore — reflected on the importance of their experiences at Silver Lake and stressed the need for supporting its ministry into the future.

Now For the Future seeks to raise \$8 to \$12 million to improve existing buildings and construct new ones that will expand the conference center's summer and year-round capacity, provide better accessibility, conserve resources, and offer more adult-friendly accommodations for retreat groups.

Sue Butler-Woodward, co-chair of the Local Arrangements Committee for the 2007 General Synod to be held in Hartford, described the efforts to recruit volunteers for the event. 2007 is the 50th anniversary of the United Church of Christ, and it will be the first time the denomination's national gathering has been held in Connecticut.

Bruce Barrett, co-president of Barrett Outdoor Communications and an active member of Woodmont United Church of Christ in Milford, received the Conference's Living Waters Award, given to laity who live their faith in their daily lives, primarily in their place of work. Barrett was recognized for his public service work, his generosity, and the work he does mentoring youth. The award, so named to reflect the understanding that in baptism all persons become part of the Body of Christ and are therefore called to carry out Christ's ministry, was presented by Rev. Crabtree.

Though rain threatened, attendees were able to move back and forth from workshops in First Church and the nearby Trinity Episcopal Church, and obtain their lunches without getting wet — a remarkable event in a weekend that was otherwise marked with heavy rains throughout New England.

The meeting closed with worship and communion, including the installation of the Rev. Dr. Ron Brown as Associate Conference Minister for Clergy Concerns.

Come One, Come All "Let it shine... around the World"

139th Annual Meeting of the Connecticut Conference United Church of Christ October 20 & 21, 2006

Location: South Church, 9 Main Street, New Britain

Keynote Speaker: The Rev. Cally Rogers-Witte, Executive Minister of Wider Church Ministries, National Setting of the United Church of Christ

Forum leaders: Staff Members of the Wider Church Ministries, National Setting of the United Church of Christ

For more information www.ctucc.org or (866) 367-2822 Toll Free in CT (860) 233-5564

• United Church News •

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Mission – Giving and Receiving

Hurricanes Katrina and Rita changed forever the lives of untold numbers of people and communities. In the first week of September 2005, the Connecticut Conference convened a special meeting and committed itself to support in three particular ways: through long-term relationship of relief, rehabilitation and recovery with Back Bay Mission in Biloxi, Mississippi and with Central Congregational Church in New Orleans, and through the Disaster Response Ministry's ongoing efforts in Florida and along the Gulf Coast. Continue to keep them all in your prayers.

As the first anniversary of Hurricane Katrina approaches, Connecticut Conference churches and individuals remain extraordinarily generous and faithful in their response. To date,

approximately \$177,000 has been contributed for Back Bay Mission, \$55,000 for Central Congregational and \$325,000 to the national UCC Hope Shall Bloom offering. Praise God!

This issue of ConnTact focuses on that mission response, with a look at how a few of our churches have heard their call. There are many more stories to be told, and I want to do so in the near future. In each case, the people who participated found the experience transforming. They received as much as they gave, and want to do it again. That's how it is with mission.

It's been my privilege to work with these churches in helping to tell their stories. I hope you find them equally uplifting.

JIM MORGAN, EDITOR

Finding New Life in Florida

BY JOHN TIBOR

In the wake of the damage from the hurricanes that affected the Gulf Coast last year, Rev. Lucia Jackson of the North Haven Congregational Church suggested that the congregation reach out and offer assistance. Each summer since coming to NHCC, Rev. Jackson has organized and conducted a youth mission trip, often working with Habitat for Humanity. Now, she said, it was time for the adults to step into action.

The first place that came to mind was Back Bay Mission. Many years ago, the youth and adults of NHCC had traveled to Back Bay, so there was personal connection with the loss to that area. However, we learned that the devastation there was so intense that there was no certainty as to when specific recovery could begin. We began to plan in late fall for a proposed trip in March and contacted the UCC Disaster Response Ministry in Florida, which soon became our destination.

Our group of eight adult volunteers packed up a van with tools, supplies, and personal gear and journeyed to Daytona Beach. There we were met by Reverend Karen Thompson of DeLand, Florida, who is the regional disaster response coordinator.

Our first assignment was to replace the roof of a house that had suffered hurricane damage. Our task was to install the shingles, as other volunteer groups that had preceded us had repaired structural damage and readied the roof. We completed the roof in two days, with half of our group beginning a second assignment that day.

That work involved cleaning mold damage from the exterior of a house, replacing much of the exterior finished siding, and sealing and painting the exterior. Previous volunteer groups at this site already had done interior cleanup. The owner of the house was not present during this time because he had recently received a lung transplant and could not return to the house until all evidence of mold was removed. By the end of this project the house seemed to have been given a new life, and so had we.

