

An Interview with Rev. Bruce Davenport of St. John #5 Faith Church, New Orleans



Photo by: Bill Sasser

Rev. Bruce Davenport, 55, is the pastor of St. John #5 Faith Church in New Orleans. The church is in St. Bernard Parish, the 7th Ward, and next to the St. Bernard housing project, one of the city's oldest and largest housing developments for low-income residents. St. John Church was heavily damaged by Katrina and 8-foot-high flood waters in August 2005. Rev. Davenport, with help from his community and outside organizations, has led efforts to rebuild the church and its services to the neighborhood.

Before the storm, St. John Church provided help to the community from five adjacent houses. Services included housing for

The Roundtable:

How many people were in your congregation before Katrina?

Rev. Davenport:

We had 30 to 40 people, but we were losing people in the congregation because the area was in such decline.

The Roundtable:

How did you get the name St. John #5 Faith Church?

Rev. Davenport:

We're non-denominational. We used to be Baptist until we started working with our HIV/AIDS patients. Our message didn't sit well with the Baptists because they were preaching abstinence. We preach abstinence too, but the reality is that they are going to do what they want to do. The disease is still going to spread.

In the city, they have so many St. John's, so I named ours "#5."

The Roundtable:

What services was St. John providing in the community before Katrina? Did you receive grants to provide the services?

Rev. Davenport:

We started the outreach services in 1989, but we didn't get a grant until 1997. It was for our summer camp, and it was \$10,000. That was the first grant we ever got, and it was from United Way. We got a federal government grant later in 2000 for computers for helping our kids with their education. They were so far behind in their schooling, and

pregnant teens, battered women and HIV/AIDS patients; computer, education and job training for adults; youth camps; and after-school computer and education programs for at-risk youth.

Since the storm, Rev. Davenport's rebuilding efforts have been highlighted by local media. He has also been recognized outside Louisiana. In January, Davenport spoke at Ithaca College in upstate New York about rebuilding efforts during a trip sponsored by an Ithaca-based organization called Love Knows No Bounds that traveled to New Orleans to help with the rebuilding. This month, Davenport and 30 members of his congregation attended a week-long spiritual retreat in Bath, New York sponsored by PeaceWeavers, a local community organization.

But he is not without critics. One man who says he volunteered with Davenport has accused the pastor of personally profiting off donations. Rev. Davenport responds to those claims in this interview.

the local school only had three computers. We had hundreds of kids in our summer camp. They would bring their parents, who would also get adult education to get their GEDs. Some of the parents would help out as volunteers.

The Roundtable:

Describe what happened when Katrina struck.

Rev. Davenport:

Katrina knocked us out, and we had to pick ourselves up. It was a bad situation. We were broken down from Katrina.

One reason the broken levees caught so many people is because a lot of people didn't have a place to go. The storm came and the waters were clear. But then the waters started getting black, and that's when the trouble really began. That's when the levees broke and people really didn't know what to do.

We didn't leave because we had members of our church who couldn't leave and they needed help. There were bodies floating in the street, and I just couldn't let them float away. We were tying bodies to telephone polls. A lot of people were drowning, and we were trying to help them out. Some were stranded on bridges for weeks, and my wife and I stayed and tried to help as many as we could. We tried to rescue people and tried to get a lot of people out. I waded in the water so much, I still have a rash on my body.

The church was hit real bad. All our computers were hurt. But we had people coming to live in the church. We still have people living in the church today. Right now it's down to two or three, but we had about 20 people living there after the storm.

The Roundtable:

Did you receive any disaster relief after the storm?

Rev. Davenport:

Rev. Davenport, a New Orleans native who grew up in the St. Bernard housing project, was assistant pastor of St. John from 1986 until he became pastor in 1989. Before working at St. John, he was a social worker for Catholic Charities in Metairie, La. He graduated from Union Baptist Theological Seminary in New Orleans. He is joined in ministry by his wife, Deborah, and their three adult children.

We could never get anyone to bring us water. We were very disturbed by all those organizations that are supposed to be powerful, but they never helped. When Katrina came that was God's way of saying whoever will help, will help and whoever won't help, won't help.

The Roundtable:

Why didn't they help?

Rev. Davenport:

The disaster relief teams couldn't get to us.

The Roundtable:

So who finally helped you?

