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Mennonite Disaster Service (MDS) is a volunteer network of Anabaptist churches that responds in Christian love to those affected by disasters in Canada and the United States. While the main focus is on clean up, repair and rebuilding homes, this service touches lives and nurtures hope, faith and wholeness.

Our programs, funded by contributions, aim to assist the most vulnerable community members, individuals and families who, without assistance, would not have the means to recover. MDS volunteers — women and men, youth and adults — provide the skills and labor needed to respond, rebuild and restore.

Behind the Hammer is published quarterly by Mennonite Disaster Service (MDS) and is available for free upon request. This magazine shares the stories of MDS work in the U.S. and Canada and of the more than 4,000 annual volunteers who are the core of MDS. The stories are meant to encourage people to continue expressing the love of God through the work of MDS.

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ON THE COVER:
MDS Puerto Rico Unit chair, Eileen Rolon, who leaves near Aibonito in the central part of the island, lost part of the roof of her home during Hurricane Maria. MDS volunteers spent Oct. 29–Nov. 2 replacing the roof.
“We cannot thank you enough, except to take your gifts and make certain that hope is restored.”

Kevi Key

A long season of giving

As we look toward this Christmas season, we rejoice and celebrate the birth of Jesus Christ, God’s only son, a gift so great and wonderful. Sometimes we call this time of year the season of giving.

As I reflect on the past several months I have already experienced a season of giving, in fact, a long season of giving that began as far back as late August when gifts and volunteers flowed to MDS after Hurricane Harvey struck Texas.

And then the hurricanes didn’t stop and neither did the giving. Hurricane Irma struck south western Florida 10 days after Harvey landed in Aransas County, Texas.

The giving continued.

And then Hurricane Maria swept across the entire island of Puerto Rico, destroying homes, schools, churches and businesses, leaving the entire island of more than three million people without electricity and running water. It was merciless.

Yet, the giving continued both in financial gifts and people signing up as volunteers to help with cleanup and mucking. It’s as if the generosity and love reflected in the birth of Christ reached out across the calendar months to the people of Texas, Florida and Puerto Rico.

If that were not enough to humble each of us who work in MDS, volunteers continued to raise their hands for the other MDS projects in South Dakota, Saipan, Louisiana, West Virginia, California and other communities recovering from disasters.

I think of the volunteers from the MDS Kansas Unit, who labored weekend after weekend this past fall to get families into homes in Eureka before Thanksgiving following the devastating tornado earlier in the year. And the hardworking East Coast volunteers who labored in humid conditions of Princeville, North Carolina, in response to the Hurricane Matthew floods. Or the volunteers in Saskatchewan and Alberta who built three ready-to-move houses in Hague, Saskatchewan, and had them trucked 1,400 miles north to Fort McMurray. Now that is generous!

What a long season of giving. We truly witnessed the spirit of God and the reflected love of Christ with each gift and volunteer walking through our doors.

We cannot thank you enough, except to take your gifts and make certain that hope is restored.

For each gift, there is a face and a story behind the giver and receiver. And we say openly and with joy that this is God at work in the world, bringing healing, hope and restoration to the survivors of disasters. For Betania Mennonite Academy near Aibonito, Puerto Rico, we want to see joy as it opens again so the children can learn and grow. For the low-income farmworkers in Victoria County, Texas, we will again see joy when we see them back in dry, mold-free houses.

We thank you for this long season of giving and for the hope you bring to so many. Blessings and Merry Christmas.
After an unprecedented hurricane season, MDS volunteers bring hope to devastated communities

HURRICANE REPORT

Don’t ask, just do

In the space of 44 days, the U.S. was hit with three powerful and destructive hurricanes. It is easy to forget that during late August through the end of September 2017, lives were lost, homes were destroyed and communities uprooted.

Mennonite Disaster Service (MDS) continues its response to the hurricanes as communities are being rebuilt, homes are repaired or new homes are built and the lives of disaster survivors are restored.

HURRICANE HARVEY — TEXAS

When Hurricane Harvey barreled ashore in southeast Texas on August 26, its Category 4 fury showed no mercy. By the time it moved out of the region, an unprecedented 50 inches of rain had fallen in some places.

MDS moved quickly to establish recovery work in Victoria County and Aransas Pass, devastated communities in the coastal flatlands south of Houston.

