

# Catholic church reopens in New Orleans' Katrina-damaged 9th Ward

NEW ORLEANS – A trumpet blared the hymn “We Have Come Into This House” as about 400 people began singing and marching around the block to officially reopen St. David Church in the Lower 9th Ward of New Orleans.

The church had been closed for nearly four years after it was damaged by the flooding caused by Hurricane Katrina.

“Sept. 8, 2007, was the official start of the rebuilding of St. David,” said parishioner Michael Gordon, referring to the day when parishioners installed a church subfloor in preparation for the renovations.

That long road to reopening ended March 1 when New Orleans Auxiliary Bishop Shelton J. Fabre, the principal celebrant for the dedication Mass, handed the church keys to Josephite Father Joe Campion, pastor at St. David, who unlocked the main entrance to start the rite of dedication.

The church stayed unlit throughout the readings, which included a passage from Genesis about Noah and the flood.

“In a wonderful way now you have been very faithful to God even though it has not been easy,” Bishop Fabre said, comparing the parishioners’ flood experience and faith to that of Noah.

He called the reopening of St. David’s a “beacon of hope in this community.”

“Just as hope is the first thing that is lost, hope is the first thing to emerge from all that has been broken,” Bishop Fabre said.

The bishop told St. David parishioners and their friends that even though they returned to their physical church their faith proved to be larger than any building.

At the end of the Mass, Father Campion reiterated the long journey home since Hurricane Katrina. He recalled his exile with other Josephite priests to Breau

Bridge where a Josephite Recovery Center was established.

His current pastoral assistant, Holy Family Sister Teresa Rooney, helped run the center to aid hurricane victims and reunite parishioners.

“It was there we began to bring our church together,” Father Campion said.

He said St. David, which was renovated in 1990, had to be completely restored after Hurricane Katrina hit in August 2005. The process began in December of that year when the Alleluia Community Church from Augusta, Ga., gutted the church and rectory.

Former St. David parishioners who had returned to New Orleans were worshipping at Blessed Sacrament Church, another Josephite parish, where Father Campion lived after the storm.

Then, parishioners from St. David and nearby St. Maurice were asked to worship at St. Maurice, without utilities. An average of 80 to 90 people attended Mass, a number that steadily increased in recent months. A transitional leadership team was established at St. Maurice to jump-start basic ministries such as evangelization, social outreach and finances.

By July 2008, after assessing storm damages and population counts at both parishes, the archdiocese announced that St. David and St. Maurice would merge and worship at St. David. The cost to reopen St. Maurice, which was established in 1852, was estimated at \$2 million, compared to \$600,000 for St. David, established in 1937.

By August 2008, St. Rita Church in New York had shipped pews, a sound system, vestments, Stations of the Cross, a baptismal font and statues to St. David, making worship possible.

“They sent everything to us that they had because their church was closed,” Sister Teresa said. “The pews were smaller and didn’t exactly fit, but it kept us going.”

At the dedication Mass, Father Campion recognized many of those who had contributed to the reopening of St. David, including 21 parishioners from St. David of Wales in Willow Grove, Pa. The Pennsylvania parish, a sister parish of its

namesake before Katrina, supported the New Orleans' parish with fundraisers and donated a bronze replica of St. David of Wales for the rededication.