

# Behind the **HAMMER**

MENNONITE DISASTER SERVICE / SUMMER 2021



## Remarkable resilience

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## SUMMER 2021

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Sisters Willie and Barbara Green in their new "generational" home in Woodsboro, Texas. Read their story on page 4. *Photo by Paul Hunt.*



PICTURED ABOVE: Volunteer Don Horst puts the finishing touches on a home in Woodsboro, Texas. For more stories on Hurricane Harvey recovery, see page 4.

# MDS

## VOLUNTEERS NEEDED

U.S. 800-241-8111  
Canada 866-261-1274  
[www.mds.org](http://www.mds.org)

**"They will go home with the satisfaction of having done the right thing."**

—Jeff Koller, MDS regional operations coord.

PICTURED BELOW: A youth group traveled from Siloam Fellowship Mennonite Church in Goshen, Indiana, to Camp Mennoscah in Murdock, Kansas, in June to build three 'tiny homes' that will be transported to San Antonio, Texas, for asylum seekers.



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 cleanup, 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.



**Mennonite  
Disaster  
Service**

**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 5,000 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. *Printed on Forest Stewardship Council® (FSC) certified paper using environmentally friendly plant-based inks.*

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## DIRECTOR'S LETTER

# Not your ordinary Friday morning

One Friday morning I visited Elkton, Virginia, a small town at the foot of the Shenandoah Mountains, a half-hour drive from my home in Harrisonburg. I wanted to see the first private access bridge being built by MDS in Virginia. (Note: over 100 bridges have been built in West Virginia).

I drove off the paved road onto a shaded lane in the woods and then the picture opened up. There were eight volunteers installing the decking of a new bridge for Troy and Sondra Smith. I stood there amazed, seeing what I would describe as a thousand pieces of hope coming together.

I made my way across the makeshift foot bridge, a temporary crossing for the Smiths, and was invited into their home. With tears welling up in her eyes, Sondra said, "You don't know how much joy this has brought to us."

Her husband, Troy, has physical challenges. Once the rescue squad tried to cross the swollen creek after a heavy rain, but were unable, until an armored vehicle made the rescue.

Back down at the bridge, one could hear the sounds of the air nailers— "rat-a-tat"—applying the decking.

Weavers Mennonite Church in Harrisonburg joined up with the local Mennonite church in Elkton, Beldor Mennonite, to help this neighbor in need. Beldor's pastor, James Akerson, says as he heaves another armful of 2x4s up on the bridge to be nailed, "Yep, Mrs. Smith has already visited our church!"

Sondra's daughter, Joanie, from Culpepper, Virginia, stands nearby in the shade and remarks, "My husband and I have been to China and back as missionaries, but we have never seen anything like this."

When you volunteer with MDS, you never have to go far to see God at work, one piece at a time. One volunteer at a time. Thanks be to God. ■

Kevin King  
Executive Director



**A three-year unprecedented effort brings displaced disaster survivors home to a new MDS-built community in Woodsboro, Texas**

More Photos

## A hallway and a house key

After living in her new home for two months, Willie Green still likes to walk up and down the hallway.

“Never in my life have I had a hallway to walk down,” she said. “I’ve never lived in a house big enough to have a hallway.”

Her house, built by volunteers from MDS and Disaster Aid Ohio, an Amish disaster recovery group which is part of MDS Eastern Ohio unit, is part of a 23-home community called Tierra de Esperanza, or “Land of Hope,” in Woodsboro, Texas.

For 64-year-old Willie and her sister Barbara, who lives with her, the hope extends not only down the hallway but to future generations of their family.

When Hurricane Harvey struck in 2017, it was the largest storm Willie had ever seen.

“I’ve lived here all my life, and we’ve never had a hurricane like that,” said Willie. “This was an eye opener.”

Although the Greens were able to safely evacuate, they came back to a badly damaged home.

“We had a big hole in the ceiling,” said Willie, “and gradually every cabinet just fell apart.”



Families move into a new 23-home community in Woodsboro, Texas.