“These two areas were at the risk of slipping through the cracks of assistance by recovery groups,” said Carl Dube, an MDS volunteer who participated in the MDS Hurricane Harvey assessment and set up the early response teams.

In Victoria County, 500 to 600 of the 800 homes in the town of Bloomington sustained some level of damage. Within two weeks of the storm, MDS volunteers arrived with heavy equipment to clear debris and tarp roofs.

By the end of the third week of October, MDS volunteers had worked on more than 200 properties clearing debris and doing minor repairs. Sixty-four homes in Aransas Pass benefitted from debris clearing, trimming trees and tarping.

“I’m not quite sure where we would be right now if you guys hadn’t shown up,” Victoria County Commissioner Danny Garcia said. “What you guys are providing for us is hope.”

HURRICANE IRMA — FLORIDA

No more than a week and a half after Harvey hit, Hurricane Irma, at one point the longest and strongest sustained hurricane in decades, swept through the Leeward Islands of the Caribbean and on September 10 hammered southern Florida.

Barely able to catch their breath from Harvey, MDS staff scheduled volunteers to move quickly to Florida and began to clean up.

As the sun rose on a warm late September morning outside the Iglesia Menonita Arca De Salvacion in Ft. Myers, Florida, a team of MDS volunteers standing next to a flatbed truck with heavy equipment, paused for a moment of prayer.

Their work for the day was going to be dusty, tedious and dangerous.

After the prayer, the volunteers branched out in four directions. Two groups went to separate homes to clean up major tree damage, removing massive fallen trees, climbing trees to clear broken and dangerous branches and move debris to the street.

Another volunteer went to assist a widow to clean up from flooding in her home and the barn where she operated an animal shelter. The fourth spent the day meeting homeowners and lining up cleanup jobs for crews coming the following weeks.

By the end of October and into early November, MDS
behind the hammer

volunteers had assisted with the cleanup and repair of nearly 100 homes in the Ft. Myers and La Belle areas.

“I wish someone would come and help me if I were in trouble,” volunteer Thomas Johnson of West Chester, Pennsylvania, said while taking a break from removing trees. “That’s why I’m here, you don’t ask, you just do.”

HURRICANE MARIA — PUERTO RICO

On September 20, Hurricane Maria made landfall in Puerto Rico, becoming the third major hurricane to strike the U.S. within a month’s time. Water and food shortages were widespread and 80 percent of the island was without electricity at least one month after the storm.

In early October, an MDS assessment team traveled to Puerto Rico to survey the damage and connect with local leaders to begin plans for recovery. They met Brenda Hernandez, the pastor of the Evangelical Mennonite Church of Coamo, where the front windows and doors were blown out. With damage to the main floor Hernandez initially planned to use the basement as an alternate space for church services. But she learned of a woman from the church who was sleeping in cars with her daughter and grandchildren.

“Maybe we can do the service some other place, but I can’t have those women sleeping in their cars with four babies,” Hernandez said. “So, we moved them to the downstairs of the church.”

In the town of Aibonito several classrooms at the Bethany Mennonite Academy lost roofs. Anticipating what would be needed to recover, school director Luis Javier Vélez said, “The point is, we live in Puerto Rico. This is an island. We are in front of the whole ocean. And, what we are living through right now, we can live through this maybe next year again. So, that’s why we need to build something strong.”

MDS will be in Puerto Rico for the long haul to rebuild strong communities by working with local leaders to determine how to best restore homes, churches and schools.

Three hurricanes in a bit more than a month’s time. Unprecedented, but not too much for MDS volunteers and donors who rose to the occasion to bring hope to disaster survivors.

—Brad Fair and Mark Beach

MDS volunteers are reaching out to communities in Florida and Puerto Rico devastated by Hurricanes Irma and Maria respectively. Volunteers will be there for the long haul.

MDS volunteers are reaching out to communities in Florida and Puerto Rico devastated by Hurricanes Irma and Maria respectively. Volunteers will be there for the long haul.

MDS Early Response teams have been clearing debris since shortly after Hurricane Harvey.
In the language of the Lakotas, the word generosity is *canteyuke* (chan-te-you-keh). The translation isn’t exact, though: *canteyuke*, means, literally, “to have a heart.”