In addition to the work we did, the group also donated about \$500 in materials and made a cash donation of another \$500. And before the trip was over, we were already asking where to go and what do next year.

John Tibor serves as treasurer of the North Haven Congregational Church and has been active in a number of the youth and adult mission trips.

Volunteers Bring Hope

BY REV. MARY SCHALLER
BLAUFUSS

As the clean-up and rebuilding of the Gulf Coast continues after the hurricanes of 2005, people offering their energy, skills and resources have helped create hope. Members of volunteer work groups have searched through muck to recover heirloom rings and treasured glassware of families who had to evacuate their homes before torrents of water rushed in through broken levees. Groups have carefully removed name-plates from church pews so people might remember their past and connect with their future. Groups have listened to stories of trauma while helping rebuild homes and encourage people in the rebuilding of their lives. Groups have returned to their own homes to tell the stories of devastation, of injustices exposed, and of glimmers of hope they have experienced. As the media have moved on to other things, volunteer work groups help all of us to *Remember* – for we are called to be a remembering church.

The response of groups from all over the United Church of Christ has been tremendous. Back Bay Mission and the New Orleans Association in the South Central Conference have been settings where many disaster recovery work groups have committed their time and energy. The "Mission Trip Opportunities" booklet published each year by the Office of UCC Volunteer Ministries of Wider Church Ministries points groups toward opportunities for

short-term immersion in issues of social, economic and cultural justice issues.

UCC Volunteer Ministries and National Disaster Ministries also have created new "Partners in Service" full-time/long-term volunteer opportunities for the purpose of facilitating work groups and working with interfaith, long-term recovery committees in communities affected by disaster. Several of those full-time disaster recovery volunteers have already been serving in Florida, in New Orleans and in Biloxi. Volunteers with general construction skills who can commit to at least a six-month continue to be sought.

These full-time disaster recovery volunteers join others in the UCC "Partners in Service" program who commit themselves to service in diverse settings of ministry related to the UCC and ecumenical partners within the United States and who are open to the transformation of their own lives that often accompanies such service. Many sites include grassroots advocacy organizations, youth homes, retirement communities, homeless shelters, organizations that accompany people with mental illness, and UCC camp/conference centers. You can find more detailed information about the UCC "Partners in Service" program, "Mission Trip Opportunities" and Disaster Recovery Volunteer Opportunities on the web at www.ucc.org/ministries/volunteer

Rev. Mary Schaller Blaufuss is Executive for Volunteer Ministries in the national office of the United Church of Christ. She can be reached at blaufusm@ucc.org or 216-736-3214.

C L A S S I F I E D S

BACK BAY MISSION – Development Associate opportunity — Are you looking for a meaningful way to contribute to a UCC mission agency? Do you have time to solidify and build new relationships with churches and individuals? If so, the Development Associate opportunity through Back Bay Mission in Biloxi, Mississippi may be for you. Two years ago, Back Bay Mission began the Development Associate program as a pilot project to strengthen the outreach of the Mission to the wider UCC. This initiative, using key individuals called Development Associates to communicate with UCC congregations, individuals and conferences, has proven to be a highly successful model. The group typically gathers at the Mission once a year for updates and specific training. From there, the Associates work in their local areas and communicate with Back Bay Mission by e-mail and phone. • Contact: To learn more about the Development Associate program, log on to www.backbaymission.com and go to the “Volunteers Needed” option, or call Debbie Kleiboeker at 228-432-0301.

Positions

BETHANY – First Church of Christ, Congregational, UCC seeks a part-time

Youth Coordinator (20 hours per month), September through June. Responsibilities include planning and facilitating Senior High Youth Group. Annual salary is \$2,500. • Contact: Please send resume and three letters of recommendation not later than August 30 to Board of Christian Education, First Church of Christ, Congregational, United Church of Christ, 511 Amity Road, Bethany, CT 06524. For more information: call 203-393-3116, or www.bethanyfirstchurch.org

BRANFORD — First Congregational Church seeks a dynamic person qualified to direct two youth choirs, grades 2-4 and 5-8. Rehearsals are Tuesday afternoons, 3:30 to 5:10. Performances are on selected Sundays, September to May, and some festival services. • Contact: For a job description or to submit your resume, contact Kathryn Nichols, Minister of Music, at Kathryn@FirstCongregationalBranford.org.

EAST LONGMEADOW, MA — Director of Christian Education - First Congregational Church, UCC in East Longmeadow, MA seeks a director who can work collaboratively and be responsible for our Church School and

Youth Ministries programs. The position averages 20 per week. Compensation is dependent upon experience and skill level and includes four weeks of paid vacation. • Contact: Rob Gormbley, at the church office, 413-525-4121; or by mail to 7 Somers Road, East Longmeadow, MA 01028; email: pastor@excell.net.