Every time it rained, Barbara and Willie put buckets under the leaking ceiling, until part of the ceiling simply fell. Mold began growing up the walls, exacerbating Barbara’s asthma.

Moving into a brand new home was a dream come true in many ways. But for the Green sisters, moving off their land—a few blocks away on Ashby Street, where their mother, their grandmother, and generations before had lived—was an act of courage.

“We had to leave our land,” said Barbara. They can still walk over to their former street, but it feels like letting go of a piece of their family history. “We’d been there all our lives,” adds Willie. “Ashby Street was the only street that Black people lived on. It used to be just Black people. So that was a hard thing, to leave the land.”

But she has no regrets.

“Even the bathroom door had fallen off in the old house,” she said. “The house was no longer fit to live in.”

Sadly, the Greens lost their younger brother to COVID-19 on August 12, 2020.

“We were so excited for him to see the house,” said Barbara, tearing up at her kitchen table. “But he passed before that could happen.”

While others questioned the Green sisters’ decision to move off their land, their brother never did.

“I knew we had his blessing,” said Willie. “There were so many days I thought: ‘We ain’t gonna get nothing—never.’ But then I’d tell myself: ‘You have to be patient.’”

Now the Green sisters call their home “a generational house”—one they plan to pass down to children, and grandchildren who need a place to live.

The Greens received keys to the house at a dedication ceremony held in March.

“That’s another first,” said Willie. “I’ve never had a house with a key, in all those years. Can you believe that?”

### OPENING DOORS TO HOPE

To complete Tierra de Esperanza, MDS worked in partnership with the Coastal Bend Disaster Recovery Group, and together they dedicated the last 13 homes on May 20,

**This new home is “a generational house” – one we plan to pass down to children, and grandchildren.**

– WILLIE AND BARBARA GREEN, HOMEOWNERS





MDS volunteers gather outside one of the newly dedicated homes.



**“It took an army of willing souls, and hundreds of skilled hands and big hearts.”**

**— DONNA ROSSON, COASTAL BEND DISASTER RECOVERY GROUP**

MDS volunteers and local leaders share joy and prayers with homeowners at a dedication celebration.

**“It began with a vision and with tenacity.”**

**— TOM SMUCKER, MDS HURRICANE HARVEY COORDINATOR**

bringing to completion a three-year unprecedented effort.

At a ceremony in Sainte Therese Catholic Church in Woodsboro, Christopher Brandt, executive director of the Coastal Bend Disaster Recovery Group, described how Tierra de Esperanza began when a small group of visionaries wouldn't give up, despite an initial lack of resources in the town, home to 1,344 people.

“All the people that participated in this program did so out of the goodness of their hearts,” reflected Brandt.

That goodness brought to completion the 3.6-acre neighborhood, located about 40 miles/64 kilometers north of Corpus Christi, valued at \$2.3 million U.S./\$2.8 million CDN. The first ten homes were dedicated in March.

Atlee Kauffmann, who coordinated the work of volunteers from Disaster Aid Ohio, said that responding groups were willing to build genuine relationships even under post-disaster duress.

“It's amazing what can be done if everyone works together and nobody is concerned about who gets the credit,” he said.

Tom Smucker, MDS Hurricane Harvey coordinator, recalled the first conversation in early 2019 that sparked the vision for Tierra de Esperanza. MDS's involvement began when Christine Cornejo—at that time program officer of the Rebuild Texas Fund—contacted Smucker asking how MDS could help in Woodsboro.

“She pushed and pushed to get MDS to come down to Refugio County and see what they have here,” Smucker said. “It began with a vision and with tenacity.”

Standing with Smucker, Cornejo remembered that very first conversation. “I said to Tom, ‘I need you to come see: come see that there's room for new households here—it's not just repair work.’ He said he had a few minutes. I said, ‘that's all I need.’”

When Donna Rosson, board president of the Coastal



Bend Disaster Recovery Group, heard what Cornejo and Smucker were cooking up, she realized this was the biggest disaster recovery effort her small town had ever seen.

“I probably looked like a deer in the headlights,” she laughed. “But everybody had their own niche and their own jobs to do, and we all worked really well together. It took an army of willing souls, and hundreds of skilled hands and big hearts.” ■

— Susan Kim





"I didn't believe it the whole time until the keys were in my hand."

