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One Church's Easter Gift to Another

Ashburn Worshipers Send Pews to Hurricane-Struck Miss. Congregation

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In February, the membership of Crossroads United Methodist Church in Ashburn decided that its sanctuary needed an extreme makeover.

It would become a more flexible space, allowing the church to use the sanctuary for more purposes than Sunday-morning services. The altar and pulpit would be moved forward and made level with the rest of the room, and the rigid wooden pews would be replaced with padded, stackable chairs.

"Space in Ashburn is so tight, and the building is so expensive that we decided to make better use of our space," said church spokesman Steve Freeman.

But what was Crossroads to do with those pews? They were barely more than a decade old, too new to chuck into the trash dump.

Through happy coincidence -- or, perhaps, divine intervention -- a solution was at hand, thanks to a trip some church members made to Mississippi in January to provide hurricane relief.

Nona Tiedge was one of the 17 Crossroads members who made the trip to the city of Moss Point, whose population the 2000 Census put at 15,851. The destruction they saw, she said last week, was unfathomable.

"There were clothes hanging in trees, washing machines on the sidewalk, totaled cars in front of people's lawns," she recalled. "You could see the foundation where structures had been, but there were no homes."

The group heard about a congregation in another Mississippi town, Escatawpa, population 3,566 in 2000, that had also been dealt a cruel blow by Hurricane Katrina.

The Rev. Willie Hill estimated that 90 percent of his congregation at Summerville United Methodist Church lost homes or businesses because of the hurricane.

"They were sad for themselves and sad for the church," which didn't fare much better, Hill said. "Basically, we did everything but take out the walls."

Hill preached a message of hope to his 100 church members. "I told them, 'We're going to

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In the months afterward, Summerville managed to restore most of what the wind and water had destroyed. But it did not have the \$12,000 needed to replace the rotting pews. So instead, for months, parishioners sat through services in metal folding chairs.

When she heard Summerville's story, Cathy Norman, who is in charge of mobilization at Crossroads, saw an opportunity.

"We were inspired by their hope and faith," Norman said.

Crossroads' unneeded pews, church members quickly decided, should go to Summerville. The plan was to have them installed in time for Easter services.

In early April, workers spent a day in Ashburn, dismantling the pews, encasing them in bubble wrap and packing them onto a trailer.

The maroon cushions and wood frames arrived in Escatawpa days later, just as crews finished painting the walls (maroon and white, to match the new cushions) and laying new red carpet.

Crossroads also sent along a surprise: Bibles, hymnals and choir robes to replace those ruined in the storm surge.

Summerville, it turned out, couldn't arrange the installation of the pews in time for Easter. Nevertheless, their arrival signifies a different kind of resurrection for the church, Hill said.

"I couldn't tell you what the [Crossroads] pastor or the members look like," the Mississippi pastor said. But "I feel that we are very blessed. They have brought hope and healing to us."

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