HARTFORD – Broadview Community Church, UCC has an opening for an Organist/Choir Director for one Sunday Service and a time of choir rehearsal to be determined by the director and the choir. Organ: 2-KBD Austin, 16 ranks. • Contact: Send resume to Broadview Community Church, UCC, 45 Oliver Street, Hartford, CT 06106 Attn: Karen Dobrick; 860-728-3176.

KILLINGWORTH — Organist wanted for permanent position at Congregational Church in Killingworth UCC. Exceptional organ of considerable historical value, built in 1875 by Holbrook of Massachusetts. • Contact: Marlene Turnbull, 860-663-1477, or leave name and phone number with church office, 9 am -1 pm, M-F, at 860-663-1789.

NEW HARTFORD — North Congregational Church, UCC seeks a Director of Christian Education, averaging 10 hours per week with some flexibility to work at home. The director will plan and administer educational programs and special events, and guide our church school volunteers. Please apply if you are an effective verbal and written communicator, a creative and capable leader, a skillful organizer, and, foremost, a person who loves to work with children. • Contact: North Congregational Church, UCC, The Rev. Greg Dawson, 17 Church Street North, P.O. Box 307, New Hartford, CT 06057; 860-379-2466; e-mail: northchurchucc@hotmail.com

NIANTIC — Niantic Community Church seeks a Director of Youth Ministries. This position will provide primary staff leadership for the growth and development of all youth programs, including small groups, retreats and mission opportunities, as well as serving as a resource for volunteers and participants in current Youth Ministries. • Contact: DYM Search Committee, Niantic

Community Church, 170 Pennsylvania Avenue, Niantic, CT 06357; 860-739-6208

SOUTH GLASTONBURY — Congregational Church seeks a Director of Music/Organist (part time) to lead a dynamic and active music ministry. Responsibilities include leading the 35 + member adult choir while playing organ (with weekly evening practice), playing the organ during the 10:30 a.m. service, and supervising both the Children’s Choir director and the 8:30 a.m. service pianist. They are an open and affirming church located at the corner of Main and High Streets in South Glastonbury, with a Schlicker Unit Pipe organ, and a new Mason & Hamlin grand piano in the sanctuary. Go to www.southcongregational.org for job description, and church information. Position available September 2006, terms and salary negotiable. • Contact: Send a letter and resume to the Director of Music Search Committee, at music@southcongregational.org; or to the Congregational Church in South Glastonbury, PO Box 187, South Glastonbury, CT 06073. Telephone inquiries may be made to Bill Moses, Director of Music Search Committee, at 860-657-8893.

TRUMBULL — Trumbull Congregational Church seeks an energetic individual to work with our Board of Christian Education, Senior Pastor and Director of Christian Education to build a relational youth ministry. Flexibility and a sense of humor are necessary for this eight hours per week position. TCC offers an hourly stipend commensurate with UCC conference guidelines. Seminarians are welcome to apply. • Contact: Trumbull Congregational Church Board of Christian Education, 3115 Reservoir Road Trumbull, CT 06611; e-mail: tcchristianed@snet.net

Sell or Give

BETHANY — Free! 125 Pilgrim Hymnals, 1931 ed., ‘35 -’65 printing, 36 The Hymnal for Youth, 23 Hymns for Junior Worship • Contact: Reverend Stephen Wasko at Bethany Congregational Church, 511 Amity Road, Bethany, CT 06524; 203-393-3116; or info@Bethanyfirstchurch.org

Recent & Upcoming Pastoral Transitions

New Calls

Arens, M. John from Pastor, Milton Congregational Church, Litchfield to Pastor, First Congregational Church, Watertown, June 15, 2006

Barnes, Linda from Pastor, Franklin Congregational Church UCC to Pastor, Colchester Federated Church, August 1, 2006

Beckwith, Ivy to Associate Pastor, Congregational Church of New Canaan, May 15, 2006

DiQuattro, James to Pastor, Columbia Congregational Church, August 1, 2006

Hardee, Brian from Pastor, Pottstown, PA to Pastor, West Avon Congregational Church, August 1, 2006

Latimer, Arthur from In-Care, New Haven Association to Pastor, Shalom UCC, New Haven, May 25, 2006

McFarland, Doreen from Pastor, The Flagg Road UCC, West Hartford to Missionary, July 2006

Murtha-Smith, Susan from Associate Pastor, Center Congregational Church, Manchester to Associate Pastor, First Congregational Church of Guilford, September 4, 2006

Penn-Strah, Sara from Lowell, MA to Pastor, First Church of Christ, Woodbridge, August 1, 2006

Rivera-Méndez, Pérsida from Pastor, Iglesia Cristiana Nueva Esperanza, East Hartford to UCC National Staff, September 1, 2006

Resignations

Hallas, Nancy from Christian Education, North Guilford Congregational Church UCC, June 2006