—LAUREN COLLINS

HOMEOWNER EXPERIENCE

## A place she can breathe

It's the last day of school and Lauren Collins takes a moment to breathe before she picks up her three kids. She's in her place of peace—her new home, built by MDS volunteers.

"Everything is so simple," said Collins, of Woodsboro, Texas. "I don't like clutter. It makes me nervous."

Peace has been hard to come by in the three years since Hurricane Harvey hit Woodsboro, devastating the small town. Collins' new house is part of a 23-home community called Tierra de Esperanza, or "Land of Hope."

The day Harvey struck in 2017, Collins finished up her job at a local bank, then drove her kids and her dog to Austin. "When we left, the storm was 50 miles away," she said. She came back to find her mobile home severely damaged and her beloved small town devastated.

"I was just in shock," she said. As recovery stretched into a long haul, Collins saw her marriage fall apart. "I think the hurricane ended us," she said. "It was just too much."

The trailer accumulated mold and mildew in the damp walls, her youngest son began having health issues. "My little boy has really bad allergies and asthma," she said.



In 2019, she saw a flyer at the grocery store about the Coastal Bend Disaster Recovery Group. She applied, and later got the word MDS was going to build her a new home using volunteers from Disaster Aid Ohio, a Conservative Mennonite disaster recovery group which is part of the MDS Eastern Ohio Unit.

When she heard that, she couldn't quite believe it.

"I didn't believe it the whole time until the keys were in my hand," she said. "I didn't tell the kids the whole time the house was being constructed. I knew they couldn't take any more disappointment piled on if something fell through."

When she ushered her children, Kyleigh, 14, Kaleb, 12, and Kailen, 7, through the front door in March, they were stunned. "They were in shock, then crying with happiness," she said.

Now settled in their new home, Collins said her children have a sense of security, and she is charting a course for the future by taking college classes with the hope of owning a business someday.

"I've always wanted a peaceful, calm place," she said, "a place where I can breathe. I'm for-ever grateful." ■