At least 15,000 Oglala Lakota people live on the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation in the southwest corner of South Dakota bordering Nebraska; some estimates show the number closer to 29,000.

The reservation is 2.8 million acres — larger than the states of Delaware and Rhode Island combined — but only 84,000 acres are suitable for agriculture. The Lakota people were the first to call parts of this area *mako sica* or “land bad,” which later became the Badlands National Park.

Extreme temperatures, lack of water, and starkly beautiful terrain make this area of the country, especially to out-of-towners, seem like a moonscape.

During July, 25 youth and adults from Canada and the U.S. spent a week living in recreational vehicles (RVs) while building homes on the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation as part of a Mennonite Disaster Service (MDS) project. They were one crew of many weekly crews coming since May, when the MDS work camp was first set up. The youth in July were part of the MDS summer youth program.

This particular week in July, there was no doubt that the MDS volunteers came in a spirit of generosity. They worked in 107-degree weather — sometimes rising at 5 a.m. to start work early because of the heat — slept on bunk beds in RVs, packed their lunches to eat on the job site, and sweated their way through breakfast and dinner together in a crowded dining trailer.

Megan Breidigan, a high school student who is a member of Vincent Mennonite Church in Spring City, Pennsylvania, took the heat in stride, pairing it with a deeper quest to retain this sense of mission back home in her normal daily life.

“We should be on fire for the Spirit rather than luke-warm,” she says at an early morning breakfast when the temperature was already climbing. “Here, it’s really easy to
be excited about our work; we are away from our usual lives. When we go back to our normal schedule, we have to carry it with us. We have to have purpose wherever we are.”  

MDS is building five houses and 15 small tornado shelters on the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation. “It’s more than just work,” says Breidigan. “It’s having purpose and enthusiasm. It’s how you build relationships and how you respect others.”

**CONFLICT + GENEROSITY = PEACE**

MDS volunteers are rebuilding homes destroyed during a storm in 2015 that was followed by September 2016 storms that brought straight-line winds, tornadoes, hail, and flooding. Hundreds of homes were leveled.

The disaster piled on top of a number of social, agricultural, and economic indicators that could also be called disasters, but on the reservation are, unfortunately, daily life. Pine Ridge has been called the poorest county in the U.S. Ninety-seven percent of the population lives with a median household income of $2,600 to $3,500 per year. The unemployment rate is 90 percent. The high school dropout rate is 70 percent. The teenage suicide rate is 150 percent higher than the U.S. national average.

If the storm disaster is a heavy layer over already-difficult lives for the Lakota, those same lives rest, in turn, on a heavy layer of conflict between the U.S. government and the residents of the reservation. A mass grave from the Wounded Knee Massacre in December 1890 is located on the reservation, along with a small museum offering photographs, peeling paint, and capital letters on the wall: INDIAN PRIDE ON THE MOVE. DECOLONIZATION. INDEPENDENCE. FREEDOM.

After the Fort Laramie Treaty of 1868, which established the Great Sioux Reservation west of the Missouri River and promised no more white settlement in a huge, 18-million acre swath of land, the U.S. continuously reneged on the treaty, eventually breaking the Great Sioux Reservation up
into five smaller reservations: Cheyenne River Reservation, Lower Brule Indian Reservation, Rosebud Indian Reservation, Standing Rock Reservation and Pine Ridge Reservation.

In 1980, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that the government had illegally taken this land, and awarded $120.5 million to the Lakota and other peoples, based on the market value of the land in 1877, plus interest. For nearly four decades, however, the Lakota have refused to accept payment and instead continue to demand that the United States return the territory.

MDS Project director Lynn Miller, known for his direct summary of any given situation, puts it this way: “This is an economic disaster created by the U.S. government over the last 200 years.”

**Canteyuке**
The land belongs to the Lakota people, a land of spectacular sunrises, dramatic storms and ongoing mystery. It is an act of generosity — *canteyuке*, having a heart — on their part to allow volunteers onto the reservation for mission work.

The MDS volunteers aren’t the only crews of their kind at Pine Ridge. Youth groups are evident in many places, repairing homes and riding around in vans that stand out with colorful church logos and paint that is shiny even underneath the layers of summer dust. Most of them work hard, have good intentions and, if they are lucky, will get to share a bit of Lakota culture with someone who cares to tell them about it.

