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## Step up to clear the stench in New Orleans

By DWIGHT LEWIS

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The Rev. Joseph Jackson wanted to go, but at the same time he wanted to stay.

"I was hesitant because of the stories I'd heard and afraid of what I might see," the Milwaukee preacher told me over the telephone late Tuesday night. "There was some ambivalence on my part.

"I had mixed emotions."

Listening to the Lexington, Ky., native, I could understand his predicament. I'm sure you would, too.

Jackson, the pastor of Evergreen Baptist Church in Milwaukee, had come south earlier in the day. On his way to his hotel, he could see some boarded-up buildings. He could also see evidence of the patched-up repair work that had taken place.

And, he told me, "There was a slight stench in the air."

Jackson was in New Orleans when he called my house Tuesday night. He and about 30 other African-American ministers, mostly from the Midwest, had come to the Crescent City to mark the upcoming first anniversary of Hurricane Katrina with "A Season of Prayer" bus tour of the Gulf Coast region, "highlighting poverty and lack of opportunity" in the United States.

The group had a press conference yesterday in New Orleans with local activists, public officials and clergy. After leaving New Orleans today, they'll go on to Baton Rouge and Biloxi, Miss.

"We came to be our brothers' and sisters' keepers," Jackson told me. "We're also down here to deepen our understanding of the analysis and actions needed to reverse conditions that predated Hurricanes Katrina and Rita.

"And we're down here to support institutional relationships and coalitions that raise up people and communities that are drowning on dry land from concentrated poverty in the Gulf Coast. We want to push the government."

Push the government to do more than what it has done so far to help get the lives of the people pushed out by Katrina and Rita back together. All of us remember how slow the local, state and federal government reacted to the hurricanes that hit the Gulf Coast last year.

"The flood uncovered and exposed some of the issues such as poverty and segregation," Jackson said as we talked.

I remembered hearing Ann Bludsaw telling me, after she and other family members fled to safety in Nashville from New Orleans immediately following Katrina, that it was tough for her to watch television accounts of people being stranded at the Superdome and the city's convention center.

"Seeing them stranded and being without food and being without water, that really touched my heart," Bludsaw said in September. "No one did anything to help these people. And I know a lot of

people said they should have evacuated, but these were the majority of people who did not have the transportation to leave the city."

Are things any better today?

"Such a disaster could come to Milwaukee or to Nashville," Jackson said. "What kind of people would we be if we just stood and watched?"

"If Iraq can be rebuilt, then home should be our top priority. We want to walk the talk. We want to be there for all people who need our help and support. We have to give more than lip service. We want to see some changes."

Jackson is right. Home should be a priority. But more importantly, home should have been a priority before Katrina and Rita hit.

If it had been, perhaps we wouldn't have seen the terrible scenes that Ann Bludsaw recalled so vividly, scenes of people standing on rooftops pleading for someone to save their lives.

We saw them, too, and as the first anniversary of Katrina and Rita is talked about and written about over the next week or two, it will be interesting to see just how much has changed since last August and early September.

Whatever has changed, I'm willing to bet that the Rev. Joseph Jackson and other ministers on his bus tour will find out that it's not nearly enough. Just watch and listen for yourself. •

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