Bartos, Kate from Pastor, Morris Congregational Church, June 25, 2006

Wilcox, Catherine from Associate Pastor, Buckingham Congregational Church of UCC, June 18, 2006

National Disaster Ministries Network

BY REV. NEWELL AND JANE CURTIS

From May 23-27, the UCC National Disaster Ministries Network met in New Orleans for its annual meeting and training. Disaster Coordinators from various UCC Conferences around the country gathered for reflection and an opportunity to learn more about the effects of Hurricane Katrina on the people, their homes, and their way of life. We learned that Katrina was initially a true natural disaster, neither unexpected nor insurmountable. That is, had it come and gone as predicted, it would have been destructive, but only another storm like the ones New Orleanians have withstood many times before. The flooding, however, was a not a natural event. The levees and pumps failed because of mistakes and negligence. That was a man-made disaster.

Now, though the floodwaters have receded, there are long-term effects that pose tremendous challenges to the rebuilding and resettlement efforts. For example, the lower Mississippi basin is home to hundreds of industrial sites, oil refineries and chemical plants. In fact, the stretch of river and land from Baton Rouge south to New Orleans is sometimes referred to as Cancer Alley. Great amounts of wastewater and other effluent materials are discharged into the river, where it is carried to the gulf that surrounds New Orleans and helps build Louisiana's delta lands.

A noted scientist, Wilma Subra, shared the results of her work sampling the soils along the Gulf Coast. The contaminated sediments from the bottom of lakes, rivers and estuaries were deposited by the storm surge and floods that rushed through the breeched levees onto the land and spread across yards, streets, parks and inside many homes, schools, churches and businesses. The sediment contains arsenic, heavy metals, bacteria, and many potential carcinogens. In some areas the sediment layer has dried and is now a powder blowing in the wind.

The day we heard a panel of UCC pastors and laypersons share their stories was the most moving and emotional part of the meeting. They spoke about practical matters, such as the importance of having a disaster response plan that includes home phone and cell phone numbers and e-mail addresses of family and friends, and names and addresses

where people will go if evacuation is necessary. They reflected on their experiences in the aftermath of the hurricane, noting that there is little trust in government now, saying that they look to the churches and volunteers to bring hope and offer dignity to their lives. *"We want to know you are here because we're people and you care."*

And we heard personal stories, such as that of a diabetic woman who stayed in her home in three feet of water in the heat, humidity and darkness to save her dog. She slept propped on two kitchen chairs, with the dog on a kitchen shelf. *"The gift volunteers provide is your presence and your time."* One volunteer, a former teacher, was asked to read to some children. One little girl exclaimed, "That's my favorite book." She had lost everything, so the teacher gave her the book.

All of the members of Beecher Church, UCC – just blocks away from Central Congregational Church – lost their homes. Most are elderly people who evacuated last August. Many are low-income and probably will not return or cannot rebuild. Those that do will have to rebuild a home they had already paid for, some of which were not insured.

"Right now, we are all on our knees, so we need you to come here." Yes, we are needed still, and their gratitude is deep and profound. When work groups come wearing Hope Shall Bloom t-shirts, they get hugged. They also spoke of loneliness - *"There is no one around. It's very difficult. I want to go out, but there's no place to go and no friends to go with."* - and the fear of being forgotten, as people, as a city, as Americans. *"In some neighborhoods, 90% of the homes are totally destroyed. Half the population has not returned. Is there another city in the United States that has so many empty houses?"*

As the anniversary of Hurricane Katrina fast approaches, please remember our brothers and sisters in New Orleans and along the Gulf Coast and Florida. They continue to need our prayers, our financial assistance and our physical presence when that is possible. It all means so very much to them. The Connecticut Conference has special partnerships with Back Bay Mission in Biloxi, Mississippi and Central Congregational Church UCC in New Orleans. Contributions can be sent care of the Connecticut Conference of UCC, 125 Sherman St., Hartford, CT 06105.

Rev. Newell and Jane and Curtis are Coordinators for the Connecticut Conference Disaster Response Ministries team. If your church would like to have them come and speak about their work and the importance of disaster response planning in Connecticut, please contact them at njcurtis@comcast.net.

The New Normal

BY REV. ERICK R. OLSEN

Ours was supposed to be a "normal" work camp. We'd made plans early in 2005 for a small group of adults to travel in mid-March 2006 to work with Back Bay Mission, hoping to rejuvenate what had been a vital relationship between this congregation and Back Bay. Last August, Hurricane Katrina washed "normal" out to sea.

When word of the storm came, we wondered if people we knew and places we loved had been spared. We felt called to go more than ever – but wondered if we could. Eventually, word came that we could go, and we sent out solicitation letters to our community and beyond. Almost immediately, financial support began to pour in. On March 19, six of us flew into New Orleans.

