Journey to Galveston

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Each spring thousands of students from across the country head for destinations unknown for a week of relaxation and fun. Spring break represents the much needed respite from the endless succession of classes, homework, and work that is the life of a college student. But students at the Journey House Campus Ministries experience a different kind of spring break, one spent in the service of others.

There has been ongoing campus ministry in the East Lansing area for over fifty years, and in the late 1990’s the East Lansing congregation, then known as the I Am Mission, embarked on a bold new plan, the Journey House. Their vision was to create a facility to not only provide student housing, but also to expand the impact of the ministries they had been providing to students by giving them a safe, inviting place to gather and create community. With the help of the world church, and in particular Apostle Jim Slauter, the Journey House, then known simply as the Campus Ministry Center, opened its doors to students in the fall of 1999 and was dedicated in the spring of 2000.

With the capacity to house up to twelve students at a time, the house has been home to over 50 students since its opening. Countless other students have been blessed by the ministries that Journey House has been able to provide, both in East Lansing and through its support of campus ministry programs at other colleges. Part of Journey House’s purpose and mission is to serve as a model and resource for campus ministry throughout Community of Christ. Diane McNeil, the Director of Journey House, is also the Campus Ministry Specialist for Community of Christ.

It was Diane who, while talking to Jeff Anderson during the 2000 World Conference, first began to envision a spring break mission trip. Excitement over this new vision grew and in both 2001 and 2003 students traveled to the Power House in Baltimore, Maryland where Jeff
was, and still is, serving as the pastor. Between the two trips, students volunteered their time
doing everything from creating, conducting and compiling surveys, to insulating and dry walling
the attic of the church, to spending time working with students at the local middle school.

There was a drive and desire among the students of Journey House to provide disaster
relief to hurricane victims, resulting in the decision in both 2006 and 2007 to head to Florida, and
then to New Orleans in 2008. Each year held new challenges and experiences that were unique
in helping to shape each of the students’ lives.

When Galveston, Texas, became the target for 2009, a new challenge arose that
threatened to stop the trip before it even began. Each year several vehicles were rented for
making the trips, but Galveston was too far away to drive and flying would break the budget.
Each previous trip had cost students between $100 and $150, with the remainder being paid for
by fundraising and programming funds. The answer to this seemingly insurmountable obstacle
was presented in the form of a $5,000 grant from the Community of Christ Oblation Fund.

With their goal in sights the students began their fundraising, reaching record numbers
due to the enormous generosity of Journey House supporters and many Community of Christ
congregations, members, and friends. Excitement and anticipation continued to grow as the trip
approached, both for the twelve who would be going and in the Bay Area congregation that
would be hosting them.

Judy Daniels, the pastor of the Bay Area congregation, went far beyond anything that
could have been expected to prepare for the arrival of the ten students, Diane, and Kim
Stanbridge, the Resident Manager of Journey House. Since it had been decided that the group
would be housed at the church, she put out a call for mattresses, sheets, pillows, towels, and
anything else that would be required. She arranged for week long guest passes to the local
YMCA so that the group would have ready access to showers throughout the week. She arranged for the use of her neighbors’ showers for Saturday and Sunday evenings when the YMCA was closed. She even went so far as to hand over the keys to her van to a complete stranger for the week.

Students were taken aback by the hospitality they received from both the Bay Area congregation and everyone else they encountered during the week. When they first arrived at Judy’s neighbors to take showers they, were greeted with arms wide open, literally. So much food was given throughout the week that it was impossible for the group to finish it all.

During their Sunday morning worship Life to Lead, the praise band that grew out of the desire of Journey House students to return the great ministry they had been blessed with, shared in music with the congregation, providing both praise music and a ministry of music. On Wednesday night the congregation again gathered to share with the students and Life to Lead as they presented a praise service to tell them about campus ministry, the Journey House, past mission trips, and what we had been able to do in Galveston. Testimonies from many of the students, both members and friends of Community of Christ, reaffirmed the importance of campus ministry in the lives of college students everywhere.

Working in Galveston provided a new experience as the group found themselves working directly with the people they were helping. In the past the organizations we partnered with made all of the necessary contacts and arrangement for the work, but in Galveston contact was made directly. This contact had a very deep and significant effect on everyone, volunteer and owner alike.

The first task the group was set to was cleaning up and clearing away a garage that had both burned and flooded during the hurricane, in addition to helping to removing several downed
trees. The owner of the property, April, shared how she had tried everything she could think of to find someone to help her with this project. Her husband had passed away a year ago and this was the kind of thing that he had always dealt with. The property had been in her husband’s family for over 200 years.

After steady work on both Monday and Wednesday and three trailer loads of debris, both the garage and yard were once again visible. Throughout the two days of work, April was able to share about the rich history of Galveston, and when she stated she wished she could do something as thanks, she was asked to share more about the area. The stories she was able to share were the kind which cannot be found a history book.

Also on Monday part of the group was able to go downtown to the Mod Café and clean up an alleyway adjacent to the building which was filled with mud and debris. Thanks to some bleach provided by the building’s owner, they were able to overcome the stench of the alleyway and surprise one café employee who never knew there was cement under the mud.

Tuesday was spent at the Seafarer’s Center of Galveston, a nonprofit ministry for seafarers which provides many services, both spiritual and physical, for seafarers. Their building had received seven feet of water and also suffered a roof failure during the hurricane. Because work had already begun to recover from the damage, students were set to work collecting and organizing building materials, clearing damaged or unwanted materials, sweeping floors, scraping paint, cleaning windows, sorting and shredding old documents and records, and, most importantly, using an antimicrobial to kill any remaining mold. Throughout the day students were able to share with Wendy and Melissa, the co-managers, about Journey House and also learn about the Seafarers Center.
Wendy and Melissa expressed their gratitude for the work being done by purchasing pizza and pop for lunch. They shared how frustrated and discouraged they had felt as weeks went by without any visible improvement in the building; how encouraging and heartening it was to see the progress that was made in a single day!

On the final day of work, Thursday, the group headed to Juanita’s house, which had received thirteen feet of water. While the houses in the area were all built on stilts, at some point her basement had been enclosed and finished and the only items she was able to salvage were a few mugs and dishes. While some work had already been done it was clear that much more was still needed. It was decided to divide and conquer, with a group working in the basement to finish removing the drywall and insulation while the rest went upstairs and cleaned the house from top to bottom.

At the beginning of the day it was clear that Juanita was distraught and didn’t know where to even begin, but by the end of the day she had found a new hope. She knew that there are people who care and could see that her home would be put back together again.

Although the students of Journey House had set out to minister to others, throughout the week they were ministered to again and again. While the group was able to visit many sites around Houston and Galveston in the evenings and their day off, what will always stand out the most in their memories are the people: the people they served and who served them in return. The loving embrace of the Living Christ is more powerful than any hurricane, and for the twelve who were lucky enough to journey to Galveston their lives will never be the same.