

AN ORAL HISTORY

with

REVEREND LEE J. ADAMS JR.

This is an interview for the Mississippi Oral History Program of The University of Southern Mississippi Hurricane Katrina Project. The interview is with Reverend Lee J. Adams Jr. and is taking place on June 6, 2008. The interviewer is James Pat Smith.

Smith: This is an interview with Reverend Lee J. Adams, the pastor of Little Rock Baptist Church in Gulfport, Mississippi. Pastor Adams will be focusing most of the interview on Katrina and the role that his church played in hosting volunteers and the impact on the community, the congregation, and the clergy of the storm and the recovery. Today is June the sixth, 2008. Reverend Adams, could you state your name and today's date and where we're located?

Adams: My name is Lee J. Adams Jr. Today's date is June 6, 2008. We are here at the Little Rock Missionary Baptist Church, which is located at 4538 Old Pass Road in Gulfport, Mississippi, in the community locally known as Gaston Point.

Smith: And could you share with us your date of birth?

Adams: My date of birth is seven, seventeen, 1947. I was born here in Gulfport. At that time Memorial Hospital was on what we called the Navy Base. And I was born in Memorial Hospital. I grew up one block down the street from this church at 1205 Woodward Avenue. The first twenty-one years of my life that was my family's address. My father later moved to a new home, one street over on Mills Avenue. So basically except for a few years in the military, my whole life has been here in Gulfport, Mississippi, in the community of Gaston Point. I live now, ten blocks from the church. I can literally walk from home to work or from here back home.

Smith: [What is] your spouse's name?

Adams: Ruby Adams.

Smith: Do you know the date and place of your marriage? Some men have trouble with this.

Adams: I was married September the sixth, 1970, at this church.

Smith: Does your wife allow you to state her date of birth?

Adams: Oh, yeah. She doesn't mind. She's a little older than me. She was born two, twenty-one, 1947.

Smith: And what was her maiden name?

Adams: McDonald, Ruby McDonald.

Smith: You've been in the ministry quite a long time. Have you pursued any other occupations other than Baptist ministry?

Adams: Yes, sir. I've been, how many things haven't I been? When I graduated high school, I attended Tuskegee Institute from 1964 to 1968, but I didn't achieve a degree because I went, actually, on a five-year plan. And at that time the draft was instituted, and you only got four years deferment. So at the end of the fourth year, I had to join the Air Force to keep from being drafted in the Army. After my tenure in the Air Force—

Smith: You were ten years in the Air Force?

Adams: No, eight years.

Smith: Eight years in the Air Force.

Adams: I wasn't really sure what I wanted to be. I at first attended Tuskegee, majoring in chemistry, and I decided I didn't want to do that. And I had my GI bill, so I went to Southern for a while, majoring in psychology.

Smith: When you speak of Southern, is this—

Adams: University of Southern Mississippi.

Smith: University of Southern Mississippi.

Adams: Right. But I just couldn't seem to get my focus as far as jobs. I've worked for industrial companies like oil-producing companies, well, companies that produce the equipment, off-shore equipment. I've been a longshoreman. I've been a ship fitter, and I've owned a few businesses that failed. And finally in 1988, I wound up in the ministry. I even spent two months as a dispatcher for Gulfport Police Department.

Smith: And how did you come to be in the ministry? Some ministers will have a sense of calling. Can you talk about how you found your way into this twenty-year occupation?

Adams: I was called. I just said I had no desire to be a minister, but God's plan was for me to be a minister. And after struggling and realizing that everything I had done had failed because I wouldn't be obedient to God, I finally accepted my calling.

Smith: And so you've been the pastor of—

Adams: Little Rock since 1992.

Smith: Ninety-two. Did you do any other educational preparation for the ministry? You studied psychology, you said, at USM.

Adams: Right. I've been to a couple of local seminaries, and actually when Katrina hit, I was about eight months to a year from graduating from William Carey College in Hattiesburg with a degree in theology. And I haven't gotten back to that yet.

Smith: Have you attended any other colleges or universities, other than the ones we've mentioned Tuskegee, USM, William Carey? Or seminaries? You said you'd been to a couple—

Adams: Mississippi Baptist Seminary and I even got, I have two associate degrees from what used to be here called Phillips College, one in accounting and one in business management.

Smith: And where did you graduate from high school?

Adams: Thirty-third Avenue High School, 1964. That was during the time of segregation; that was the black school.

Smith: And where did you attend elementary school?

Adams: Well, it's not there anymore, but it was Gaston Point Elementary, and there used to be a slab right across the street from the church.

Smith: It's now located a couple of blocks—

Adams: Yeah, a couple of blocks away.

Smith: Do you have any other civic or professional organizations that you've been active in that you think are notable for anybody trying to understand your perspective on life and Katrina?

Adams: Right now I'm vice chair of the Board of Gaston Point Community Development Corporation. I'm also head of the foundation here at the church, which is Little Rock Baptist Church of West Gulfport, Incorporated. I have served on the board with Habitat for Humanity. I'm involved with our local district association through the church. I served as treasurer for a while, and now I'm second vice

moderator, and I could probably think of a few more if I just took the time. I should have jotted some notes down like you said. (laughter) But I'm known as a very active pastor.

Smith: Have you had any awards or honors or citations that you think are helpful for people to know about that help us understand, again, your perspective on the community?

Adams: I have some; I just can't think of them. They in there piled up somewhere. I have so many plaques, I can't put them on the wall.

Smith: That's good. Do you have children?

Adams: No, sir.

Smith: You mentioned your father. What was your father's full name?

Adams: His name was Lee J. Adams.

Smith: And his date of birth?

Adams: Five, twenty, 1916.

Smith: Do you know where he was born?

Adams: New Orleans.

Smith: And what occupations did your father pursue in his lifetime?

Adams: Most of his life he was a truck driver. He drove for—back in the days, you know, he had a lot of local grocery companies, like H.T. Carter Merchant's Company and United Cash. He drove for Merchant's Company for twenty-something years, and then another twenty-something for United Cash. And then he went to work for the City of Gulfport, and he served as a safety officer for the City of Gulfport.

Smith: And your mother, what was her maiden name?

Adams: McElhaney(?).

Smith: Is she related to a minister?

Adams: That's her brother, my uncle.

Smith: OK. So your uncle was Famous McElhaney.

Adams: Famous McElhaney. Yes, sir.

Smith: A sort of renowned pastor.

Adams: Yes, sir.

Smith: In Gulfport. Do you know your mother's date and place of birth?

Adams: April 22, 1916, in Seminary, Mississippi.

Smith: Do you know the date that your parents were married?

Adams: August 10, 1935.

Smith: Do you know the place they were married?

Adams: Gulfport.

Smith: Did your mother pursue any occupations outside of the home?

Adams: Yes. My mother was, she worked in laundry, back in the day when, you know, dry-cleaning was a big thing. Your shirts had to be done, and she worked for Exclusive Cleaners for, oh, probably thirty-five, forty years. It's been that long. Ever since I was a little, bitty boy, we used to pick her up from work in the afternoon; so she worked there for a long, long time. And then when she changed professions, she became a cafeteria manager for the school system.

Smith: Very good. Reverend Adams, let's go back to and think about Katrina. If you can think about the few days before Katrina, when did you become aware of this storm and how big it might be, how devastating it might be? How was your awareness growing?

