



Damage to The First Presbyterian Church of Punta Gorda (above) and The First Presbyterian Church of Port Charlotte, both hard-hit by the storms.



# A One-Two-Three Punch

PTS Alums Experience Florida's Hurricanes, and the Continuing Relief Effort, Firsthand

by Barbara A. Chaapel

Frances, Jeanne, and Charley are three names the people of southern and central Florida want to forget. And, as heat and water again begin to churn far off in the Atlantic, they fervently hope no new names will be chiseled into their hearts and lives in the coming months.

June marked the official beginning of the 2005 hurricane season, according to the National Weather Service, and Floridians, many of them Presbyterians, are still recovering from last year's trinity of devastating storms.

The first blast came from Charley, which on Friday, August 13 made a surprise right turn from the Gulf and cut a path of destruction right through the middle of Peace River Presbytery. Just the day before, executive presbyter Graham Hart (PTS Class of 1976) had had a conversation with Jim Kirk, a member of the PCUSA Disaster Assistance Team, about the possible effects of the storm. They sent a broadcast fax to all churches and waited.

Tim Stewart, pastor of Burnt Store Presbyterian Church in Punta Gorda, who was watching Doppler radar on TV, literally saw Charley make the turn. "He said, 'It's coming here,'" recalls Hart, "and 20 minutes later he was huddled in a safe room of his house with several labs and retrievers that help the blind while the eye of the storm was breaking windows and pulling shingles off the roof above him."

Church members of the presbytery's 38 churches awoke on Sunday, August 15 to discover that First Church, Punta Gorda, had taken a direct hit. Charley lifted its roof off and deposited it in the sanctuary, which was a total loss. (The congregation has been worshipping in the fellowship hall of neighboring Burnt Store Church, and has decided to completely rebuild.) Members of Chapel by the Sea in Fort Myers Beach couldn't reach the church because of restricted access, and only four days later learned that the building had sustained serious wind and water damage; water and sand filled the sanctuary.

But on that post-hurricane sabbath, "worship services were held in every church but those two," says Hart, and First Church, Punta Gorda's, pastor "had prayer in the parking lot with several parishioners who showed up even though there was no sanctuary." Hart went with an interfaith group of clergy to Port Charlotte and Punta Gorda, the two worst-hit areas, and called every pastor in the presbytery to find out how everyone had fared.

Now almost a year later, Hart recites with gratitude the offers of help that flooded into Peace River in the hurricane's wake from across the church and the nation, each a puzzle piece in reconstructing the lives of individuals and churches. There was the presbytery's Hurricane Charley Task Force, with 25 people present at its first meeting four days after the storm, who soon made contact with a point person from each congregation. There were hundreds of phone calls and emails from across the country. Forty lay Stephens Ministers from nearby churches volunteered to visit Presbyterians in the hardest-hit areas who did not have phone or electric service. "One such neighborly visit found an elderly woman in tears," says Hart. "She had no food in her house, and was profusely grateful when the volunteers took her to the nearest grocery store."

The task force quickly put up a web site to provide information, and, with a \$50,000 grant from Presbyterian Disaster Assistance (PDA), hired Larry Graham-Johnson, who had been through Hurricane Andrew in Tropical Florida Presbytery, as a rebuilding coordinator for a year.

“FEMA and the Governor’s office asked us to stay in the relief effort for the long haul,” Hart says. “The Red Cross and others are primed to help as first responders, but the church knows how to go the distance. When everyone finally packs up and leaves, we’ll still be here.”

Adept at organizing, the Presbyterians soon had work crews deployed to the eight churches in the presbytery that had sustained damage; an urgent priority was repairing a daycare center in one of the churches that serves 125 children. The center was reopened in less than a week. Other task group members visited pastors whose homes had been damaged. “We knew it was important to care for the caregivers as they were trying to care for others,” Hart says. “Venice Presbyterian Church hosted a breakfast for all the pastoral staff who had experienced personal loss, or significant loss in their congregation; 25 pastors and spouses attended.”

