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Local group responding to Katrina victims who still need help

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March 23, 2008

BY SUE ELLEN ROSS Post-Tribune correspondent

The Faith Without Borders group has shown that it's definitely possible to work toward a common goal, no matter the religious affiliations of those involved.

The group's goal is to help survivors of Hurricane Katrina, and 35 area residents from various churches will travel to New Orleans from Monday through Friday to work on four houses. They will install dry wall and trim, paint and perform other renovations.

"We don't want to stand by as our fellow Americans in New Orleans are still living in FEMA trailers, with their lives out of order," said Helen Rutkowski, one of the coordinators of the trip. "The main purpose of the trip is to rebuild homes together with Operation Helping Hands, a volunteer program of the Catholic Charities Archdiocese of New Orleans."

Faith Without Borders is based at St. John the Evangelist Catholic Church in St. John, but represents 15 Northwest Indiana churches.

Angie Williams, executive director of the Food Bank of Northwest Indiana and a member of Lighthouse Christian Fellowship Church, has belonged to FWB since its first trip to New Orleans in 2006.

"We have an ongoing partnership with St. John the Evangelist Church," she said. "During their recent Grocery Bag Project Ministry, St. John parishioners donated 6,700 pounds of food and supplies that we will be taking to New Orleans with the mission team."

Bob Hynek of Crown Point also will travel south. A policeman, he was on standby after Katrina hit the Gulf Coast on Aug. 28, 2005.

"We were never sent at that time, but I've made two other trips since then," he said. "I have a friend whose family lives down there, and I wanted to help."

Hynek's first trip to New Orleans was a family affair. His wife, Sue, and oldest son, Josh, accompanied him.

"During both my trips, I met people who love that we come down and help," Hynek said. "In the job that I do, I see the worst in people all the time. It's nice to see people helping other people for a change."

Rutkowski said trip expenses, including van rental and gas for three, 15-passenger vans, are covered by donations and a volunteerism grant St. John the Evangelist Parish received from Mail Boxes Etc. for this FWB mission.

"There are other mission trip expenses totaling \$50 per person," Rutkowski said, "which are paid for by each team member. About a dozen team members have their trip fees paid through memorial sponsorship donations in memory of Julie Herr, our FWB core team member who passed away in January."

Medical supplies, books and food also will be packed in the vans.

Rutkowski said Faith Without Borders began in August 2006. It is a ministry that was developed after the youth of St. John the Evangelist inspired the adults to reach out beyond the community to help those in need, a year after the youths' Appalachia Family Mission trip to Jerkins, Ky., she added.

"The (FWB) ministry is an umbrella name to a variety of mission-based ministries at our parish," Rutkowski said, "including the Katrina Relief Mission, Dominican Republic Mission, Dominican Republic Orphan Sponsorship

Program, Medical Supply Drive, Disaster Response Team, and Appalachia Family Mission."

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