Adams: That's a difficult question because being a veteran of quite a few hurricanes, I heard the predictions, and then you know, at one time it was a five, and then it dropped down to a three, and you know I never really realized, to my neglect, how large it was or else I probably—well, I believe in providence. So maybe God didn't let me do that so I wouldn't leave, and so we stayed here. And we were in this building when the hurricane hit. I remember thinking about it, and I remember my wife telling me that she wanted to go. And I was telling her I couldn't go because I had some members that were elderly, and I couldn't be so sure that they were going to get to a shelter. And so I was going to stay and keep the church open so that I would know that they would be all right. That's really why I stayed because—

Smith: This is a pretty sturdy building, built in the last twenty years, maybe?

Adams: This building here was built in [19]80.

Smith: Nineteen eighty.

Adams: Yeah.

Smith: So twenty-eight years.

Adams: Yeah. The sanctuary over there, we went into in [19]95, but I stayed because of consideration of people that I felt like, not that somebody wouldn't take them to the shelter, but they might not really know how to ask. And I knew I could convince them to at least come here. And so that's why I stayed. I remember going, riding down the afternoon before the storm, and it was eerily quiet on the beach. But the water, you could see it; it had a fullness to it. But the wind wasn't really blowing; the waves weren't even lapping. But there was a fullness to the Gulf that you could literally see, the actual quiet before the, you know. And that's all I remember prior to.

Smith: OK. And then the storm itself you spent here at Little Rock Baptist Church. How many people were here with you?

Adams: About fifty.

Smith: So your decision to stay here actually was useful.

Adams: Yeah. We even got some people who had been over to West Elementary, and they were told that because of the expected storm surge, that they didn't open it. So they wound up coming over here.

Smith: Now, West Elementary would be—

Adams: Forty-second Avenue and Old Pass Road, and Fifteenth Street. It's a new school.

Smith: And it's only slightly closer to the beach than this is, though.

Adams: Right.

Smith: Maybe a little lower?

Adams: Right, lower elevation.

Smith: It kind of goes down a little bit.

Adams: Right.

Smith: In there around Milner Stadium.

Adams: Right.

Smith: OK. So you kept the church open. What were people doing during the storm? When did they start coming in over here, and what were they doing?

Adams: Sunday afternoon, but we had lights; up until Monday morning at twenty minutes to six, we had lights. So people just kind of sat around, some with radios, listening to radios; some that had small TVs watched television. I played computer games, you know. My wife slept in my office, actually just kind of like you weren't sleepy, but finally you went to sleep. And that morning at about twenty to six, we started to hear the wind blowing, and right away the lights went out. And it was on then. The wind was fierce, fierce, fierce, very fierce. Rain was blowing laterally.

Smith: What ages of people did you have here?

Adams: From babies to, Miss Julia Gillespie was probably the oldest, and at that time she was ninety-three.

Smith: Were most of the people who took shelter here members of the church?

Adams: Not really. A lot of them were just people. Since I've been the pastor here, I've tried to make everybody in the community understand that this is the community's church. And so I've never turned away a person because they weren't a member. When we had the tents up and we were giving out stuff, I never asked, "Where do you belong to church?" When we were putting roofs on homes in the community, members didn't have any priority over anybody. What we dealt with was the need.

Smith: So you spent the day here at the church. Is there anything unusual or memorable or that you learned from just being cooped up here with fifty people in the storm?

Adams: Oh.

Smith: What did you learn from that?

Adams: Oh. I learned what mass fear is like. Like I say, the wind became very fierce. It was literally blowing these big, heavy doors here open. And I mean all the wind could get through was the crack between them, but it was literally blowing them open. I had to tie them down with computer cords, you know, something like this, just take it and tie the two doors together so it couldn't come but so far open. We heard a noise and walked over into the sanctuary over there, and shingles were popping off the roof; sounded like somebody shooting a twenty-two, patow, pow, pow, pow, pow, pow. That's exactly what it sounded like. And then it was literally raining in there; all the shingles came off, and it was literally—I mean, not like outside, but I mean it was plenty water falling everywhere.

Smith: And let's position this building from the beach. You're probably what? Less than a mile from the beach.

Adams: Less than a mile.

Smith: You're on the north side of the railroad tracks.

Adams: Right.

Smith: Less than a mile from the beach. So you saw your worship sanctuary being heavily, the roof was heavily damaged, and it was raining in the sanctuary. What was happening here in the education building?

Adams: In this building, we really wasn't springing too many leaks. We didn't have but a few, and we were relatively safe. I guess about ten o'clock, my best friend, he had left, and he had gone to Mobile, and he called me on the phone, on the cell phone. And I was talking to him, and he said, "I know that you think it's real bad now," he say, "but I'm watching it on television, and the worst is yet to come." And I told him, I say, "Man, you can't tell me that." I said, "I can't go back in here and tell all these people that the worst is yet to come." He said, "Well, I'm just letting you know. I got to let you know." So I called everybody into the sanctuary, into the area in here, and I told them, I said, "Brothers and sisters, it appears that we have not seen the worst of this storm." I said, "We have a room in the back with windows only on one side. If it gets bad in here, if this area is, you know, we'll go back there. That's our panic room. We'll all huddle back there." And after that, we started singing, and we started praying.

Smith: What songs did you sing?

Adams: I wish I could remember, but you know, usual songs that black folk will sing at a prayer meeting. They weren't real sad songs, now, but "I Will Trust in the Lord," "Hold to God's Unchanging Hand," songs like that. And we would sing a song, and then somebody would pray. And didn't have to ask for volunteers; sometimes one or two people wanted to pray at the same time. And that must have gone on for about forty minutes. And I think we all realized in that forty minutes that we had stopped even listening to the storm. And so a calm came over us, and then when this building did start springing leaks, we just worried about putting something under the leak. And we made it through the rest of the day.

Smith: And you said there was quite a bit of fear before that. What did you see happening that let you know the fear, other than what was going on inside of you? What did you see—

Adams: How did I see other people's fear?

Smith: Yeah. How did you see that?

Adams: Well, there's a—number one, nobody was really seated in there; they were trying to get to the doors where they could see what's going on. And then those that were in there were really, like, huddled together. It was just, you could just feel it in the air. Even if they didn't say anything or do anything, you could feel fear was common amongst all of us.

Smith: Was the most fearful thing the popping of the shingles off the sanctuary?

Adams: Well, that was probably part of it, but the other part was me running from door to door, trying to—every time I tie one, look like this one back here would start blowing open. And I mean, it was blowing them open like it wasn't even playing. And I left my truck parked wrong because I left it with the tail out, and I had the thing down and locked, but it literally broke that lock, just it was playing with the tailgate on my truck like it was little toy. You know, I got a thing on the back of it; it was just lifting it and letting it down like it felt like. Tin started flying off the roof. Oh, man, and then somebody, somehow or another got up under the back side of one car, and it was beating them. Every car out there really had bad damage; that tin was beating them cars like they was little children.

Smith: OK. Some pretty fearful time in here, but your just normal worship activity, sort of a prayer meeting calmed people quite a bit.

Adams: Yes, sir.

Smith: When things settled down and you were able to look at the outside, what was that like? What did you see?