— Susan Kim

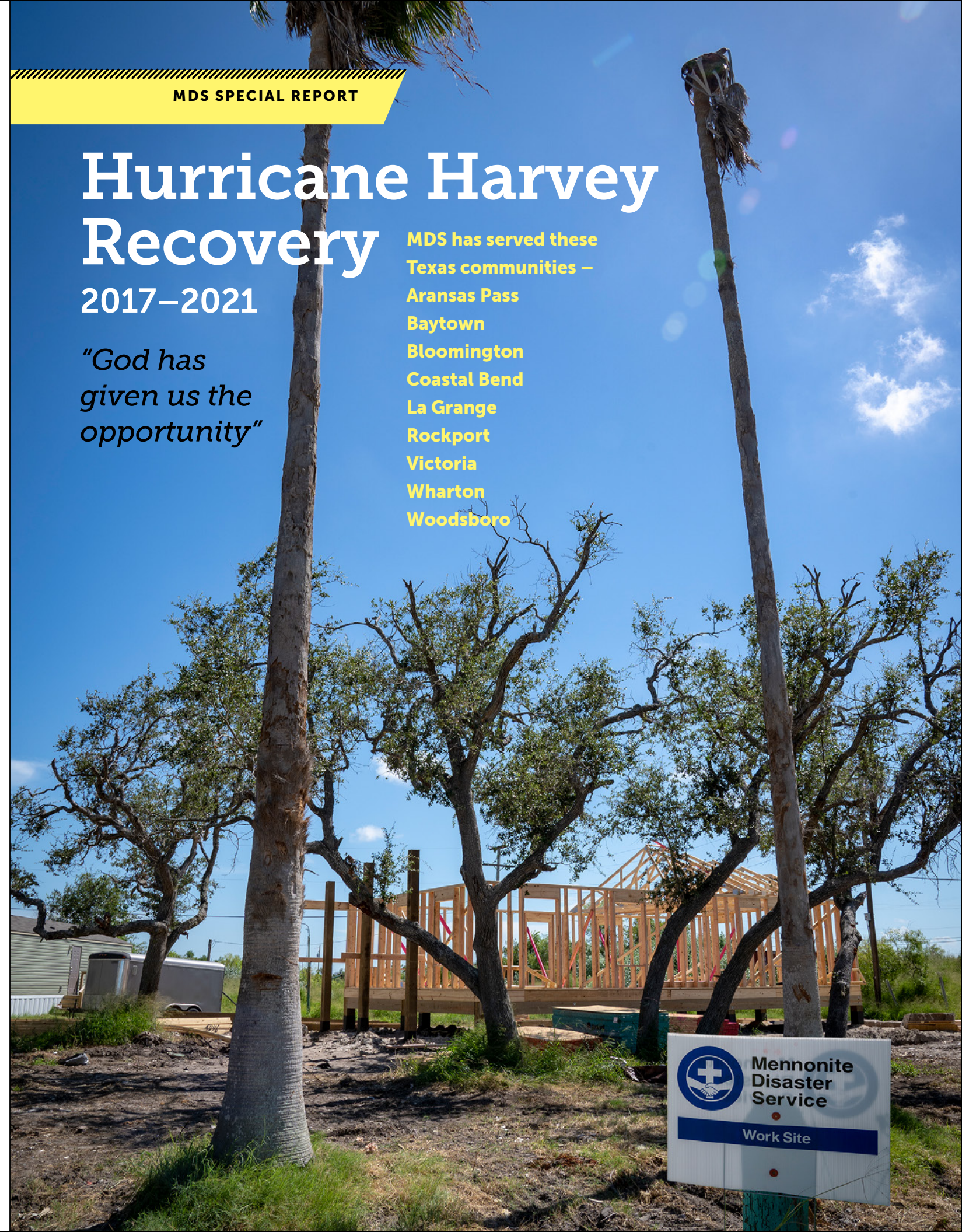
MDS SPECIAL REPORT

# Hurricane Harvey Recovery 2017–2021

*"God has given us the opportunity"*

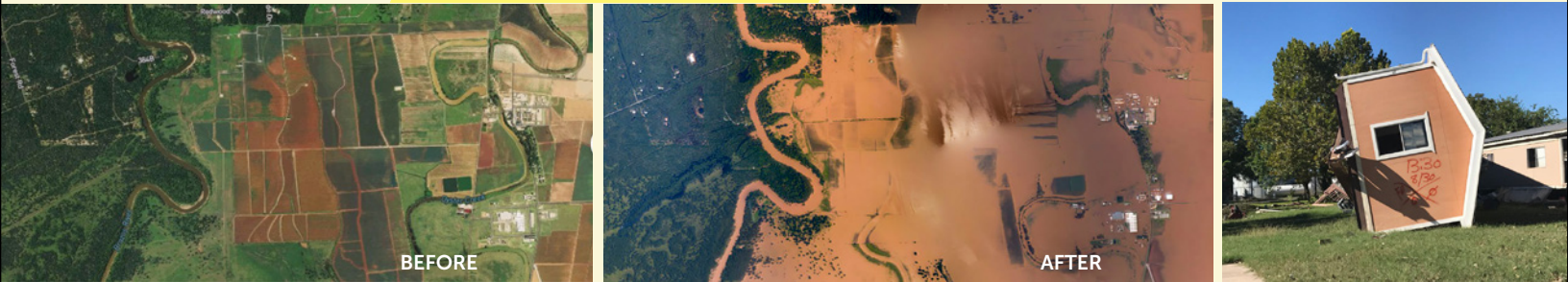
MDS has served these Texas communities –

- Aransas Pass
- Baytown
- Bloomington
- Coastal Bend
- La Grange
- Rockport
- Victoria
- Wharton
- Woodsboro



**Hurricane Harvey, a Category 4 storm, hit Texas on August 25, 2017, dumping record levels of rain that led to extreme flooding. Affecting an estimated 13 million people and nearly 135,000 homes, it made landfall three times in six days, bringing 130-mph winds, a 10-foot storm surge and 52 tornadoes. It caused more damage than any other natural disaster in U.S. history except Hurricane Katrina.**

 More Photos



**As damage from Hurricane Harvey lingers, care for community doesn't lag**

## Remarkable resilience

Rick Villa, executive director of the Victoria County Long-Term Recovery Group in Texas, talks about Hurricane Harvey as if the storm happened last week.