Rev. Davenport:

We have groups coming from all over the nation. We knew if the government was not going to act right, we'd put our trust in the people. They are coming from other churches and different cities. Individuals themselves are working with us. A lot of people said they got tired of giving their money to the Red Cross or the Salvation Army and they come down here and don't see much improvement.

If you were to come down here today, you would think Katrina hit last week. We're still very limited. Grocery stores and businesses are still limited. We have yet to get gas or land telephones in some areas.

We have churches from New Orleans, Oregon, Louisiana, New York, Arizona, Texas and California. Love Knows No Bounds gathered up old furniture and appliances and shipped it down here. Common Ground Relief brought computers. Mercy Corps from Portland came to work. Trinity Chapel Bible Church came from Fort Worth.

We had eight feet of water in the church easy. We still need \$250,000 worth of work on the church. My house was destroyed, and my wife and I live in a trailer. We just cleaned up as much as we could. We didn't have any insurance. We lost about 80 computers. A group gave us

about six computers and we're trying to run a computer lab, but it's hard with so few.

But we never stopped having church services. We had church the day before Katrina hit, and we had church on the Sunday after the storm on the steps of the church. The water came right up on the steps. We couldn't have it inside the church because the roof had caved in. We figured if we could just get to the church, everything would be all right.

The Roundtable:

How much money have you received in donations?

Rev. Davenport:

We use it for repairs so quickly, it's hard to keep a tally on it.

The Roundtable:

How do you decide who gets the money?

Rev. Davenport:

The need of the people. We make them fill out an assessment form, and if there's an item they need right away, they put down number one on the form. We get them to tell what they've got and what they need and we evaluate from there. Other organizations give people so much trouble to get help. There was so much paperwork just to get an icebox, and they had to wait months to get an icebox. We cut through all that paperwork.

The Roundtable:

What do you mean by other organizations?

Rev. Davenport:

United Way, Salvation Army and Red Cross. All the organizations that popped up after Katrina.

The Roundtable:

Are you receiving any government money?

Rev. Davenport:

No. If Uncle Sam showed up, I'd take a shot at him. He's sending money to the rich, but he's not sending any money to poor people. We keep applying for money, but they keep telling us no. They're giving money to the big grassroots organizations, but they say we are not self-sustained. But that's not true. We were helping people before, and we'll keep helping people.

The Roundtable:

One of the volunteers who helped you with rebuilding has written on a website that you are personally profiting from the disaster by buying houses in your own name and accepting contributions for work that is being done for free. Is that true?

Rev. Davenport:

I don't mind your asking questions about our integrity because that's one thing we pride ourselves on. Every house we have is in the church name. He was a contractor who came down to work for money. We told him we didn't have money to pay him as much as we wanted, and we hired someone for less money. We are very transparent. Our merit and our word always speak for us. People can come and check us out at any time.

The Roundtable:

How many people are in your congregation now?

Rev. Davenport:

About 30 people. We're trying to get more people. It's not the size of the dog, it's the bite in the dog. And we have a good bite to get back.

We're going to use our church as much as possible to get ourselves back up and running. We have volunteers and we have people coming in to help and we're piecing it together. We have enough to keep our heads above the

water.

The Roundtable:

How many people are you helping?

Rev. Davenport:

Thousands. We help people get houses, couches, food. They call us all the time. They want to come back because Houston is giving them the blues. You can visit your relatives for only so long. And other cities are ready to send them back to New Orleans. They don't want anything to do with them anymore.

The Roundtable:

How long will it be before you are back to normal?

Rev. Davenport:

It's going to take quite a while because there are so many needs out there. Before we put ourselves first, we have to get our community to help. The church won't be effective if we don't have a community to support it. We don't have the government, but we have the people to help us.

The Roundtable:

What keeps you going?

Rev. Davenport:

My faith in God.

The Roundtable:

Are there times when you think God has forgotten you?

Rev. Davenport:

No way. No way. No way. If anything, I think he cares about us that much more. He has stepped in where other people couldn't step in. He sent rescue. He brought people we needed. He brought people to help us. He brought

organizations to step in. We saw this as relief from God.

The Roundtable:

Why is that?

Rev. Davenport:

We were in so much hardship. We had so much pain, so much crime, so much racism, so much disturbance. People lived in horrible housing with no way out. This is the wakeup we needed to start over again and try to get it better.

The Roundtable:

Thank you for speaking with us.