Adams: Stuff everywhere. I mean, the destruction was awesome. It took me a half hour to navigate to my house from here. So many big oak trees down. I mean, it was, the total amount of devastation was awesome; it was absolutely awesome. And I just couldn't believe it. I mean, you just, I'd seen hurricanes before, but not this amount of devastation. There was not—oh, I suspect I didn't see one house that didn't have any problems except mine.

Smith: So your house—

Adams: That's a miracle story, but I didn't have enough damage to file a claim. In fact I told my wife that I probably wouldn't leave except our carport is to the south, and I felt like those posts that supported it, I said, "Well, it's going to lift that, and then they going to fall out, and then the carport might fall." Well, it did just what I thought. It lifted them, and the posts fell out, but the amazing thing was they didn't even move. Where they fell is where they lay. I didn't have to go down the street and find them. So within a hour I had got a carjack and a two by four, and those posts were back under my carport. And that's all the damage I had. No roof damage, no windows out. I had a woodpile in the backyard where I stacked firewood because I have a fireplace.

Not one stick of that wood moved. *Not one stick of that wood moved.* But the lord said, “I want you to know I been by.” So my neighbor’s garbage can was in my yard, but other than that, it was absolutely perfect.

Smith: You said that your drive home—you live in West Gulfport.

Adams: Yeah, I live right down there; we’re about ten blocks.

Smith: Within a few blocks of the church, just west of the church. So you saw more debris in the streets than any other storm you had been through.

Adams: Oh, yes, sir.

Smith: Were you here during Camille? Or were you—

Adams: No. I was in Vietnam during Camille.

Smith: By the way, what rank were you?

Adams: I achieved the rank of E-5 in the Air Force, staff sergeant.

Smith: OK. So you didn’t see the immediate aftermath of Camille, but you’ve seen a lot of other storms, and this one was devastating as far as what you see. About what’s the membership of your congregation, or your average Sunday attendance, pre-Katrina?

Adams: Oh, pre-Katrina, membership has always been pretty high, but we had pretty much, I’d say we’d be lucky if we had two hundred on a Sunday, but membership was always about nine hundred or a thousand, pre-Katrina. But to be honest, that was the church’s fault, and I say that because prior to my coming, there is a thing that happened to churches in the [19]70s that in the late [19]60s and early [19]70s when we began to think of the government as the caretaker of people, that we quit taking care of people. And so they found no reason to come to church, and so ever since I’ve been here—and I think that’s the only reason I am here is because I remember when I grew up in this community, this church was the center of the community and everything. You know, it was just the center of life in the community, and we no longer occupy that position, and I’ve been working for that the sixteen years I been back; I been trying to get these people to understand that our problems in our community are because we refuse to do ministry. We just want to come on Sunday and you know, have a hallelujah time, and go back home, and all the while, people are out there suffering.

Smith: Now, this church has had, I know you’ve been involved with youth programs very much. Can you talk about that? This is pre-Katrina.

Adams: Right.

Smith: But I knew about you in these—

Adams: Right, but you see, that was me trying to lead by example. That was the members saying, “Yeah, you can use the building. You can have what you want to.” But not participating.

Smith: What was the program that you—

Adams: I used to be involved with a great gentleman that just died, Reverend [Harry] Tartt. And what was his good friend, the lady’s name? But we had a program called Y Workers Helping Youth, and we would take—

Smith: Christine Bryce(?)?

Adams: Christine Bryce. And we would work with children in the community, and we would have activities, and essay contests and speaking contests and talents, you know, just to give the children that outlet. And we would give them awards and work the scholarships for them and stuff. Our association still does; children that graduate from high school and attend college, each church gets to give one scholarship to that child when he enrolls in college, and we try to give them a laptop computer. We still, I’m still very involved, but like I say, that’s me, leading, with very few being willing to work with me. But it’s a struggle; it’s getting better.

Smith: OK. So you had a church of about the average Sunday morning attendance’d be about two hundred, and that had some outreach in the community. Your community’s devastated. Do you know about what, how many of your members or church officers were dehoued, as a result of the storm, lost a roof over their head?

Adams: Pshew! I would say 60 percent, maybe 70 percent.

Smith: So at some point 60 or 70 percent of them had to move out of their house?

Adams: That’s right.

Smith: So that’s a pretty heavy blow. Does the church have any other employees beside yourself?

Adams: Well, we have—not full-time.

Smith: Well, part-time employees?

Adams: Part-time we have secretaries and janitors and musicians and like that.

Smith: And how were they impacted? How many of them were dehoued?

Adams: OK. Well, the janitor, he doesn't live in this community. The secretary lives in Rolling Meadows; they had a leak, but they didn't have to leave home. One.

Smith: So the staff of the church—

Adams: Was pretty intact.

Smith: —was pretty intact, able to come back and work, to help carry on in that way. But the membership is 60, 70 percent dehoued.

Adams: Right. Most of them had a FEMA trailer by their house.

Smith: This storm took place on a Monday. When was the first time that you had a church service here?

Adams: The next Sunday.

Smith: Next Sunday. Did you have electricity?

Adams: No.

Smith: How did you have church without electricity?

Adams: Open the windows. We were in this building; couldn't go in that one.

Smith: The big sanctuary building was—

Adams: Messed up.

Smith: Messed up. What was the nature of the damage over there?

Adams: It was mostly water damage.

Smith: So it had, the roof?

Adams: Yeah. Had to get new roofing shingles.

Smith: So your carpets were soaked?

Adams: Yeah.

Smith: Your pews?

Adams: Pews soaked.

Smith: Soaked. So it was unusable. So you were over here. What was that first service like? If you would have normally expected a couple of hundred people on a Sunday morning, how many assembled that Sunday after Katrina?

Adams: About thirty-five. A lot of them had left town, though; a lot of people weren't brave, now, or foolish, whichever one you want to call it. (laughter) They had left town, and they really hadn't come back.

Smith: OK. When did you begin to know the extent of the loss of your members as far as the loss of their housing, how badly they were hurt?

Adams: Oh, I knew that right away because as soon as—well, let's say a few days. As soon as roads got passable, that's the first thing I did was ride around the community and assess, you know, what needed to be done. But the beautiful thing was, even before I got to do that, God had made a way for help to come.

Smith: And how was that?

Adams: On the Tuesday after the storm, having nothing else to do, having gotten water from somewhere, and they had a big water main bust, so that's where you would get the water to use in your bathroom, you know.

Smith: To flush.

Adams: Right. I came up to the church; just had nothing better to do, and there were four gentlemen, sitting in a SUV [suburban utility vehicle] in the parking lot, out there. And they said, "We looking for the pastor." And I said, "You looking at him." And they said, "Well, we want to come down here to volunteer to help y'all work, but we need somewhere to stay." And so we came through, and we walked over here, and they looked at this area over here. I say, "Is this good enough?" They say, "Yeah." They said, "If you'll agree to it, I promise you a week from Friday, we'll be here, six men will be here with a Bobcat."

Smith: And where were these gentlemen from?

Adams: Michigan. From, oh, anyway, they were Wesleyans, from the Wesleyan Church in Michigan. I thought of one of them, New Haven, but that's not it. But they were officially associated with the organization called World Hope. But they came; they were from Michigan, and just as they had said, six days later, they were here, six men with a Bobcat. And first thing they knew they could do was start cutting trees, but you know, by that Sunday morning, after we had service, people, one lady had a freezer, and the meat was thawing out, getting ready to go bad. So my friend and I— one of the businesses I had been in was barbecue business. So we just pulled the grill out, and we just started cooking, and we cooked every day. Every time somebody had stuff that was going bad, they'd bring it to us, and we'd cook it every day. And anybody that came by and wanted to eat, could get a meal.