"There's a lot of collaboration going on in this warehouse," says Villa, gesturing around a 14,000-square-foot space, where building supplies, cases of water, and packaged goods are staged.

"We probably have about 25 homeowners in the pipeline we are helping," he says, meaning caseworkers are still assessing needs and connecting hurricane survivors with resources ranging from funding to home repairs to mental health services.

Villa's passion for helping hurricane survivors in the city of Victoria, and the surrounding county, hasn't let up in the three years, nine months since Harvey devastated the area.

Victoria is known as "The Crossroads" because of its location within a two-hour drive of Corpus Christi, Houston, San Antonio, and Austin.

MDS was a founding partner of the Victoria County Long-Term Recovery Group, helping Villa and others learn about long-term disaster recovery.

"Thank you, Mennonites," Villa says. "I can't say it enough. I could say it a million times."

The long-term recovery group's headquarters, which once held a printing press for a newspaper, now includes administrative offices, bunk rooms to accommodate volunteers, and the supplies warehouse.

When Villa initially found out the rooms didn't meet the

local fire code, his heart fell. "But MDS volunteers created a second exit and rebuilt the wall around it, so now they can safely stay here," he says.

Long-term recovery from Harvey hasn't been a linear process. In early 2020, COVID-19—an unprecedented health and economic disaster—swept Victoria, followed by Winter Storm Uri in February 2021, which damaged thousands more homes and left many without water and power.

MDS came to help in Victoria after the freeze, providing hard-to-find plumbing supplies as well as volunteers experienced in plumbing. Villa believes his community has remarkable resilience. "Why keep rebuilding?" he asks aloud. "Because we keep going. Disaster recovery keeps everybody together."

Mark Longoria, board chair of the Victoria County Long-



Rick Villa of the Victoria County Long-Term Recovery Group

Term Recovery Group, said he first gives credit to God. "The miracle of what God has done is amazing," he says.

Longoria believes that the behind-the-scenes help from MDS will help more families far into the future. "Before the long-term recovery group existed, when



Homeowner Edna Franco and her brother receive a quilt from Tom Smucker, MDS Hurricane Harvey Coordinator at a dedication celebration in June 2021.

**"My role is to keep connected with the community. No two communities are the same. You have to know when to ask questions and when to be quiet."**

— TOM SMUCKER, MDS HURRICANE HARVEY COORDINATOR

 More Photos

**"Thank you, Mennonites. I can't say it enough. I could say it a million times."**

— RICK VILLA, VICTORIA COUNTY LONG-TERM RECOVERY GROUP

Harvey hit, people went from church to church, trying to find resources," he says. "But resources are scarce here in Victoria, and that made it difficult for survivors to get the help and hope they needed."

Longoria began envisioning disaster recovery in Victoria in a new way: "What if we had a place where we could serve people without them having to run around?"

When Longoria asked this question, Tom Smucker, coordinator of Hurricane Harvey work for MDS, listened. "Tom Smucker, and of course the whole MDS team, have been a huge blessing," says Longoria. "When the disaster hit here, we didn't know what to do, how to make things happen, how to coordinate, how to get things built, or how to handle a case."

When Harvey hit, the Mennonites were some of the first people on the scene, Longoria recalls. Since then, he says, recovery has been "miracle after miracle."

Longoria says that ultimately his focus has been on showing love to his neighbors, some of whom are the more than 1,300 families who have been helped by the Victoria County Long-Term Recovery Group. "God's hand was involved in this," he says.

As Smucker listens to Longoria's history of Victoria's ongoing recovery, he says MDS volunteers will be back this fall for more Hurricane Harvey-related work. "We don't know exactly what that will look like yet, but we will work together."