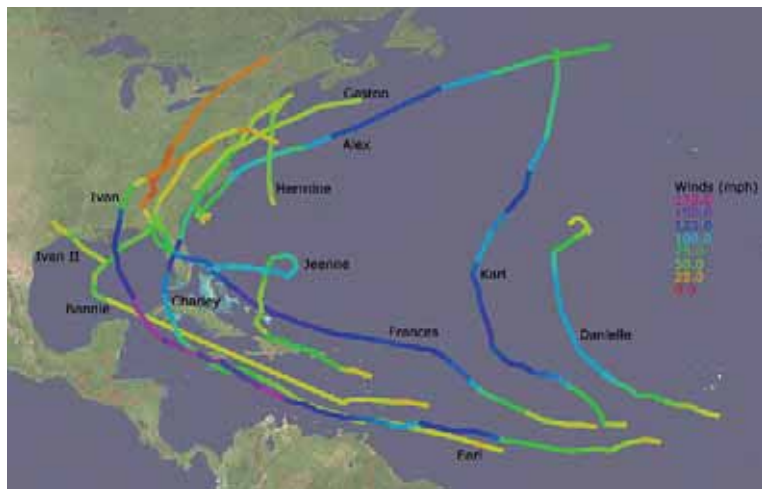
In late August, PCUSA moderator Rick Ufford-Chase came to the presbytery to participate in relief efforts. And since last Thanksgiving, more than 500 Presbyterians from churches in Michigan, Alabama, New York, North Carolina, and Nebraska have traveled to Peace River to help. One team came from the First Presbyterian Church in Pittsfield, New York, which had lost its sanctuary to a fire last year (see *inSpire* summer/fall 2004 “End Things”). “We know what you’re going through,” Hart remembers one Pittsfield member saying.



Word went out through One Great Hour of Sharing and the PDA that money was needed, and as usual, Presbyterians responded generously. “I was able to take a \$10,000 check to each of our seven most-affected churches,” says Hart. “It thrilled me to be able to present the checks during worship and say ‘This is from Presbyterians across the country.’” The presbytery has received more than \$350,000 in donations.

But it is presence, Hart believes, that has been the most crucial in Peace River Presbytery’s continuing recovery. “People being present with people; that’s the gospel,” he says.

A bit farther east in the Orlando area, 31 churches in Central Florida Presbytery also felt Charley’s wrath, as well as sustaining damage from Hurricanes Jeanne and Frances. Six congregations could not worship in their sanctuaries for months. As in Peace River, no church families lost members to the storms, reports executive presbyter



The tracks of Hurricanes Charley, Frances, and Jeanne seem merely like distant lines on a weather map until they intersect with a building like The First Presbyterian Church of Punta Gorda.



Paige McRight (PTS Class of 1971). And through the weeks and months of rebuilding, it is the stories she remembers.

“Tom Womack, pastor at First Presbyterian, Vero Beach, knew they were in trouble after Frances hit when a school of mullet passed him on the inland side as he waded across the church parking lot. He knew the congregation was coming out of trouble when members of Westminster Church, Vero Beach, their daughter church, celebrated the burning of their own

mortgage with a major gift to their mother church for hurricane relief. He knew they were coming out of trouble when First Church, Orlando, sent nursery supplies, sheet music, and funds to replace ruined cribs, and when the Board of Pensions Emergency Fund came through to help staff members restore homes.

“George Spaeth, a commissioned lay pastor at Conway Church, and Wesley Porto, pastor of New Hope—two congregations that share one space—found three trees in the church the day after Charley. On Monday they found friends with chainsaws from New Life Presbyterian, Fruitland Park, arriving to clear brush, and friends from South Lake Presbyterian in Clermont bringing lunch for 250 to feed the church’s neighborhood hot meals after two days without power. PDA funds later paid to remove the trees so that repair work could begin.

“The Okeechobee Presbyterian Church Food Pantry, a major resource in a rural county with many farm labor families, was put out of business by the storms. Presbyterians from West Virginia and North and South Carolina provided and stocked a trailer to get them back in business. Because the farm laborers could then work, they could try to salvage the crops heavily damaged by the storms so that other hungry families could eat.”



Water floods Palmdale Presbyterian Church in Jeanne's wake

McRight believes the storms have been teachers. "We've learned how much we value each other," she says. "We learned a new appreciation for the community that is the Presbyterian Church (USA). We've learned patience, that recovery and rebuilding take much longer than any of us wants. And we've learned to live with a vague but constant sense of disorientation because things don't look like they used to where we live. We've learned to be grateful to God, who is our refuge and strength. And One Great Hour of Sharing will never be a casual offering for us again."