Smith: So you ran, basically, a community kitchen?

Adams: Yeah.

Smith: So how many meals a day were being prepared here at the church?

Adams: At least two or three hundred.

Smith: And how long did that—

Adams: That lasted for about three weeks. Then the Red Cross was coming through. And in three weeks we had groups coming in, so we were cooking for the groups that were coming in, and they would be sometimes twenty, thirty people. At one time in October or late September, we had a hundred and forty people in.

Smith: A hundred and forty people sort of stationed around this church as volunteers?

Adams: Yeah, sleeping in here.

Smith: Sleeping in your building, your education building.

Adams: We had so many till a group came from Washington DC to visit with us, I had to let them sleep over there.

Smith: In the sanctuary, in the damaged sanctuary.

Adams: Yeah. Yes, sir.

Smith: That sounds like it would have been a good thing. Are there any surprising problems that it poses when you get so much help?

Adams: No, not at the time because we had that much work. We had that much work.

Smith: How were you feeding all these people?

Adams: We would all get together and cook.

Smith: Where'd the food come from?

Adams: Oh, we would buy it.

Smith: OK. The church would buy it? People in church would buy it?

Adams: Yeah. We would buy it. Now, when they got organized, they would come and give us money to buy the food. And then we still would cook it, and like I said, my friend and I, we would be on the grill most days, and try to make it a little different, but it was all coming off the grill until, you know, everything got back to normal. Then we have the kitchen with a six-burner gas stove and stuff. But I had kind of gotten people spoiled, so every Wednesday it was known that I had to cook something on the grill. Every group that came would say, “Well, we heard Pastor can barbecue, so we know we going to have barbecue Wednesday.” So I was just, you know, that was a automatic thing. But I didn’t mind; I really didn’t. I enjoyed it. I’m a person that loves people. And Wednesday night we would have a community prayer meeting. People from our church and the people that were in that week, and we would have prayer meeting together and fellowship and talk and learn about one another. If it’s one thing I learned from this hurricane, even being a Christian and I didn’t know, and that’s that America’s still full of wonderful people.

Smith: You said the first group that came in was from Michigan. Did that continue to be the main groups that—

Adams: All of them came from the Midwest. We had some from Michigan, some from Pennsylvania, a couple of groups from New York, Ohio. In fact I got to visit; I went to the church in Ohio. It’s where the University of Ohio is, not Ohio State, Athens. And I got to go to Central Wesleyan; that’s the name of the church in Holland, Michigan, Central Wesleyan. Got to visit that church and Hope College, which is in Holland, Michigan. They had a lot of kids that came down. And just to see these people come with work on their mind, and that’s all they did. They’d work hard all day, get up, eat breakfast, eat a light lunch. And so we would make sure they had a heavy supper because they had worked all—I mean, literally. They were wearing themselves out. Had one guy came from Pennsylvania; he has since then moved to Kentucky, and we would call him tree-cutting John. He stayed three months. He wouldn’t leave. And I know John must have—we were counting at one time, but John had cut down somewhere around four hundred trees that were, you know, blocking people’s property or on their house and stuff like that. He must have cut somewhere around four hundred trees.

Smith: How did you know where to send all these volunteers? How did you know what tasks needed to be done? How was that organized.

Adams: OK. First thing I did when the hurricane happened, I asked some members to get with me, and we went to every house in this community and took a survey. And we did that in one day.

Smith: This is within a day or two of the storm, you had looked at every house and had made a list.

Adams: Right, and had a list.

Smith: Of what appeared to be major problems.

Adams: Of what appeared to be wrong. That's right. And I'm really proud for that because when—

Smith: How many blocks did that survey entail? Gaston Point?

Adams: Gaston Point.

Smith: Would be the railroad tracks to the Navy base.

Adams: And Broad Avenue to Lewis Avenue. And then you got a little bit down and around that (inaudible) around about Sixty-second, but that's basically Gaston Point.

Smith: That's a pretty big neighborhood.

Adams: But now, once people found out what we were doing, it didn't take long for people from all communities to come and ask for help. And so you'll find that we put roofs on in every community in this city. We cut trees in every community in this city because we prioritized according to needs, and we had a system. If you were disabled, you was number one on the list. You know. If you were elderly, you were number two. If you were disabled and elderly, then you were number one on the list. And that's how we did. So you know, you can go in any community, I can take you in any community and show you where we put some roofs on some buildings because we just were not respecter of persons, and I didn't, although we are Baptists, I didn't restrict it to any particular group. And that's how we worked.

Smith: So you practiced "God rains on the just and the unjust, alike."

Adams: That's right. Didn't ask them if they were a Christian.

Smith: Yeah. So you were just there to meet a need.

Adams: That's right.

Smith: Do you have any idea of the number of people that were touched by groups that worked out of this church?

Adams: Oh, no, sir, I don't. I could tell you we had over, between fifty-five hundred and six thousand volunteers come through. We still have; we got a group that's coming in this weekend.

Smith: I notice there's a trailer parked out back.

Adams: Yeah. But we have a group that's coming in this weekend. In fact we're just ending the program officially August 31, so that'll be three years that we've had people coming. And there's never been a month that somebody wasn't here.

Smith: So you-all had done a survey here in Gaston Point very quickly, and you had a list of things that needed to be done. When you could put a name with the last, you determined a priority based on age or disability. And so you—

Adams: Right. That was some of the questions we asked, see?

Smith: You just worked the list.

Adams: That's what we started out doing, and when World Hope came, they were very, you know, they brought some computers and stuff. So we took that survey and put it in the computer, and so we had it like that. And then as other people would come, they would fill out a—I might could find one here—but they would fill out a profile sheet of the help that they needed. And like I said, always asked their age or whatever, so that's how we would do our work. And of course the other thing we prioritized was we had one man that was always cutting trees, but we might have two crews if there were a bunch of houses with trees on them that people couldn't get in or they were in dangerous situation. And that's pretty much how we operated.

Smith: So you had just a tremendous number of volunteers. Before the storm, could you have imagined this volunteer outpour?

Adams: No.

Smith: What is it that you think motivated the people that came from so far away in such numbers? What's there? You interacted with these people. What makes them do that?

Adams: A genuine love for mankind. It's just that simple. It's all about love.

Smith: You had large numbers of people here on the grounds for a long time.

Adams: And I mean, sleeping on the floor on air mattress.

Smith: Did these people worship with your congregation?

Adams: Yes.

Smith: Your congregation is majority African-American.

Adams: Right.

Smith: Did you have integrated church services?

Adams: Yes.

Smith: So you had white and black worshipping together?

Adams: Yes. And you know sometimes they would, if they had a choir and they wanted to sing, we would let them sing. You know. A couple of them brought ministers; I let them have my pulpit, and they could preach. It was just a sharing; we shared everything.

Smith: Do you think that experience has had any lasting impact on race relations in our community?

Adams: I know it has.

Smith: Nationally there's been quite a bit of comment about Senator Obama's church and about white America not having a real understanding of black America or the black church. Do you have any observations about your experience of that here in this place?

