

Bicycle ministry helps repair lives in Haiti, at home

By Kitty Carpenter | Sept. 24, 2010 {1219}

Before the Jan. 12 earthquake in Haiti, the Rev. Guerry Lefranc called 56 orphaned children "my kids." Now, he says, he could easily be father to 200 if he had the resources to care for them.

"We feed as many people as we can each day with bread and sugar water. Then, we close the door and cry, while the others beg and plead," he said.

Lefranc is director of United Methodist-related Zamar Ministries near Croix-des-Bouquets, Haiti, which operates a school, church and clinic. He is also the brother of the Rev. Tamara Isidore, pastor at Friendship United Methodist Church in Clearwater and a member of the Florida Conference's Haiti-Florida Covenant task group.



Volunteers in Haiti unload bicycles and other supplies provided by East Lake and Wellspring United Methodist churches in Palm Harbor and Tampa, respectively, for Zamar Ministries. Photo courtesy of Sue Bailey. Photo #10-1551.

Lefranc says the earthquake devastated his parish, located near the airport in Port-au-Prince. He says people there have received tents, but no other help from the government or Red Cross, despite the fact that supplies are relatively close by.

Problems associated with distributing donated supplies have prolonged people's suffering, Lefranc says, forcing people to live in tents and beg for food.

Several Florida Conference churches are helping fill that gaping hole of relief. They're providing food and supplies, but also another much-needed item — bicycles.

One of the first big projects of the bicycle ministry at East Lake United Methodist Church in Palm Harbor was refurbishing bicycles for Haiti.

Shortly after the earthquake hit, 11 adult bicycles were loaded into a container filled with relief supplies headed for Zamar Ministries. The container was coordinated by Wellspring United Methodist Church in Tampa, which has been working with the Haitian ministry for several years.

Within a few days of that shipment, Magical Charters in Odessa and Agape

Ministries in Venice and Haiti worked to send another 21 adult bicycles. Most were provided to adult relief workers so they could travel to earthquake damaged sites more easily.

And by the end of this month, the Palm Harbor church plans to send another large shipping container of supplies.

Sue Bailey, who co-chairs the church's mission ministry with her husband, Mike, said the container will include a variety of items, including food, bicycles, household items, school supplies, clothes, 200 toys made by the church's ToyMaker ministry and supplies for the clinic. It will also include tools and repair kits so Zamar Ministries can start its own bicycle repair program. Volunteers will load the container Sept. 25.

The first priority of the shipment is food, Lefranc said, but the second is 20 bicycles for ministry workers.

"With bicycles, they can go to (supply and relief sites to) get more help," Lefranc said.



Sue Bailey, the Rev. Guerry Lefranc (center) and David Fowles help volunteers sort donations for a container of bicycles and supplies for Zamar Ministries. Fowles will be helping Lefranc in Haiti for two months. Photo by Kitty Carpenter. Photo #10-1552.

Each bicycle has a yellow seat with the word Zamar painted on it. If people need to use a bicycle, they must agree to work for the ministry.

Skilled volunteers, students launch ministry

The genesis of the bicycle ministry began long before the earthquake hit and grew from another ministry at East Lake United Methodist Church.

Since 2007, the church's ToyMakers ministry has

produced thousands of brightly painted, simple wooden toys for children in physical or emotional distress. In late 2009, volunteers expanded the program to include a thriving bicycle ministry that has refurbished more than 150 bicycles for Haiti, area veteran's groups, homeless men and women living in tent cities in Pinellas and Pasco counties, and local at-risk children.

Both ministries began when people with similar interests were motivated to put their hobbies into service for others. The Rev. Gene Watson was one of the driving forces behind the group.

Watson retired to Palm Harbor by way of New Port Richey after serving 40 years in the Nebraska Conference of The United Methodist Church. His ministry began as a US2 missionary teaching industrial arts at a children's home in Nebraska.

Feeling like a "preacher out of water" after retiring, he stepped back into woodworking and mechanical repair work and joined the ToyMakers Group of New Port Richey. The community group, established in 1982, has provided 250,000 toys

to children in need across the globe and spawned nearly 100 ToyMakers programs across the country.

Watson and two other church members, John Little and Mac Russell, formed a new ToyMakers outreach at East Lake United Methodist Church in 2007 with six volunteers. Today, 40 men and women, ages 15 to 90, work in shifts Tuesdays through Thursdays and Saturday mornings making a variety of toys. More than 4,000 are distributed each year to children's hospitals, therapy units, Ronald McDonald houses, Fisher House of Bay Pines Veteran's Hospital, law enforcement agencies, firefighters' programs, women's shelters and local children's missions.