Maretta Champagne, a Lakota Oglala who is outreach coordinator for the Pine Ridge Long-Term Recovery Committee, took time to share stories of her life that are gently instructive.

“As you are going around, remember we have the Badlands. It’s really beautiful. We are thankful for it every day,” she says. “For us, prayer is not a one-day thing. When you’re cooking for your family, you’re praying. You bestow good energy. You don’t cook when you’re angry.”

The team is invited to a traditional meal. Champagne and her daughter have been up since sunrise preparing it. She dishes out bowls of soup with root vegetables and dried meat, berries, bread and a dried, sweet mixture of corn and currants.

The soup, *wohanpi*, contains *timpusa*, a wild turnip. *Wojiapi*, the thick berry sauce, is made from choke cherries and wild plums.

Traditional cooking, according to Champagne, is part of the Lakota culture and the meal is followed by storytelling, which is how Lakota traditions get passed from generation to generation.

“Especially in the summer, people are outside until 9 o’clock at night, and they tell the history,” she says. When she was a child, it was often the same story night after night, and the repetition had a purpose. “These stories went back to the time when terrible lizards walked the land,” she says, “so maybe the stories go all the way to the cave people.”

Then she smiles and shakes her head: “Nowadays, you might hear someone sigh and say, ‘I’ve heard that story already.’”

Rodney Jackson, a case manager with the long-term recovery committee, says disaster recovery for Pine Ridge is inseparable from the community’s resolve to honor Lakota tradition.

“I believe the language is being preserved; the further out
you go on the reservation, the more fluent people are.”

There is an emphasis on being “culturally competent,” he says, unlike when his mother was a schoolgirl. Then, Jackson says, “they had a saying: ‘we’re going to kill the Indian and save the child.’ ”

As the volunteers and the Lakota attempt to connect, each with a different sense of generosity, a sense of canteyuke, Jackson believes reconciliation is possible. “We have to take the best of both our cultures for healing and reconciliation — all the values congruent with both our cultures. It’s going to have to be that way if we’re all going to make it.”

Later in the week, as the MDS volunteers continue their work, they take time to marvel at the land around them.

“There’s nothing blocking your view here,” says Laura Taraboletti, 16, “I’ve never seen anything like it.”

Sixteen-year-old Alyssa Breidigan agrees: “You can see forever.”

—Susan Kim

Watch the video for more of the story: mds.mennonite.net/volunteer-opportunity/pine-ridge-south-dakota

How does a pile of boards become an MDS-built home?

Just before sunrise, Mennonite Disaster Service (MDS) project director Lynn Miller arrives at a job site on the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation in South Dakota. A pile of fresh lumber is waiting by the already-poured foundation, boards that will become walls raised by a youth volunteer crew that very afternoon.

MDS is building five homes on the reservation after 2015 storms — followed by more storms in September 2016 — brought straight-line winds, tornadoes, hail, and flooding that destroyed hundreds of residences.

Miller bought the lumber from Pine Ridge Building Products, the only supplier on the reservation. The next closest seller is in Rapid City, some 80 miles away.

“I’m determined to purchase supplies on the reservation,” said Miller. “Frankly it’s my goal to not have to drive to Rapid City for supplies at all while I’m here.”

Here, the lumber is more than just wood: it represents the respectful relationship MDS has with the Oglala Lakota people who live here.

When rebuilding or repairing homes after a disaster, MDS strives to purchase supplies locally, helping to boost an economy often sagging from recession, storm damage or both. Miller has hired local craftspeople to prep the drywall for volunteer painting crews.

“Rather than supply volunteers with a trowel and a bucket of mud, we hired people in need of jobs for drywall finishing,” said Miller.

MDS puts resources where people really need them, said Maretta Champagne, an Oglala Lakota who serves as outreach coordinator for the Pine Ridge long-term recovery committee.

“We don’t have the resources here, we don’t have the banks,” she says to the volunteers. “I just want to say thank you for coming. I know the families who are getting these homes appreciate it. I appreciate it. I’m sure you’ve seen some of the houses. It’s really heartbreaking to see people living like that. I’m really grateful you take the time to come.”