Adams: Yes. It's not true. People are people. Christians are Christians. And that's just how it is. Like I say, being born southern and everything, it really enlarged my understanding of other people. It really did, to see these people come with nothing else in mind but to do some good, to help. To see these people come, and sometimes they're working at a house, and the old person that lives in that house has younger people living with them, and they won't lift a hand to help the people that's doing the work. Yet these people, they know why they came and what they came to do, and that's what they're interested in. And yes, to have service with them, you know, if it's real worship, anybody can get into anybody else's worship. I went to Central Wesleyan, and I enjoyed it. I didn't say it was dull.

Smith: Predominantly white church?

Adams: It was all white. I saw one black person there.

Smith: One black person.

Adams: It was all white, but it was still worship. They had a great pastor; he preached a great sermon. It was worship, and I could feel the spirit of the lord there. And that's what's necessary. You know, it doesn't matter. And I know we are somewhat emotional, but that didn't bother them.

Smith: So the more expressive style of worship in a southern, black congregation didn't seem to bother these—

Adams: No. They enjoyed it.

Smith: —Yankees.

Adams: They enjoyed it.

Smith: White Yankees.

Adams: They enjoyed it.

Smith: They may have not had much contact at all, maybe, in their community with African-Americans.

Adams: Right. But they enjoyed it.

Smith: Were you able to know much about their background? Whether in fact these were people that usually would have had little contact with African-Americans in their community?

Adams: Right. I went to Holland. The hardest thing to find was a black person.

Smith: So this is a lily-white community.

Adams: Pretty much.

Smith: That poured itself out for Gaston Point and people all over Gulfport.

Adams: That's right.

Smith: Do you know if the crews that operated from your church, did they deliver services without racial consciousness? Did you have old, white people that got helped out of Little Rock Baptist Church or disabled white people?

Adams: Yeah.

Smith: The community is, this is a, probably most people would say kind of West Gulfport is a more depressed area, Gulfport. And it's racially—

Adams: Right. But, yeah, we—

Smith: —racially mixed.

Adams: We had, you know, and the beautiful thing was it didn't bother the people to ask. We had people from across the tracks, and you know how devastated they were. One day the whole crew spent helping this man clean up them pork bellies down there out off his yard and stuff. And boy, they were smelling, oh, to high heaven.
(laughter)

Smith: The Port of Gulfport had a bunch of stored chicken and pork down there that washed all over people's houses and stank the place up a lot.

Adams: Yeah. They spent quite a few days just helping people clean up that.

Smith: So you had white folk from Gulfport who—

Adams: Came to us for help.

Smith: —came to Little Rock Baptist Church—

Adams: For help.

Smith: —for help.

Adams: And we gave it to them.

Smith: How did that make you feel? Did you ever think you would see the day when your church would be the vehicle that these people needed? Or did it ever occur to you the irony? You grew up in days of segregation.

Adams: You right.

Smith: You and I probably grew up ten blocks from each other and never knew each other.

Adams: That's right. But I guess the funny thing is, or not the funny thing; I praise God. And you know my father died just in November of last year. So I still think about him and miss him a lot. But I was never taught to be prejudiced. Never. And you know, when you growing up and you see inequities, you think about things, but yet I didn't have a foundation on which to place it so I could never develop and maintain that theory in my mind because I was never taught to be prejudiced.

Smith: You told me that when you were growing up, you would walk to school past the church that my dad was pastoring in the late [19]60s.

Adams: Yeah.

Smith: Can you talk about walking through? In West Gulfport you have a black neighborhood, a white neighborhood, black neighborhood. That's kind of the way it worked back in those days.

Adams: Right.

Smith: Tell me about that walking through those white neighborhoods on the way to Thirty-third Avenue.

Adams: Nobody ever bothered us. Nobody. I cannot remember an incident where we got bothered. Of course we never walked alone. It was like, I'd get up and get dressed for school, and I'd come up to the corner of Woodward Avenue, and I'd wait on the boys that lived down that way. And as they got to Woodward, they'd pick me up. As they got to Camp, they'd pick us up. By that time it would be about fifteen of us. But nobody bothered us; nobody yelled the N-word out of they house.

Smith: You could walk through a while neighborhood with fifteen black kids.

Adams: Yeah.

Smith: And it didn't particularly bother the white people through there.

Adams: No. They knew we wasn't going to do anything.

Smith: They knew you were going to school.

Adams: That we were just going to school, kids going to school. And we acted mannerly. We didn't tear up nobody's yard or, you know, anything like that. So it was just, you know, I just—and I guess I'm blessed to have been raised in Gulfport. You know, I know when I went to college, I used to hear about worse places. And I used to tell them, "No. We don't really get treated that bad, and we didn't, in Gulfport, we didn't have to wear our colors"—

(brief interruption)

Adams: You want me to stop?

Smith: No. Go ahead. You were talking about Gulfport.

Adams: Yeah. Our colors, our school colors weren't the same as Gulfport High's because we didn't have to use they second-hand uniforms. We had our own uniforms. I used to hear people say, "When they'd get through with them over here, we wind up with them over here." Well, no, our colors were green and gold, and Gulfport High's colors was blue and white. And so like I say, I'm just blessed to have grown up in the South with it not being so southern. But yet you knew there was segregation, but it wasn't—the only time you might experience it, if you go in Woolworth's and you might be in line and somebody behind you, and they might wait on that person first. But as far as it being afraid to go somewhere, it just, you didn't have to be that in Gulfport; you really didn't.

Smith: But there is a kind of a little irony here, don't you think? Of the black church being the vehicle of ministry to white people?

Adams: Well, that's God. And I tell you something; whoever listens can believe, or they cannot believe it. My house, between my neighbor's house and my house, four big lots. And my house greatest exposure is to the south. So you would have thought that if Katrina were going to tear up any house, it would have torn up mine. Now, between my house and my neighbor's house is no further than from here to that wall. My neighbor's house had fifty-thousand-dollars worth of damage, and I'm his buffer to the south. My house had none. I wondered about that. I wondered about that, and that Thursday night as I lay in my bed, windows open, trying to feel some cool air, the lord literally spoke to my mind and say, "You know why nothing happened to your house?" He say, "Because I didn't want you to be worrying about the insurance adjustor because I got a lot of people that's going to need your help."

Smith: Well, what's the worst thing that you think happened to anyone in your congregation? Can you single anything out as the worst suffering that you saw right after the storm?

Adams: Not really. Our congregation was really fairly blessed.

Smith: Although 60 percent were dehoued; 60 or 70 percent were out of their house for a time.

Adams: Yeah.

Smith: But you can speak of them as blessed.

Adams: Yes, sir. Because here what you got to understand. You just hit on it; you said this is a depressed community. Didn't you?

Smith: Yeah.

Adams: Well, some of those people's houses was messed up before Katrina, but because of Katrina, they got a house. They got fixed, or got new houses. I call that a blessing. Some of them people's houses needed a roof before Katrina, but they couldn't afford it. And some of them didn't have insurance. But because of Katrina, if it was a new roof they needed, they got that. If it was other things, even down to structural work—you know, World Hope was the first group to come. I have another group that's here now, World Reform Church, and they're just ending their tenure here of over two years. And they come in; they stayed three weeks. God blessed me into finding an apartment building for them to stay in. The man had two buildings, and they were messed up. So they fixed both of them for him to let them stay in one of them for a while. And wherein we—how can I put it? Wherein World Hope went everywhere, World Reform Church only worked in West Gulfport. I didn't ask them to do that, but they said that's what they would do.