Smucker echoes Longoria's philosophy that disaster recovery is about helping your neighbor. "Who is your neighbor?" Smucker asks. "We just happen to have a little longer arm when MDS talks about who our neighbors are."

He explains the difference in his role and that of an MDS short-term volunteer. "My role is not to build houses," he describes. "My role is to keep connected with the community. No two communities are the same. You have to know when to ask questions and when to be quiet."

Smucker has spent more time involved in Hurricane Harvey recovery than he ever believed he would. But he's got more time to spare, he says. "I'm retired. I've got pretty good health. I've got time. And I've got lots of experience—I've been in six communities here." ■

— Susan Kim

In response to Hurricane Harvey,

## MDS volunteers ...

### Built 135 new homes

Including two subdivisions: Hope Meadows (40 homes)  
Tierra de Esperanza, or "Land of Hope" (23 homes)

### Repaired 147 homes

### Cleaned up 332 properties

 More Photos



 More Photos



Ann Pasnick (center) presents a finished quilt, cut by her late mother, to the Hebert family in Cameron, Louisiana.

#### VOLUNTEER EXPERIENCE

## God's patchwork

*Reflections from the past – by Ann Pasnick with Lois Wenger*

It was a moment of mixed emotions as I stood there at the linen closet of the old Kansas farmhouse.

I had traveled there from my home in Illinois to do some cleaning after my mother had passed.

Now here I stood, looking at something my dear mother had begun but never finished—a quilting creation she had designed and cut but never sewn.

Other scraps lay about, no doubt intended for the finished comforter; and as I stared mistily at those pieces, a plan began to take shape in my mind's eye. I could take home the carefully crafted design and make my own comforter, and it would be a genuine mother-daughter effort.

In a matter of a few months I had completed the quilt.

Soon I found myself on another trip, but this time even further south—to a portion of Louisiana that had fallen prey to the monster named Hurricane Katrina.

I had packed the special comforter into my luggage, intending to give it to one of the families for which MDS was building a new house.

The weeks flew by as I busied myself in the MDS kitchen, preparing meal after meal for hungry volunteer builders.

As the day for my return home neared, a home

dedication ceremony was planned. I was able to attend and present the quilt to Mary, the homeowner.

The presentation of a quilt at an MDS home dedication is always an emotional experience, but I was unprepared for how emotional this one would be. As I stepped forward to give Mary the quilt my mother and I had made, she burst into tears—great, sobbing tears.

"This means so much to me," she managed between sobs.

"This fabric," she crooned. "I had this same fabric before the hurricane swept it away!"

That's when I understood the reason for her emotion. But even then I didn't fully understand the workings of an almighty God that would move a Kansas farmer to buy the same fabric that appealed to a Louisiana factory worker and then preserve it for her in her hour of need through me, the intermediary in Illinois.

It can only be explained because we serve an awesome God who is intensely interested in the details of our lives.

Even patchwork. ■



More Photos

2019 MDS Summer Youth project in Conway, South Carolina

## Hands-on learning experience

### Youth eager to show God's love through summer service

Across the U.S., young people are packing their bags to embark on an MDS Summer Youth Program. They took time to share their deep sense of mission and true excitement with *Behind the Hammer* readers.

Youth from Mercersburg Mennonite Church in Pennsylvania will head to Jennings, Louisiana, where they'll be working on homes damaged by Hurricane Laura, which struck in August 2020, and Hurricane Delta, which hit the same area two months later.

The group last served with a Summer Youth Program in 2019, when they traveled to Conway, South Carolina to

repair flood-damaged homes.

Lindsey Horst, 18, said she most looks forward to "seeing people's faces ... even though the things seem little to us, they're meaningful to them."

Brock Martin, 17, looks forward to "getting closer with the youth group while serving ... also seeing the homeowners' faces."

There's a hands-on spiritual aspect, too, reflected 18-year-old Maggie Possinger about her previous experience with MDS.

"Studying the Bible beside my friends is much different than serving beside my friends. Having the opportunity to volunteer at MDS changed our lives," she said.

Wade Horst, 17, will enjoy "trying new stuff and learning how to do it better."