"It just shows that God can use individuals and churches with talents big and small to help others in a tangible way," Watson said.

The church helped ToyMakers expand by offering an annex building that had been used as a maintenance facility for a golf course as a permanent workshop. Watson says the un-air-conditioned building is not fancy, but it is full of toys, tools, bicycles and volunteers.

The interest in a bicycle ministry began to take shape when Watson found a kindred spirit in Cory Nickels, a teenage neighbor.

When he was 13, Nickels said, he began roaming his neighborhood on garbage nights, picking up anything that could be recycled, fixed, sold or donated to people in need. He fixed strollers, cribs, bicycles and even televisions and donated them to domestic violence centers and other charities.



(Left to right) Cory Nickels, the Rev. Gene Watson, Trevor Charlton and Otniel LeFranc repair bicycles bound for Haiti and local organizations. Photo by Kitty Carpenter. Photo #10-1552.

Nickels, now 17 and a senior in the engineering academy program at River Ridge High School in New Port Rickey, says his home workshop kept expanding and he began working regularly with Watson, both at ToyMakers and on bicycles. When Watson and his wife, the Rev. Lois-Rogers Watson, a retired Florida Conference minister and former staff member at the East Lake church, moved to Palm Harbor, Watson spoke with ToyMakers leaders about including a bicycle ministry.

Church member Trevor Charlton, a mechanical engineer and a plant manager for a pharmaceutical packaging company in Odessa, heard about the proposed project and volunteered to lead the team.

Originally from York, England, Charlton said he "tinkered with" cars and motorcycles when he was younger and was looking for something to do that would give back to his church and community.

Charlton enlisted the help of coworker Frank Kirkland of Holiday, a plant

maintenance engineer. Then, Adam Fierce, a junior in East Lake High School's engineering magnet program and a member of the church joined the team, and the bicycle ministry was born.

The four volunteers now work on the bicycles most Saturdays from 9 a.m. to 1 p.m., alongside the ToyMakers volunteers. Watson helps as needed, but spends most of his time making toys.

"It is very gratifying to know that our bike ministry has such (far-reaching) consequences," Charlton said of the ministry's impact in Haiti.

Community effort

Here at home, Karen Epting, president of the ToyMakers ministry, and other church volunteers work with Pinellas and Pasco County sheriffs Jim Coats and Bob White to enlist community support and identify local needs.

The bicycle ministry receives unclaimed, lost or stolen bicycles from both sheriffs' departments with the understanding that some of the bicycles will be refurbished and given back to the community.



Karen Epting puts away several wooden cars among the boxes of blue racers, ladybugs, firetrucks and other toys. Photo by Kitty Carpenter. Photo #10-1554.

The Pinellas Suncoast Transit Authority also donates unclaimed bicycles — sometimes 20 a month — that have been left on bus bicycle racks.

Between those associations and the number of bicycles donated by church members and the community at large, there is a constant stream of bicycles entering the workshop, some for refurbishing and others for parts.

Neither the toys nor the bicycles are ever sold. Funds are raised from donations and through some repairs made to bicycles that belong to

church members. As a result, there is very little cost associated with either project.

The toys and the bicycles are distributed through established charitable agencies, such as Project Hope of Catholic Charities in Pinellas Park, United Methodist Cooperative Ministries' children's programs in Clearwater, Hispanic ministries at Union Street United Methodist Church in Clearwater, Christmas Angel Tree Ministries at various nonprofits, Sally House in St. Petersburg, and the American Marine Institute Alternative School and the Veterans' Association in New Port Richey.

The bicycle ministry is always in need of additional skilled volunteers. Individuals who would like more information or to donate a used bicycle may call Charlton at 727-412-0586.

More information about Haiti relief efforts coordinated by East Lake and Wellspring United Methodist churches is available at <http://www.eastlakeumc.org> and http://www.wellspringtampabay.org/whats_happening.cfm.

Additional information on the ToyMakers ministry is available at <http://www.toymakersofeastlake.org>

<http://www.toymakersofeastlake.org>.

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News media contact: Tita Parham, 800-282-8011, tparham@flumc.org, Orlando

*Parham is managing editor of e-Review Florida United Methodist News Service.

**Carpenter is a freelance writer based in Palm Harbor, Fla.

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