Smith: Do you need to talk?

Adams: Mm-mm, no. That's what they said they would do. And they stayed three weeks at a time, and these people, they're skilled laborers. They can build a house from the ground up. They electricians, they're plumbers; they're sheetrock hangers, and all of that.

Smith: And where do they come from?

Adams: They come from the World Reform Church.

Smith: Do you know where they're—

Adams: They out of Michigan, too. See that lady right there?

Smith: Um-hm.

Adams: They fixed her house from the floor up.

Smith: So the community, on the whole, looking back on it, three years, it's been blessed?

Adams: It's been blessed.

Smith: The days right after the storm were filled with a lot of need.

Adams: Right.

Smith: And you were working very hard. Can you talk a little bit about what that's like for a minister? I've talked to some other ministers that talked about the strain, the unusual burdens that they had. Can you talk a little bit about that?

Adams: Yes. Quite a few, not the least of which was funerals. Almost every other black church was destroyed, so we had—they were calling. Automatically you're going to let them use your sanctuary for a funeral. Also amongst that time, in November of [20]05, I buried my mother. She had Alzheimer's, and we had taken her to Atlanta, and the move is really what got her. Alzheimer's patient out of their environment, they just get confused. And having so many funerals, and after a while, I had to tell people, "You can have the funeral, but I can't come. I've seen too many tears, too much sadness, too much crying. You can have it. You welcome to use the church, but please don't be angry if I don't come." Because that was starting to wear on me, and then with the work going on, I was showing up every day. I figure if people come to do something for you that you ought to at least be there to cheerlead. No, I wasn't going to get on no roof or anything like that, but at least I was here if anything came up that I really needed to be a part of, I was here. And then if you deal with black folk when they have a problem, the first one they're always going to call is the pastor. They not going to call the secretary; they going to call the pastor, and then

you got to refer it on out. And just constantly hearing of people's struggles and problems and constantly being they sounding board and they leaning post, and then ministry on Sundays and people being sick. It gets to a point where you don't have any jolly time; it's all serious, and it'll wear on you. It'll wear on you, handling your problems and everybody else's problems. It'll wear on you. And you want to disappear, but you don't because you feel obligation.

Smith: In your congregation, your building was being used by a lot of other people, a lot of other congregations for funerals. In your congregation, do you think that you saw an unusual number of deaths—

Adams: Yes.

Smith: —in the months—

Adams: Yes.

Smith: You mentioned your mother had passed away.

Adams: Yes.

Smith: Your father's passed away recently.

Adams: Yes, but since Katrina I personally had to bury more people. I know I lost seven members, not counting my mama, from August of 2005 to 2007. Pause for just a minute.

(brief interruption)

Smith: So we were talking about you saw an increased number of deaths; the rate of passing of elderly increased.

Adams: Not just elderly; people, period.

Smith: People period.

Adams: Yeah. It's a funny thing. When I did finally get on the beach—(brief interruption)

Smith: So the number of elderly, and *others*, you say?

Adams: And others. All of them wasn't elderly.

Smith: What do you attribute it to? You knew the families; you knew situations. What was going on?

Adams: I attribute a lot of it to the stress.

Smith: The stress of—

Adams: Of Hurricane Katrina. It was amazing to me because I spent two years in Vietnam. And to ride along, when I had opportunity to get on the beach, and it looked like somewhere you dropped a bomb, literally. The destruction was so complete; it looked like the difference between—when I got back from Camille, some of the beautiful antebellum homes were still there. But with this storm, none of them. I mean, everything all gone. It was—I don't—you know. Oh, I got something to show you. Don't let it be gone from here, now. There it is. Read that e-mail and look at those pictures.

Smith: This is the sky before Katrina struck. Whoever took these pictures did an awesome job. Whoever said awesome and terrifying was telling the truth. Wow. Take a look. These pictures were made by a man in Magee, Mississippi, when the eye of the storm passed through. Magee is a hundred and fifty miles north of the Coast where Katrina made landfill. So you see these swirling clouds—

Adams: Keep looking.

Smith: —up against a sunset, just really beautiful, actually. That's horrible to say, but beautiful swirls with a tornado tail in the clouds.

Adams: That ain't the big one. Just keep going. It's amazing.

Smith: Another big, big tornado. This is around Magee?

Adams: Imagine, all of that hit us.

Smith: All of that passed through here and went on in a hundred and fifty miles, and these clouds or this turbulence up against the sunset is just awesome.

Adams: Yes, sir. Now, that one is beautiful to me, the blues and the grays.

Smith: There's an actual beauty to it, but it's so much energy and power in these clouds, in these pictures of a tornado that came off of that storm around Magee. So you were telling me that you believe part of what's taking people away is just the visual destruction they're seeing; they're stressed by the debris and the wreckage that was all around them for months and months, and by what's now still absent. The garbage is picked up, but they're so many slabs.

Adams: The totalness of it. Christmas of 2005 I felt so bad because you know, you could always ride down the beach and see the beautiful decorations and the homes and stuff. And you know I've always loved where I live, and for those beautiful homes not to be there anymore, and it'll never be the same because you can never build back

something that was as old as some of those homes were, and as well done architecturally that'll just always be missing.

Smith: So you felt that the distress of what the visual beauty is missing. You've said your mother had trouble because she was disoriented by all that happened, but maybe a lot of people were disoriented that didn't have dementia of any type.

Adams: Right.

Smith: So that's a thing weighing on people. Is there anything else that occurs to you?

Adams: That's a stress.

Smith: What about the dealings with insurance? Did you catch a lot of people's woes with insurance agents or adjustors?

Adams: Well, now, like I say, now, in this community nobody had flood problems; so I only know of one lady we put a roof on down on Railroad. Had a nice home, but she had some, not a normal insurance company. And she told me something about—anyway, some way they finagled out of paying her, but we put her roof on, and finally she settled with them for some lesser amount, and she didn't have any floodwaters in there. But basically, like I said, a lot of my people didn't have insurance.

Smith: I have had an insurance agent—consider the source—to characterize people without insurance as irresponsible. Does that trigger anything back about responsibility for failing to have insurance.

Adams: Well, he doesn't know. If you got to buy food or pay insurance, which one you going to do?

Smith: So some people that you know didn't have insurance because—

Adams: Income.

Smith: —they're living on social security.

Adams: That's right, income.

Smith: Income. Or they're working a minimum-wage job? They own a house; maybe they inherited the house, but their income is insufficient.

Adams: Their income is insufficient.

Smith: Did you have any observations about the folks who did not leave the community here? Is that a function of income in any way, when you look at the fifty that stayed with you here in the church that day?

Adams: I think that was just a conscious decision that I expect there's some of them that didn't leave because they couldn't pay for a hotel room. I would expect that, yes. Probably some of them that came here, some of them just not accustomed to leaving. Like I said, the old people that I thought wouldn't go, they wasn't going to go. And so that's why I had this here to open. I say I don't know what I'll do if it happens again, because really I want to leave if it happens again and tell them to call me when the lights come back on, but if I'm here and I'm in this position, I once again have to do what the lord tells me. You know, it's really not up to me. If he says, "I want you to stay there," then I'll say, "I'll stay there." And I'll probably send my wife because I know it was difficult for her.

