NEW ORLEANS • African-American ministers, accustomed to providing spiritual guidance to their congregations, are helping members cope with serious mental and emotional disorders nearly a year after Hurricane Katrina hit.

“It is, at times, overwhelming,” said Rev Larry Campbell, assistant pastor of Israelite Baptist Church in the Central City neighborhood. He has counseled worshippers with substance abuse problems and suicidal thoughts, referring some to mental health professionals, when possible.

“There’s a sense of hopelessness as it relates to, When are we going to get this city back to where it was?”

Katrina killed 1,339 according to the National Hurricane Center. It flooded 80 per cent of the city, and most New Orleans residents evacuated. Only about half the population is back and the city is slowly rebuilding. African-American churches, like the communities they served, were hit hard, and many are still struggling to regroup. “They are being called upon to do all kinds of phenomenal things, in terms of dealing with the loss and the pain,” said Jennifer Jones-Bridgett, director of PICO LIFT, a statewide interfaith coalition of churches.Ministers, Jones-Bridgett said, report being overwhelmed by the anxiety, depression and frustration with the slow pace of recovery expressed by many residents of the storm-ravaged city. “They are dealing with these concerns in their own personal lives, as well as in the lives of members of the congregation who are coming home,” she said.

“These were the vulnerable people to start with,” said University of California at Los Angeles psychologist Vickie Mays. “And the city services that weren’t working well before, now really aren’t working at all.”