#### FRESH EYES—AND A FRESH COAT OF PAINT

The youth group from Heritage Mennonite Church in Denver, Pennsylvania, is ready to travel to Bennettsville, South Carolina, where they will be repairing homes damaged by Hurricane Florence in 2018.

Sixteen-year-old Kayla Landis draws deep meaning from helping others. "I love to work and help people out in this way while showing them the love of God," she said.



2019 MDS Summer Youth project in Conway, South Carolina

Jerlyn Horst, 18, already knows that Bennettsville is a place with work that needs to be done. "It will be a great way to travel and help someone at the same time," said Horst.

Fifteen-year-old Jerell Horst chimed in: "I want to help others."

Miranda Wenger, 20, expects to see houses that need damaged debris carried out and new drywall put in.

"I also expect that there will be painting that needs to be done," she said. "What inspired me to go on this trip is the opportunity to do what I can to help those in need, to get to know my church members better, and to experience new things."

Before leaving for their Summer Youth Program in Paradise, California, where they'll rebuild homes for wildfire survivors, young people from Trinity Mennonite Church in Phoenix, Arizona, gathered to talk about their trip (in between dips in the pool).

"What I'm most excited about is not only strengthening relationships I already have but also creating new ones with

"What inspired me to go on this trip is the opportunity to do what I can to help those in need ... and to experience new things."

— MIRANDA WENGER, YOUTH VOLUNTEER



other people," said Nathan Shenk, 15. "The people helping out are able to create a community."

Luke Harshman, 15, knows firsthand how wildfires can traumatize people. "Considering that we're going to an area badly affected by wildfires, I have a lot of family up here affected, so I'm glad to be able to help."

The best aspect about going, added 16-year-old Brooke Snyder, "is that we will have a lasting impact on people's lives."

For youth leaders, accompanying young people on a Summer Youth Program brings deep rewards. Nick Buckwalter, youth leader at Akron Mennonite Church in Pennsylvania, said his group of four wanted to do an MDS project last year, but it was canceled due to COVID-19.

"We were most drawn to Bennettsville because it was in a location reachable by van," he said, adding that "youth wanted a hands-on learning experience to give back in a meaningful way, and to grow together as a group." ■

— Susan Kim



Jeff Koller and Tim Schrag plant a tree in Woodsboro, Texas, where MDS has built or repaired hundreds of homes.

## Caring for creation: at the heart of MDS work

Whether planting trees at a disaster recovery site, or finding more environmentally-friendly lunch bags for use at MDS projects, MDS is caring for our planet. MDS considers the impact to the environment in every aspect of a project, from choosing environmentally friendly building materials whenever possible, setting up recycling areas for volunteers, and helping volunteers leave an area cleaner than when they arrived. ■



Reusable lunch bags and water bottles being used at MDS projects.



On Earth Day, MDS staff planted trees on the grounds of the MDS offices in Lititz, Pa.

## Q+A



MDS welcomes Steve Hochstetler, administrative assistant for Region 3, which covers a dozen states including Texas, Colorado and Missouri.

## A wonderful change

### Q: WHERE DID YOU GROW UP?

A: I grew up on a farm in northern Indiana, the youngest of four kids. We had cattle, pigs and dairy cows.

### Q: WHEN DID YOU FIRST HEAR OF MDS?

A: MDS responded to tornadoes in Indiana in 1965. I was four years old and our house was one of hundreds destroyed. In the 80s and 90s, I was an MDS Church Contact Person in North Carolina. In 1996, Hurricane Fran knocked down thousands of trees, many on homes. MDS asked me to attend response meetings, then I spent five weeks as the project leader.

### Q: WHAT DREW YOU TO THIS JOB?

A: MDS responds in the name of Christ. That is reflected in how MDS employees are treated as well as our clients. I had just retired from a stressful corporate job. Working at MDS is a wonderful change.