Smith: Did you have people who were distressed in their working with FEMA or with the SBA [Small Business Association] loan program?

Adams: I don't know anybody that we had that really got a SBA loan. See, most of our people's houses were built with grants, the ones that we fixed. As I said, we have a foundation here at the church. We received funds somewhere around five hundred thousand dollars, which we expended on fixing, you know, roofs and stuff, but then you could get grants from Red Cross. You could get grants from Salvation Army. Six of my members became caseworkers, and so they were going throughout the community, and they would evaluate the house and sit down and write the grant. And we had—I don't think we had any grants disapproved.

Smith: Did you have many of these 60 or 70 percent that lost their homes living in FEMA trailers at any particular time?

Adams: Um-hm, most of them.

Smith: Anybody have any particular headaches about that they brought to you?

Adams: No.

Smith: Either in getting it or adjusting to it?

Adams: No, not really. FEMA was pretty quick in this area.

Smith: You saw a lot of additional deaths in your congregation in that first year. Illnesses or any other indicators of stress that you saw? Any illnesses, family distress of any sort that you think, strikes you as being unusual?

Adams: So busy sometimes you don't notice some things, but I'm sure it's some in there, and then again, I might not know if they didn't come to me to discuss it. It's a

funny thing about people nowadays; some people, instead of coming to the pastor, they want to pastor to think they were perfect so they'll tell everybody else (laughter) but the pastor. That's amazing, but it's true. So but I'm sure; I'm sure there's some families that broke up because of the stress because it just was a stressful time.

Smith: And you yourself, you told me that you'd had a hospitalization.

Adams: Well, it wasn't—

Smith: (Inaudible) of the storm.

Adams: It wasn't for sickness; it was for—I went to a PTSD [post-traumatic stress disorder] program at the VA [Veterans Administration] for eight weeks because my emotional state just was not good.

Smith: That's post-traumatic stress disorder?

Adams: Yeah, disorder.

Smith: Did you have any of that coming out of Vietnam?

Adams: Yes, sir. And so I was offered an eight-week stay, and I could have done it as a day-tripper, but I didn't. I stayed in the dorm over there because I said if I did it and came back home every night, I still faced the same thing. And I just needed to get away from it.

Smith: OK. Did you have a lot of meetings with other pastors during this period of time?

Adams: Yes. We had quite a few meetings.

Smith: You had a lot of meetings with other pastors?

Adams: Yes, sir, but—

Smith: Did you see any of them experiencing unusual sense of burden or stress?

Adams: No, except for our moderator. Now, he's over in Pascagoula; he was pretty much like me, feet on the ground, running from Jump Street, and maybe Reverend Hartwell out at St. James Baptist Church, but you see, most of the ministers are not from this area. And most preachers nowadays don't live in the community where they pastor because it's a depressed area. So they live out in—and it's hard to get the feeling of what's going on with a set of people when you just around them a couple of days a week, you know? Every time I leave the church and I go through Gaston Point, I can see what's going on. Nobody has to tell me how bad the drug problem is or

anything else. I can see what's going on, and I'll make it my business to ride just to see.

Smith: Do you think that you've seen in your congregation any increased incidence of depression or drug abuse that came with this?

Adams: Yes. I need to close that door. Yes, but it's a natural occurrence. I've seen family problems where children are rebelling against parents, and you know, wanting to be—just difficulties; you know, difficulties that parents and kids have, but they've seemed to be exaggerated because of they're stressed.

Smith: Have you seen any increased incidence of children having trouble at school or increased incidences of teen pregnancy that you think are attributable to Katrina or the stress of Katrina?

Adams: I've seen an increase in teen pregnancy; whether I could directly contribute it to Katrina or not, I don't know, but definitely have seen increased instances of teen pregnancy.

Smith: Has that led to any particular outreach on the part of this church or other churches that you know about?

Adams: Well, they actually had a summit for the whole city last week. Our church participated; the local radio station sponsored a program for young ladies called "Save Our Sisters." And they held it last week at the coliseum; said they had some sixteen hundred girls attend. So that shows you there's a problem if sixteen hundred young ladies came out. But it also shows that they must want help.

Smith: OK. The church itself, how is it doing, now, three years after the storm? Prestorm you said you might expect two hundred people on a Sunday morning. How's it doing now?

Adams: Attendance is increasing. It's not because anybody found Jesus during the storm, I don't think. It's just that in our struggle we are managing to do more and more ministry in the community. It's been a struggle, but I'm convincing more and more people that it is not just something that we can choose to do, but as Christians, it's our responsibility, that God didn't put this church in this community for us to sit here and watch it go to hell, but it's our responsibility to minister to the people in this community, and not just by walking around, preaching the gospel, but that unless you do ministry, you're not doing anything. Book of James said, "You can tell a hungry man, 'Go and feel well; God's going to take care of you.' But if you don't feed him, how can he believe it?" So I'm convincing them that we have to do ministry, that we have a great responsibility to God to take care of the people in the community where he put us.

Smith: Do you have any particular outreaches that are new after Katrina?

Adams: Well, we have some we began during Katrina, and we're trying especially to minister to drug addicts in the community, one on one. And by that I mean to counsel them, to make sure that they understand one thing, that when they—understanding that they might not stop right away, but I want them to know that every time they do that crack or whatever they do, that somebody loves them. And then when they come out of it, as they always will, and that remorse sets in, there's somebody that they can come and talk to who's going to be understanding most of all and not condemning at all.

Smith: I've interviewed the pastor of First Baptist Church in Gulfport, and he said something similar, really, about his—he said his whole concept of ministry changed with the storm. From what I'm hearing from you, you had a concept that the storm sort of reinforced.

Adams: Right.

Smith: That the church having to be in the community more. That pastor talked to me a good bit about the financial woes of his church after the storm, decrease in attendance. Did you have any difficulty with the insurance claims on your buildings here?

Adams: Not really.

Smith: Would you consider your church—how would you consider your church doing financially? A lot of them struggle post-Katrina. Is your church doing any different—

Adams: No.

Smith: —now than it was before the storm?

Adams: No, not really. No, but that still doesn't change what you have to do. If you don't do worrying about what's in the bank, then you might not never do. We have to remember what we read when the lord said, "The cattle on a thousand hills belong to me. The world is the lord's and the fullness thereof." We got to trust God that he's going to provide the finances. You know, you can't just sit down and say, "Well, no, we don't have the money to witness. Then, OK, we not (inaudible)." You just got to get out there, and you got to do. I mean, what did Jesus have? You know, he had no money. He had nothing except something more valuable than money, and we still have to use that. What we have is more valuable than money and realize that all you need is what you need when you need it, and God will provide it.

Smith: So you're not distressed about the financial affairs of this church right now. You told me that your church, through its foundation, had managed to spend five hundred thousand dollars—

Adams: It's gone.

Smith: —helping people reconstruct.

Adams: Right. And I didn't put a dime of it in the regular fund, not one dime.

Smith: Pre-Katrina, could you have imagined this church delivering that kind of, being the vehicle, the pipeline for delivering that kind of aid?

Adams: No.

Smith: In this community?

Adams: No, I couldn't.

Smith: It's kind of astounding.

