



Everything New Orleans

## Black clergy tour Katrina damage Group to demand federal recovery help

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A national group of black clergy and lay leaders touring the storm-ravaged Gulf Coast said Wednesday that they will demand the federal government release money for rebuilding.

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Standing outside the flood-damaged Mount Nebo Bible Baptist Church on Flood Street in the Lower 9th Ward, members of the Gamaliel Foundation's African American Leadership Commission said they are on a fact-finding mission, dubbed the "Drowning on Dry Land/Connecting Covenant Visit," to learn how they can provide continuing support to the people of the Gulf Coast, particularly the poor.

"We're here to support the faith community, allies and organizations in their ongoing Katrina/Rita restoration strategies," said the Rev. Joseph Jackson Jr., pastor of Evergreen Missionary Baptist Church of Milwaukee, Wis., and co-chairman of the commission. "We're here visiting with clergy, public policy and public officials to pursue a unified national strategy for releasing all of the resources -- real money -- to rebuild the Gulf Coast and, more importantly, the people."

The Gamaliel Foundation is an organizing network of more than 60 affiliates in 21 states in America and five provinces in South Africa, according to its Web site, [www.gamaliel.org](http://www.gamaliel.org). The foundation represents more than a million multifaith, multiracial church people who work on social justice campaigns. The African American Leadership Commission comprises mostly black clergy and lay leaders whose mission is to address issues and concerns of the black community.

One member of the tour, Deacon Gerry Hughley of Cincinnati, Ohio, said he couldn't believe the devastation left by Hurricanes Katrina and Rita. "This is blowing me away," he said. "This is a year later. I'm really blown away by that."

The Rev. Sharon Smith of East St. Louis, Ill., treasurer of the AALC, said the commission "needed to come to New Orleans." She said the AALC has been "agitated" by the "outrageous inadequacy of our government's action in response, recovery and restoration."

Smith said the AALC stands ready to go to Washington, D.C., to demand that the federal government rebuild the Gulf Coast. Storm survivors are weary and losing faith in the government, she said, and "it is time for the church and the people of faith beyond the Gulf Coast . . . to come together in faith rebuilding the Gulf Coast. We stand with and for the survivors of Katrina and Rita," Smith said.

This is what Mount Nebo's pastor, the Rev. Charles Duplessis, wanted to hear. He said he needs help to rebuild the church he has led for the past 19 years.

"I believe these are people of integrity," Duplessis said. "They didn't have to come here. My faith says they are going to do something."

Duplessis, who also lost his Lower 9th Ward home, is temporarily living in Tuskegee, Ala. He said he wants to rebuild his church but plans to put up a tent on its grounds to resume services as soon as the land is cleared.

He said he is part of a group called Churches Supporting Churches, a program that will partner 36 local churches with 360 national and international churches to rebuild Gulf Coast communities and their places of worship.

The Rev. Marvin Turner, pastor of Mount Arart Missionary Baptist Church at 2525 First St., also was encouraged by the AALC's visit. His church suffered wind damage and minor flooding, but the cost of repairs has exhausted nearly all the church's money.

He said it is important that churches be rebuilt because they are "the central building block of the black community."

Commission members also are scheduled to visit Biloxi, Miss., and Baton Rouge. On Friday the Rev. Dwight Webster, pastor of Christian Unity Baptist Church in New Orleans, will be the keynote speaker at a closing dinner.

To observe the first anniversary of the storm, the ministers also are requesting that clergy nationwide commemorate Katrina this Sunday and Aug. 27 by urging their congregations to make the rebuilding effort a movement.

For information on the AALC, visit [www.gamaliel.org/AALC](http://www.gamaliel.org/AALC).

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