I landed five hours before the rest of our group, and was greeted at the airport by Hulen Brown, wife of the Rev. Wilmer Brown, pastor of Central Congregational Church in New Orleans. I asked Hulen if things had begun to return to anything like normal. She laughed, saying, "We have a *new* normal here."

Shortly after my fellow pilgrims joined me, we began the 90-mile drive to Biloxi. Our van was quiet as we were confronted for the first of many times with horrific images of destruction along the Gulf Coast. Drives along Highway 90 showed us proof of lives and livelihoods shattered in mile after mile of mangled and displaced casinos, contaminated beaches, violated historic sites, obliterated fast food joints. Most striking were the streets and neighborhoods where people had yet to return. Indeed, many of them seemed to hold little promise for such a return anytime soon. One cluster of newly-built homes was fenced off as condemned – a sad image of potential unmet.

Our work took us into a number of different homes in varying stages of rebuilding. A few of us were charged with mold abatement, which meant scrubbing and washing down exposed studs. Some had the chance to begin the installation of sheetrock over treated studs, and still others working on our main project were able to apply interior paint by the end of the week.

One of the memorable impressions of the week was the diversity and abundance of church groups working to help rebuild Biloxi. It was affirming and inspiring – particularly in the absence of a visible government presence in the neighborhoods – to meet folks who had come from other states and different traditions to tend to the hurts of this part of Christ's body.

Those of us who traveled to Biloxi for this week-long immersion continue to deal with re-entry even today. Flare-ups of anger toward indifference and eruptions of grief for so much loss are not uncommon, nor unexpected. Even as we deal with these emotions, however, we are planning for another trip south. There is no shortage of need in God's world, and we have growing numbers of people here who hunger to reach out in love. My prayer is that this will continue to be a place – our local church as well as the Connecticut Conference – where people find more and greater opportunities to serve God and live more fully as Christ's body.

The Rev. Erick Olsen is pastor of Church of Christ Congregational (UCC) in Norfolk.

Sophie's Choice - Hope and Faith

BY REV. ADAM E. ECKHART

If you had the power to restore New Orleans or abandon it, which would you choose?

In our work trip to the New Orleans region, the Senior Pilgrim Fellowship youth group of First United Church of Christ Congregational, Milford was confronted by God and the question of whether New Orleans is salvageable.



21 high schoolers and 15 adults signed up for a week-long UCC Disaster Response mission trip to Metairie, Louisiana. The people of Good Shepherd UCC offered hospitality throughout the week, housing us in their Recreation Hall, which doubles as their worship space while they renovate their damaged sanctuary.

On our first day we toured "the Big Easy." Some areas are making progress, with trailers in front yards and piles of moldy sheetrock revealing that rebuilding has begun. The lower Ninth Ward, however, exposed us to houses off their foundations and the ominous spray painted Xs, reckoning when the house was searched and if bodies were found. National Guard Humvees patrolled the streets, one of the few signs of life in the neighborhoods.

The next day, we began our work and personal encounters with New Orleans. Some of us installed sheetrock in Central Congregational Church; others primed the walls in over a dozen Good Shepherd UCC rooms; still others erected walls for a shed to store tools for future UCC work groups.

Our most emotionally challenging work took place in the homes of New Orleans residents. We were charged with the first stages of recovery: throwing out damaged personal effects and pulling down moldy walls. Such work required that we work well together on our sites, and in general the work helped us bond in fellowship and faith.

The heat and intensity of our surroundings and work, however, took an emotional toll on us. As a group of 36 people, we were challenged simply to live together. Taking turns for showers, preparing meals, and merely gathering three dozen people together were tasks as trying as the real "work" of the trip.

We thought the trip would be about the people of New Orleans and not about us, the people who came to help. Were we wrong? Could it be that the real question of our trip wasn't could New Orleans be rebuilt, but how can any community heal its wounds? Not simply "How can we help New Orleans?" but also, "how can God, through New Orleans, build us up as community?"

Sophie is an 80-year-old African-American woman who has lived her whole life in New Orleans. When Katrina came, she left only when soldiers made her. She returned as soon as possible, despite warnings to wait and the health risks of living in a mold-infested house.

When we started working on her home, we didn't understand why she chose to come back. We chalked up Sophie's choice to stubbornness, or fear of change - the kinds of motives we UCC folk often scorn.

But we came to see Sophie's choice as an act of pure hope and faith. Sophie said she knew that New Orleans would be rebuilt and she wanted to see it for herself. She had faith that her house would be restored, and sure enough, here we were making it happen. Sophie knew that she couldn't do it alone and that no one person could save New Orleans, but that if God's will was to rebuild the city, there was nothing anybody could do but play their small role.

By encountering people who were choosing hope in God and in New Orleans' future, we received the blessing of hope for our own community. We thank God for letting us meet faithful souls like Sophie. We have returned to Connecticut transformed, more confident than ever that if New Orleans can be restored, all communities have the potential to persevere through faith in God.