It is more than lifting a hammer; it is seeing the care and dignity put into every relationship as a house gets repaired or replaced. It is a blessing to be part of this! ■

## COOKING FOR A CROWD



## Zesty Pasta Salad

- 2 - 16 oz pkg tri-colored pasta noodles
- 2-3 medium tomatoes
- 2 small red onion
- 1 c. green pepper
- 1 c. yellow pepper
- 1 c. red pepper
- 2 cans black olives
- 2 small cucumbers, diced
- 2 small bunches of broccoli
- 2 bottles zesty Italian dressing

Prepare noodles as directed on package. Drain noodles and put in a clear glass serving bowl. Dice all veggies; then place them on top of cooked noodles. Add Italian dressing and gently mix well. Cover and chill before serving.

For best results, prepare a day ahead. Stir a couple of times that day and prior to serving. You may need to add a little extra dressing before serving as the noodles will soak it up.

Yield: about 25 servings of 1 cup each





Duane Anderson is one of many Brethren Church members who have been volunteering for MDS for years.

### BRETHREN CHURCH

When Jean Anderson read in a Brethren Church newsletter that MDS and the Brethren Church had formalized a working agreement together, she could not have been more excited.

“Serving with MDS is the perfect place for the Brethren church to be,” said Anderson, 70, who has served with MDS with her husband, Duane, since 2018.

For Anderson and many other Brethren Church members, the new agreement sets down in formal terms a partnership of service and caring

that has already been thriving on the ground.

Anderson said she has seen many times when members of Brethren churches had a heart to help disaster survivors—but lacked the capacity and resources to make it happen.

The agreement specifies that MDS will provide opportunities for Brethren Church congregations and congregants—both skilled and non-skilled—to volunteer and serve locally and throughout the U.S. and Canada.

### OHIO

As volunteers from MDS began working on new homes in Trotwood, Ohio in May, they helped tornado survivors unlock the door to owning a home for the first time.

When tornadoes struck the community, located just outside Dayton, on May 28, 2019, hundreds of people were left homeless. The twisters destroyed five apartment complexes, the largest with more than 400 units.

“Trotwood lost a great deal of multi-family units in the tornado—just a massive hit to affordable rental housing,” explained Laura Mercer, executive director of the Miami Valley Long Term Recovery Group.



MDS and partnering groups break ground on a home as part of the Tornado Survivors Pathway to Ownership Project in Ohio.

MDS and other organizations in the Ohio Voluntary Organizations Active in Disaster became involved in the Tornado Survivors Pathway to Ownership Project.

Wayne Yoder, who is serving as the project coordinator for MDS, will be happy to soon be welcoming volunteers onsite.

“The community leaders are excited to have the program revitalizing their neighborhoods,” he said.

### VIRGINIA

Dozens of MDS volunteers in Harrisonburg, Virginia, gathered for a picnic in May to mark how more than 250 volunteers in the Shenandoah Valley had creatively and safely reached out to help their community



MDS Shenandoah Valley Unit

during the pandemic.

“COVID-19 presented unique needs from various organizations and institutions,” said Rich Rhodes, chair of the MDS Shenandoah Valley Unit. “Many of those who helped out with the COVID response were seniors.”

At the picnic, local MDS volunteer coordinator Phil Helmuth thanked the volunteers and recalled some of the many ways in which they served.

“They started off by making masks—thousands of them,” said Helmuth. “Then, right on the heels of that, the first responders in our area said they needed some personal protective gowns.”

### CALIFORNIA

The Evangelio En Accion, or “Gospel in Action” church in Selma, California, is in the business of hope. But when COVID-19 swept the world, the small Mennonite Brethren church nearly shut down.

When church member Urbano Gonzalez heard about the COVID-19 Congregational Relief Fund in early 2020, he decided he’d fill out an application. Launched in April 2020, the fund was originally seeded with a

combined \$800,000 US/\$995,988 CDN commitment from Everence, Mennonite Central Committee U.S., and MDS in the U.S., plus an additional \$220,553 US/\$274,585 CDN in contributions from other donors.

Evangelio En Accion received \$5,000 US/\$6,224 CDN from the fund; Gonzalez believes it helped keep the church doors open.

The fund, now closing, distributed 216 grants to congregations that represented 15 different denominations and more than 16 ethnic groups in 29 states and Puerto Rico. ■

### DIGITAL-READY

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