As the young volunteers arrive at the site, Miller takes time to explain MDS’s philosophy to them: “It’s a cooperative here,” he says. “It’s not one-sided and it’s not top-down.”

He adds, with a smile: “And the good news is, it’s only going to be 95 degrees today.”
Ron Long can easily recall times in his life when his job was extremely difficult, both physically and mentally. As a young man, after considering going into social work, he realized he liked using his hands. He began his career in construction as a laborer, working his way up to become the business owner he is today.

“I remember working for one guy who told me to move a huge pile of rocks from one place to another — for no real reason,” he said.

On another construction site, he was tasked with tamping down the dirt around the foundation of a commercial building - a job that took him a couple of weeks.

Now the owner of a self-storage business, Long was the impetus behind a youth group traveling from Vincent Mennonite Church in Spring City, Pennsylvania, to the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation in South Dakota, where, as part of an Mennonite Disaster Service Summer Youth Program (SYP), they are building homes for people who lost their residences to storms in 2015 and 2016.

The SYP is a week-long service experience designed for youth and their sponsors to put their hands and feet to the gospel by serving others. SYP project locations are usually determined by late December or early January, after which annual application forms are posted on the MDS website.

During the week, the young people worked on a few different homes among five MDS is building on the reservation. They framed one house, finally raising the walls on their last day onsite. They also painted the interior of another two houses.

“I’ve heard that once you go on one project, you can’t stop.”

VOLUNTEER ALYSSA BREIDIGAN

MDS Summer Youth Program volunteers
Megan Breidigan, Alyssa Breidigan, Laura Tarabotta, Anika Seitzinger, Lillian Simpson

You could do this, too

The SYP youth come for a week, living at an MDS camp in RVs, eating breakfast and dinner in a single room house, and making their lunches to eat at the worksite each day. Each morning, they share their reflections by participating in morning devotions and dinnertime reports.

They also visit local sites, and at Pine Ridge that includes
the Wounded Knee and Crazy Horse memorial sites as well as Mount Rushmore.

Ron Long has been a volunteer many times for MDS. Although the youth have been on mission trips before, this is their first time participating in an MDS project. “Ron was the one who really had the idea to get us involved with MDS,” explained Alyssa Breidigan, 16. “We joke that Ron’s kind of obsessed with MDS. I’ve heard that once you go on one project, you can’t stop.”

Both Breidigan and Laura Taraboletti, also 16, traveled to Puerto Rico, last year, where they helped renovate a Mennonite school. Although not an MDS project, the young women said some aspects of the mission trips were the same. “When you are on a mission project, you need to go with the flow,” said Taraboletti. “You do what you’re told to do.”

—Susan Kim

Is your youth group interested in serving with MDS next summer? Call or go to: mds.mennonite.net/volunteer/youth-programs/

Easy cheesy taco pie

2 lbs. lean ground beef
2 medium onions, chopped (1 cup)
2 pkg. taco seasoning mix
2 cans (4.5 oz) chopped green chilies
2 c. milk
4 eggs
1 c. basic baking mix (recipe below)
1½ c. shredded cheddar or Monterey Jack cheese

Basic Baking Mix
2 ¾ c. all-purpose flour
½ c. nonfat dry milk powder
1 T. sugar
1 T. double-acting baking powder
1 t. salt
6 T. oil

Heat oven to 400F. Grease two 9-inch pie plates. Cook ground beef and onion in skillet until browned. Drain. Stir in taco seasoning. Spoon into pie plate; top with chilies.

Place milk, eggs and baking mix into bowl and stir until blended. Pour into pie plate. Bake about 25 minutes. Put sliced tomato (optional) on top of mixture, then sprinkle with cheese. Bake 8-10 minutes longer. Cool 5 minutes. Serve with salsa and sour cream.

Serves 12

This recipe comes from Debi Bruce, left, and Gina Giambalvo, right, of the Cape Christian Church in Cape Coral, Florida. They showed their love for MDS volunteers by delivering them a taco pie after a busy day of cleaning up damage from Hurricane Irma.
God’s love in action, it was amazing

The April and May 2017 flooding of Constance Bay and the West Carleton communities in eastern Ontario was a test in perseverance.

First, there was record-breaking amounts of rainfall. Whereas the normal rainfall for this time of year is three inches, some regions saw more than seven inches of rain since the beginning of April. The ground was saturated.