The Rev. Adam Eckhart is associate pastor of the First UCC Congregational, Milford. He works with the Christian Outreach Committee and is the advisor to the church's Senior Youth Group.

200th Anniversary of Haystack Meeting

On an August afternoon in 1806, five Williams College students met in a field, as was their habit, to talk and pray and, like so many young people, to dream of a better world. When a sudden thunderstorm interrupted, they sought shelter under a haystack — and there resolved to spend their lives in service, carrying their faith "into all the world." It was there that the American foreign missions movement was born.

One of those young men, Samuel Mills, Jr., was the son of the pastor of what is today United Congregational Church in Torrington. Another participant, Harvey Loomis, also came from the church. Within a few years, the charter for the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions was signed at First Church in Farmington, Connecticut.

But this event is not only a matter of historical interest. To this day, countless people around the world can trace their Christian lineage to a hayfield in northwestern Massachusetts. It still inspires Christians to engage with the needs and hopes of the wider world - establishing schools, equipping hospitals, founding churches, proclaiming the gospel of Jesus Christ - and still sparks debate about the meaning of Christian mission in a post-colonial, economically interwoven world.

Over the weekend of September 22-24, on the Williams campus in the Berkshire hills, a conference and celebration will mark the Haystack bicentennial. The event has been designed by an ecumenical coalition coming from many denominations: United Church of Christ, United Methodist, American Baptist, Episcopal and Presbyterian, evangelicals and progressives, all of whom trace their involvement in global

faith-based work to the Haystack prayer meeting.

The weekend will feature a keynote address, panel discussions, workshops, world music and dance performances, participatory music sessions, and worship, drawing participants from around the region and across the nation. (A description of all workshops to be offered, and a complete schedule of the weekend, is at haystack.williams.edu.) Registration is open to all.

Conference co-organizer Rick Spalding, Williams College Chaplain, said, "The Haystack Movement has changed the shape of lives and communities, brought cultures into dialogue and, sometimes, into conflict, and inspired generations of Christians to risk following their faith out into the world."

Co-organizer Rev. Carrie Bail, pastor of the First Congregational Church, UCC in Williamstown, which will host several weekend events, added, "Our fondest hope is that a new generation of young people might be inspired by the same Haystack Spirit, to go out into the world open to having their hearts changed while in the process of serving others around the world."

Conference events will take place at First Baptist Church at 731 Main Street, First Congregational Church UCC at 906 Main Street, and First United Methodist Church at 777 Main Street, all in Williamstown, and at locations on the Williams College campus. Further information can be found by visiting haystack.williams.edu or by calling the conference registrar at 413-458-8220. The registration fee is \$50 until August 22 and \$55 after that.

A cemetery stone re-dedication ceremony for the Loomis and Mills families, followed by a fellowship hall reception, will be held at United Congregational Church in Torrington on Saturday, September 9 at 2 pm. For more information, please e-mail Beverly Farrell, chair of the church's Spirit of Haystack Committee, at seaandme@optonline.net

By God's Grace, Transformation

BY REV. DAVID T. TAYLOR

It was a rainy and raw April morning at Bradley Airport. The dozen or so youth and the other adult leader and I began our flight southward – the Gulfport/Biloxi Airport was our destination. As we walked off the plane, a blast of hot, Gulf coast air greeted us. The twenty minute van ride brought us to Back Bay Mission, and early the next morning we began our hurricane recovery work – storm debris clean-up, roof repair, a kitchen renovation. One elderly resident's smile after her home was painted remains etched in my memory.

The year was 1973, and the hurricane was Camille, which had pounded the Mississippi Gulf coast in August of 1969.

Thirty three years later, I remain as committed as ever to this vibrant and faithful ministry of the United Church of Christ. Although I have attended my last meeting as the president of the Board of Directors, I will continue to make the three yearly trips to Back Bay Mission to serve in an advisory capacity as "immediate past president."

What is so special about the mission and ministry of Back Bay Mission? In a word, *transformation*. By God's grace, the lives of the poorest of the poor are transformed by compassionate acts of justice and kindness. By God's grace, the lives and the ministries of seminarians and sabbatical pastors are transformed as they learn of Back Bay's innovative strategies for community development and social change – strategies which are transferable to their own communities and congregations. By God's



The Rev. David Taylor, former Back Bay Mission board president, and The Rev. Shari Prestemon, Executive Director of Back Bay Mission, stand in front of the trailers that temporarily house Back Bay's offices.

grace, the lives of young people and adults are transformed by their involvement in hands-on mission work, particularly in the wake of hurricane Katrina.