William Anderson, PTS Class of 1984, pastors Palmdale Presbyterian Church in Melbourne, in the eastern part of McRight's presbytery. Charley had blown out by the time it reached Melbourne, but Jeanne and Frances did come calling. "We had to cancel services on Labor Day weekend because of Frances, and it did a bit of damage," Anderson said. "But on September 26 Jeanne really got us. Not only did we have to cancel services that Sunday, we've been meeting in other locations since then because of damage to the church." Jeanne pulled the flat roof of the building that served as nursery, library, narthex, gathering area, and offices right off, and left it hanging over the edge into the parking lot, daylight visible between the roof boards. The adjacent sanctuary was flooded, and the standing water seeped into the lower level. "We had one dry room on the whole property," Anderson recalls, "the choir room." In total, the church sustained more than \$400,000 in damages.

The congregation met first at a local elementary school and then, because tarps, moldy drywall, and mildewed carpet defined the foreseeable future, the session appointed a committee to decide what to do long-term. The nearest Presbyterian church was too far away, so they approached the rabbi of a new and nearby Messianic Jewish synagogue. "An elder and I went to visit," says Anderson, "and it was workable. But of course there was no cross, no font, no communion table. So we had to improvise. At least they had a place to store our hymnals so we didn't have to carry them back and forth. It seems like a small thing, but it was a great relief. Parking was tight, so we set up a shuttle bus. Christian education space was tight, too. Some classes met in the hallway sitting in folding chairs."

Palmdale's session has helped the Messianic congregation pay the utility bills, and the two congregations have learned what it is to be neighbors. "At our annual meeting and congregational dinner in January, there was no pork, ham, bacon, or sausage in our covered dishes," Anderson says. "I don't understand Messianic Judaism at all if I'm honest, but I am deeply grateful for their gracious hospitality."

Before the offices relocated to a commercial office park, Anderson worked out of the trunk of his car for a few weeks ("It was Palmdale Presbyterian Church in exile," he laughs). But he admits it was very difficult.

"I'm a liturgical theologian, not a process person," he says. "And we haven't come close to making sense of all this theologically. We've tried to stress the nature of the church community, and our life together. After November 1, we could have gone back to two services on Sunday, but we decided to stick to one service so we could all be together in worship." The church has tried to keep its programs going, although that has meant an ever-growing list of venues, including fellow PCUSA congregations. "Our neighboring churches, both Presbyterian and others, have shown us a tremendous amount of graciousness," Anderson says.

He won't forget the toll Jeanne took on people. The oldest person in his church, a 103-year-old woman in an assisted-living facility, died when she was being moved out of the facility because of the storm. A session member suffered a stroke while planning hurricane relief around a fellow elder's dining room table. "People felt so overwhelmed at the loss to homes and churches," Anderson says. "Two of my elders wanted to resign until I talked with them and tried to lessen their load on session. Paige McRight was a huge support for me, and my colleagues checked in with me a lot. The storm passes in a couple of hours, but it takes months, even years, for people to get through it."

Bob Norris's church was 20 miles west of the eye of Frances. Norris, a 1979 PTS graduate, serves the Royal Poinciana Chapel in Palm Beach, an interdenominational congregation. Frances hit first, with no time to regroup before Jeanne barreled in. "We had no chance to clean up before everything was thrown around again," says Norris.

"Frances damaged the property and shut down electricity. We fixed that after being out of the sanctuary for three weeks. Then Jeanne came along and damaged the chapel with wind and water, including major water damage to our organ from water that came in under the belfry. Though because of the storm shutters, we didn't have so much damage that we had to cancel worship."

"On an island, when there is a disaster you learn a lot about community," Norris says. "We had a respect for weather, and we learned to rely on and help each other. We helped evacuate the hospital and people in homes close-lying the water."

Norris speaks theologically about the storm. "God pruned the island, and we cleaned it up. Nothing hit us that can't be replanted, or pounded back into shape. God's people in tropical Florida are resilient. We came back into our church with gladness, telling the story, as if coming back from exile."

Norris's sermons in the weeks after the hurricanes considered texts like Jesus stilling the storm, and the Great Flood, as he emphasized for his people the pervasive and constant presence of God. "It was like we were baptized anew by the storms."

But he believes at the same time that the enormity of the loss is still unfathomable, these many months after Frances and Jeanne are no longer names on the front pages of the nation's newspapers. "Some promised help has not yet come; some homes covered with blue tarps will await roofs for many months. Some of the uninsured will not be able to rebuild. Very little of Florida has been unaffected."

But most of Florida is connected in ways stronger than before last August. That includes Presbyterians. "We're a connectional church to our core," says Hart. "The downside of that is that all of our theological and social differences pervade the system and have to be dealt with and argued out by everybody. But the upside is that in an emergency, we care, we cooperate, we connect. The people of Florida would not be where we are now were it not for a connectional church." ■