Within a day or so the levels climbed to a 20-year high and soon a 40-year high. By May 5 the community realized this was no ordinary spring flooding. The waters surged. No one was ready for what would become more than a 100-year flood level, reached on May 6 and 7. Nearly 600 homes in four communities were flooded. The power went out in some areas.

In the Constance Bay community of some 3,000 people which is part of Greater Ottawa, local volunteers were helping with sandbagging, as directed by their Community Association volunteers.

This evolved into the Constance Bay Flood Relief Committee (CBFRC) that then coordinated the cleanup effort with help from various volunteer groups, including Mennonite Disaster Service (MDS).

“They helped organize the sandbagging and later organized local volunteers and volunteer groups like MDS for the clean-up,” Nick Hamm, Ontario Unit secretary reported.

Since most disaster response organizations are not involved in long term recovery, the CBFRC asked MDS and World Renew (WR) for assistance in the recovery phase.

Despite being far from the “mecca” of Mennonites in central Ontario, MDS volunteers came mainly from Eastern Ontario, including from the Mennonite communities such as the Markham-Waterloo Mennonites from Beachburg and Elmira, Old Order Mennonites from Lindsay, Orthodox Mennonites from Douglas and many others like Ottawa Mennonite Church whose members also provided support services. World Renew also sent some skilled volunteers during one week.

Organized by the MDS Ontario Unit, the teams provided more than 50 volunteer days during three weeks for clean-up and 155 volunteer days over the course of three weeks repairing homes, including the delivery of two very much-needed storage sheds.

The MDS volunteers served 17 homeowners with clean-up and 13 homeowners in the repair stage. Now the MDS Ontario Unit is working with the local recovery committee and the local MDS Church Contact Persons to start building two new homes through the winter months.

“These efforts demonstrated to me how MDS is God’s ministry and it is our chance to glorify God in his goodness by serving Him in this special way”, Hamm said reflecting on the Constance Bay work. “He opened doors for us and put us in people’s lives who needed to see God’s love in action. It was pretty amazing.”

PROJECT
Clean-up and repair work after flooding in Constance Bay, Ontario

PARTICIPANTS
9 churches, 7 denominations

NUMBER OF PEOPLE INVOLVED
21 for clean-up, 55 for repairs

UNIT
Ontario (Region 5)

UNIT CHAIR
C. Martin Durksen
behind the hammer

regions at a glance

region 5 — canada

ontario

The Ontario Unit continued work in Constance Bay (see page 12) to repair houses damaged by a spring flood. They are considering two rebuilds which would begin in the winter.

british columbia

Wildfires in 2017 postponed plans of the British Columbia Unit to help a family rebuild following fires last summer.

alberta

Three homes were shipped from Saskatchewan to Ft. McMurray and placed on their foundations and readied for homeowners to move in during August.

manitoba

The Region 5 board met in Winnipeg on October 13 and 14. The Manitoba Unit is finalizing plans for hosting the MDS All Unit Meeting in Winkler scheduled for February 9-10, 2018. See page 14 for information about the event and registration. All are invited.

region 4 — u.s. west coast

washington

Region 4 held their annual meeting in September in Seattle with about 40 in attendance. Roger Sharp succeeded John Eshleman as region board chair. Tracey Jones of Tremendous Leadership gave the keynote address on “Passing the Baton.”

northern mariana islands

The Saipan project which already has funding and volunteers scheduled through December is expected to continue to the end of April 2018.

california

The Lake County project resumed in October and is expected to continue through April 2018. The California Unit and Region 4 are planning to build 2-3 homes at Lake Isabella in Kern County.

region 3 — u.s. midwest

texas

Region 3 leadership participated in the early response investigation team. The Texas West Unit sent crews to Aransas Pass for cleanup and to replace the damaged roof of Prince of Peace Mennonite Church in Corpus Christi.

arkansas

Participated in rescue efforts during hurricane Harvey with boat rescues in Beaumont and Houston.

illinois

The Region 3 annual meeting was held in Morton October 27-28. Ronn Frantz was named as new Region 3 chair.

west virginia

Region 2 volunteers supported and participated in Partnership Home Project work in Clendenin, W.V.