Amidst all the storms of life – from Camille to Katrina and on into the future – Back Bay Mission humbly seeks to be a faithful ministry of God on the Gulf coast. Strengthened by the gifts and talents of so many people, inspired by the dedication of so many friends of the mission, and empowered by a loving and gracious God, Back Bay Mission endeavors to work for justice and to offer hope to the community!

The Reverend David T. Taylor is pastor of First Church of Christ, Congregational in Glastonbury.

The Heart of the Matter

BY REV. SUSAN PAGE TOWNSLEY

"Its all your fault," my father told me once again. He was blaming me—in his affectionate, joking, and honest way—for making him spend far too many hours in a rough part of Washington DC in a low income housing project.

You see, when I went to Divinity school as a student in care of Westmoreland Congregational Church in Bethesda, Maryland, my parents thought it their duty to support me by becoming active in the church. And as a result, my father was asked to serve on the Board of Directors of a project that Westmoreland shared with People's church.

So it was that he spent a number of Saturday afternoons doing small repairs and painting to the sounds of urban life and booming bass lines – even the occasional gunshot. And for several years, his understanding of the housing issue was keen and heartfelt.

Mission, narrowly defined, is the vital part Christian life in which we serve others with our

talents, resources and time. Mission, widely defined is our purpose, our calling as individuals and communities.

Recently I sat in the pews in my home church, Monroe Congregational Church, to experience a worship service led by folks recently returned from a mission trip to Casa Hogar in the small town of Benito Juarez, Mexico. In an hour and a half, it became clear that those who had gone on the trip had experiences that deepened and reshaped their faith. Their passion for the individuals they served was particular and pointed. And their understanding of the intimate effects of the differences in wealth had been heightened. Remarkably, a mission trip had transformed each of them into preachers, sharing the good news of Jesus and his love, of God's compassion for the poor, of the Holy Spirit's dignifying presence in each human being.

Mission engagement is not the "end all and be all" of the church. But it is an essential component in reminding us just what *is* the gospel, and why Jesus called us into the church to *be* his body—God's tending hands, compassionate eyes, and aching heart in this world.

Rev. Susan Page Townsley serves as Regional Minister for the Fairfield County Region of the Connecticut Conference.

The Greatest Gifts: Hope, Healing and Love

BY CAROLYN CARY, NANCY DITTES AND
CURT JOHNSON

The "Mississippi 16" from Spring Glen Church, UCC in Hamden spent a very moving and rewarding week in Long Beach, Mississippi in March. Camp Coast Care (www.campcoastcare.com), a relief facility run by the Lutheran Episcopal Disaster Services, provided the warm hospitality and good food to buoy us up to do God's work in an atmosphere full of the Holy Spirit.

We slept on cots in a school gym and shared meals from a temporary kitchen with 120 other kindred church members from across the country. We did everything from plumbing and electric, to learning how to work a power drill, to hanging up dry wall and insulation. We also helped prepare and serve meals, organize a new health clinic, and work in a tent sorting gazillion cans of soup and other non-perishables. Each day began and ended with worship with our brothers and sisters from all over the country. Our Spring Glen group also spent intentional evening time together to be in communion with one another.

Our Community Vespers each evening were led by local Episcopal clergy who talked from first-hand experience about the fate of thousands – the clergy also had lost everything in the storm, and were ministering to their congregations while bunking with friends and dealing with insurance companies. They pointed out the greatest gift our church groups bring to this land of shattered homes and wounded hearts – the gifts of hope, healing and love, coupled with an outstretched helping hand - a living testament to the Great Commandment to love our neighbors.

Four of us drove down from Connecticut, pulling a trailer full of donated tools, food and first aid items, which were delivered, along with gift cards, to people in the community. All of the individuals were grateful, with many moved to tears, and we felt blessed to be the ambassadors. We received tremendous inspiration from the families we worked with side-by-side in rebuilding their flooded homes – each story a uniquely inspiring testament to the resilience of the human spirit and to how much work still needs to be done to repair the hurricanes' physical – and emotional – destruction.

We feel called to tell their stories, and have been making presentations to area church groups, and on local TV stations. We have led multi-media worship services at our home church and in a local Unitarian congregation. We hope that what touched our hearts and moved us that week will continue to move through us in the paths of the future, and as we plan a return trip in early 2007.

Nancy Dittes was coordinator for Spring Glen's trip. Her husband, Curt Johnson, and Carolyn Cary, church moderator, were part of the Mississippi 16 contingent. For more information about Camp Coast Care, please visit them on the web at www.campcoastcare.com

Movin' Over and Makin' Room

BY LINDA SMITH

Sue and I were sitting guard duty atop a mountain of bags at New Orleans International Airport while 39 young people and 17 adults from our mission group did a driving tour of the 9th ward when a baggage handler came and engaged us in conversation.

"What y'all here for?" We said that we were headed to Abbeville, Louisiana to work on hurricane-damaged homes. "How'd ya happen to pick Abbeville?" We explained that our churches, First Congregational Church of Branford and Old Stone Church of East Haven, had partnered with St Mary's United Church of Christ immediately after Katrina had hit. "St Mary's was a relief shelter for more than fifty evacuees," we said. "We tried to help out with whatever was needed. Three weeks later, Abbeville was hit by Hurricane Rita and we are going down to do some building."

"Ya know something? All of us here have been truly blessed," the man said. I found myself baffled by this statement and wanted to know more of what prompted this response. "What do you mean blessed? How can you feel blessed with all the destruction?" "Well, every time I meet a group like yours, from different parts of the country, coming to help, I know we have not been forgotten."

He told of the many groups that have come through the airport gates, and shared his opinion that if the churches and non-profits had been given the relief money things would have progressed more quickly and equitably. As the rest of the group returned from their eye-opening tour, he greeted and thanked them all for being in New Orleans, and blessed us as we left for Abbeville.

In Abbeville, we settled into the same emergency shelter that was used for Katrina. Air mattresses covered the floor with little room for walking. There

was only one toilet and one shower. You could already see concern on the women's faces. The men had a smaller space, which they had to clear each day in order for us to eat our meals. Not enough tables and chairs, toilets backing up and the kitchen sink that wouldn't drain. How could people have lived in these conditions for months? How could we show signs of impatience so quickly?

Sunday morning we attended service at St Mary's United Church of Christ. We were led to explore the concept of "movin over and makin room" for God to enter into our lives so that we might make room "for the stranger when they come a knockin' at our door." It was two and a half hours of the embracing arms of prayer and praise. We were brought to our knees in prayer and thanksgiving, a most unaccustomed position for New Englanders.

That afternoon, as the heat became more oppressive, we arrived at our various work sites: a house that had to have windows replaced, sheathing and waterproofing, and then siding; a couple of trailers needing insulation underneath and paneling on the inside, with one requiring a hand-capped access ramp. There was a house to roof and one to paint. As the week progressed the young people were driven to finish each site. I believe this determination came from getting to know the faces that went with the damaged homes. As stories were shared we connected with these people.

The faith community of St. Mary's shared their history and Congregational roots along with their Cajun cooking, and blessed us with their hospitality. As we left, we felt that we were no longer strangers and sojourners, but fellow sisters and brothers in the family of God. Because of this experience we will continue "Movin' over, and makin' room" for new possibilities of service.

Linda Smith has helped organize and facilitate many domestic and global mission trips for the First Congregational Church of Branford. She was formerly the church's Youth Minister.



Becoming a Ministries and Mission Interpreter

BY DR. DEBBIE PALLATTO-FONTAINE

"...for we are partners working together for God..."
(1 Cor. 3)

Global Ministries, a common witness of the Division of Overseas Ministries, Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) and Wider Church Ministries, United Church of Christ is a unique part of our church. These two denominations work together in the sending and receiving of missionaries around the world. Missionaries, both short and long term, work directly with partners overseas.

At the invitation of Global Ministries, I recently had a special opportunity to attend a commissioning service recognizing my mission work in China and to participate in a training session for Global Ministries' recently launched Ministries and Mission Interpreters (MMI) project.

The goal of MMI is to have in each UCC Conference at least one trained and resourced interpreter who can tell the global mission story based on personal experience. Successful and effective mission interpretation will put a face on mission, give thanks and build enthusiasm, celebrate and educate, and proclaim the Good News.

The Revs. Cally Rogers-Witte and David Vargas, Co-Executives of Global Ministries, commissioned us to do the work of MMI and

we each received a stole and pin as symbols of our commissioning during the worship service. Each new MMI was asked to place his or her action plan for global mission into the offering plate. Each interpreter will be matched with a Global Ministries staff mentor to implement the action plan.

In the training, I learned creative ways to talk about ministry and mission, how to connect with my Conference about mission, effective ways to make presentations and offer resources, and ways to inspire and train others in their call to global mission.

Partnership is a key concept that describes the type of relationships Global Ministries seeks to build. In covenant with partner churches, we affirm a shared life in Jesus Christ. Global Ministries believes that sharing life in partnership with other churches and ecumenical bodies is the cornerstone of our global life and witness.

We are all called to be missionaries as the UCC's Statement of Faith affirms: "...to be servants in the service of others, to proclaim the gospel to all the world..." Mission is about being in solidarity with God and with all our neighbors.

Dr. Debbie Pallatto-Fontaine, is Commissioned Minister of Spiritual Formation at First Congregational Church of Woodstock. She co-chairs the Conference's Korean Partnership Committee and also serves as a mission volunteer in China. If you would like more information on how to become a global church, how to get the story of Global Ministries in your congregation, or host a MMI training session, feel free to contact her.