region 2 — u.s. central

mississippi

Storm Aid volunteers began work in Hattiesburg in late September and were planning to dedicate new homes by November.

louisiana

MDS volunteers returned to Lafayette to continue repair work started in 2016 and early 2017.

illinois

The Region 2 annual meeting was held in Morton October 27-28. Ronn Frantz was named as new Region 2 chair.

west virginia

Region 2 volunteers supported and participated in Partnership Home Project work in Clendenin, W.V.

region 1 — u.s. east coast

florida

The Region 1 annual meeting was held in Sarasota in mid-October, not long after Hurricane Irma hit.

puerto rico

The home of unit leader, Eileen Rolon, was damaged during Hurricane Maria. Volunteers from Region 1 helped to repair the roof in early November.

north carolina

Region 1 volunteers continued work in Princeville. MDS is looking for more volunteers to serve.
The 2018 Mennonite Disaster Service All Unit Meeting (AUM) will be held February 9-10 at the Winkler Bergthaler Mennonite Church, Winkler, Manitoba.

While it is certain to be cold outside in the Manitoba prairies, inside it’ll be warm as MDS volunteers gather for their annual swapping of stories, fellowship, worship and learning about MDS work across Canada and the U.S. There will also be workshops and the opportunity to catch up with old friends and make new ones.

The two-day event will feature guest speaker Cindy Klassen, one of Canada’s premiere Olympic champions and Ted & Company, a popular team of dynamic actors and musicians.

A native of Winnipeg, Klassen is best known for winning five medals, one gold, two silver and two bronze in speed skating during the 2006 Winter Olympic Games in Torino, Italy. She also won a bronze medal at the 2002 Winter Olympic games, making her the most decorated Canadian Olympic athlete in a single sport.

Based in Harrisonburg, Va., Ted & Company TheaterWorks has proven popular in both Canada and the U.S. Led by veteran actor, Ted Swartz, the group uses humor and professional storytelling to talk about issues of faith and social justice. They are passionate about creating art that provokes both laughter and thought.

Registration for the AUM is simple and quick and can be done online or through a paper registration. Go to https://mds.mennonite.net/all-unit-meeting/ to register online for the entire two days or for a single day. Call 800-241-8111 in the U.S. or 866-261-1274 for a paper registration form to be mailed to you.

Register before January 6 for a discounted rate. Registration closes the day of the AUM.

Four workshops will be presented during the AUM. They include: Seeing God at Work in MDS; Trauma, Loss and Recovery; Helping Project Directors Balance the Assignment, the Client and the Volunteer; and Enabling MDS Local Unit and Church Contact Persons.

Ted & Co. will be featured Friday night and Klassen will speak Saturday morning. Local tours will also be available.

For more information about the AUM visit mds.mennonite.net/all-unit-meeting/.
Expectation management

Jeff Koller, MDS disaster response coordinator for Regions 3 and 4, discusses his experience, challenges and joys.

Q: Was there “life before full-time MDS”?
A: I was in manufacturing management. I managed production planning for manufacturing companies with up to 2,000 employees; I was also responsible for materials procurement and planning in my career.

Q: What was one of your most challenging MDS assignments?
A: Planning and organizing for a youth project helping the Northern Cheyenne in Lame Deer, Montana. It was very interesting and very educational to navigate the various agencies on the reservation, such as the Bureau of Indian Affairs to determine what our work would be. We focused on cultural sensitivity and finding ways for the youth to engage in the local culture.

Q: How much behind-the-scenes work does it take to set up an MDS site for long-term recovery?
A: Usually it takes three or four months to get a typical project set up, sometimes six months or more of behind-the-scenes work. MDS also has short-term response teams but their role is a different one focusing on immediate cleanup after a storm.

Q: What is one of the biggest ongoing challenges common in recovering communities?
A: When a person willingly gives (for free and without being paid) their time and talent to help someone in need, I am struck by the notion that they understand the heart of God. This motivation is profound.

Q: How can volunteers be more culturally sensitive?
A: Sometimes volunteers observe a certain community and they think, “Why are those people doing things the hard way, or the slow way?” Maybe people in some communities appear to struggle but in other ways their lives are less complicated than ours. The secret is to take time to listen to folks we serve and explore options that best serve the affected people while respecting the local culture and lifestyles.
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