Adams: It is, but you know that's God. I've tried to explain to this church and make them see that this is in God's mind and God's eyes, this is our time. And we first of all need to embrace the opportunity, and we need to serve him well because this is, our time to regain this community and to save many souls, and we ought to be glad. We ought to be like lions at a piece of meat, trying to get the work done.

Smith: I interviewed a lady over in Long Beach who, I think the Mennonites rebuilt her house. Her grant from the state would have been insufficient; it bought the materials but it couldn't buy the labor, and the Mennonites spent many months. A nice Roman Catholic lady, and she told me that watching those people work—it's an elderly lady in her eighties—made her wonder if we in this community would give back to others in the same way that these distant communities have given. What do you think is happening inside our community? Are we to the point where we've got something to give back? You think there might be any increase of volunteerism in the community as a result of watching what others have done?

Adams: That's a scary question, and the answer in my heart is, speaking for this set of folk, no.

Smith: And yet we wouldn't have expected it out of these that have shown up either.

Adams: You may be right.

Smith: What's the worst memory that you have of this whole thing for the last three years, the worst memory?

Adams: I don't really have any bad ones.

Smith: What's the best memory?

Adams: One that really gave me—I had some ladies who came down from New York with a truck full of teddy bears, stuffed toys that they had collected, over five thousand of them. And we were trying to give them out. I guess this is one of my fondest memories. And the City and whatever didn't cooperate, and this was in November of 2005. And we came up; I was showing them down on the beach, and we came up not Hardy Avenue so it had to be Rich [Avenue]. And we saw a lady and her daughter walking, and so we stopped, asked the little girl did she want a stuffed animal, and she said, "Yes." She asked for one for her brother, and she said, "He lost everything, but it's going to be all right."

Smith: If you look at our community as a whole, just the whole Coast, how do you think the community is doing? What's the biggest challenge that's left?

Adams: For us to take ownership of the rest of what we need and to start the due process. We've had enough done; now we need to start to do.

Smith: What would be at the top of the to-do list for the community, if you were able to hand it up, you had your priority list for all these volunteers? What would be at the top of the to-do list for our community, right now, three years after the storm?

Adams: That's a good question, because if you say that's what we need to do, then that's what we need to do, but how can we do it? Well, first of all, oh, ask me something else. Let me think about that one for a while.

Smith: What needs to change about the way the government and other organizations respond to these disasters?

Adams: OK. The government is so big, to me, that it appears to have no feeling. It will appear sometimes to have no caring, but the government, it's like a person. You know how some people no matter what they do, they wonder how it looks. They want it to look just right. And that's what it is with the government, and too much trash between where you are and where you're trying to get. The government when it discovers a problem, it takes so long to fix it till by the time it does fix it, it's probably too late. So too much bureaucracy, and everybody is interested in covering their own space and making sure that whatever they do, it's going to be around for them to do no matter what happens. And so it's just too big, too slow to react, to me. It needs to be come streamlined, and you know, it needs to be like the power company. The storm hit that Monday; that Wednesday, you could see power company trucks from every state, which meant for them to get here that fast, some of them had to start before the storm hit. The government's not like that, but that was refreshing to see somebody from Oklahoma on the power truck that cared; they come in to go to work to see what they can do for you.

Smith: How long did it take to get electricity back on for anybody that could take it in their house here?

Adams: Mine was nine days.

Smith: So they really worked through fallen trees and debris and got those wires back up.

Adams: Yes, sir. I mean, they were really hustling. The churches came back on that next Sunday because that's when we received the first truck. Wal-Mart sent a truck in that Sunday. Sure did.

Smith: What lessons have you learned about coping with a disaster that you think other pastors or other social agencies might learn from? What do you see that you think might be good lessons coming out of all of this?

Adams: Well, like I said, what I saw from other pastors was I guess you would say a lack of understanding; I know it wasn't a lack of caring, and I didn't see a lot of pastors coming to meetings to see what they could do for the people in their community. So involvement is always the main thing; you must be involved even if you only get involved long enough to get somebody else in your congregation to come along, and you delegate it to them. But a lot of churches missed out on a lot of things because off a lack of involvement, you know, and well, it's just like, even with the Bush Katrina Fund, we served as agents for twenty churches because they didn't have a 501-C3, and yet we wasn't eligible to get any Bush Katrina money. (laughter) But still I let twenty churches, I did a letter for them so they could use our 501-C3, and when the money came through, then they sent it to us; I'd just give them the check.

Smith: And what were those funds available for?

Adams: For repair. And the reason I didn't need it is because Christmas we got the roof covered temporarily, but Christmas—and you know we got money from the insurance company to fix the roof. Well, we bought the shingles and the tar paper, but Christmas they sent a group of specialists down here just to fix the roof on our church. So I couldn't go to—there was folks talking about, “I need the money for this, this, and this,” when I had people; my labor was free.

Smith: So this church wound up being a kind of—it's another form of outreach there. You wound up being the repository for a lot of charitable funds that went to churches.

Adams: That's right. That's right. And I tried to tell people, “God just blessed us that way.” I don't know why in 1999 I figured we needed to be tax-exempt, a nonprofit entity, but I just did it. And we had a young lady here that worked for the IRS [Internal Revenue Service], and she knew how to do it for us, and so we did it. Now, this past year she earned quite a bit of money helping other churches to get their 501-C3, but we had ours since 1999, just waiting on a time like this to happen.

Smith: Studying all that accounting in college (laughter) taught you something.

Adams: But we did, and like I say, it was destiny; God intended it. He intended it to help this community more than anything. And if you ride around this community now, you'll be hard-pressed to find just old, blighted house that needs everything done to it.

Smith: Have you thought any more about the challenges facing the community? What your to-do list for the community might be?

Adams: If I could do anything, I would say that we need to find a way to energize the people in the community, to make them understand that your community is what you make it, and that everybody can't come and fix every problem that you have in your community, that you have to care about it, you have to love it enough to get involved to make it what it ought to be. So my challenge to them would be to get involved. Get involved; care. Take time to go to civic club meetings; take time to go to city council meeting. And after you talk with your councilman, then go and support him because that's the only way things are going to change. Take time to vote for rules that make people have to clean up around their establishments or get the wrecked cars out of their yards and stuff like that. But as long as you don't care, as long as you just live, you know. I preached a sermon Sunday; I told the congregation. I know they get mad at me because I always preach responsibility to them. I say, "Half of y'all can't wait to get out of here, go home, lock your doors, turn your burglar alarm on because you're worried about somebody breaking in, eat your big dinner, and watch television because that's all it means to you. And all the while, there's a world out there, and there are people in that world, and yes, there are crack addicts there, but after the second time they use crack, they don't want to use it no more now, but they just addicted. They caught up in the system. Young man that couldn't finish school because nobody encouraged him, now, he's selling crack, but you know, that wasn't his dream in life, to be grow up to be a crack seller, but that's all he got now. You know, so we need to be working on things. I'm trying to get them to put a life center across the street so you won't fuss about everybody using your church, but we not going to stop girls from having babies until we have parenting classes with teachers. First of all you got to teach them to love they self because having babies is just a thing of low self esteem, and you figure, "If I give him a baby, I'll please him, and he'll stay with me." But if we don't teach that out of them, if we don't take and put our arms around them and teach them that, "You somebody, and you don't have to have a baby for nobody," they going to keep on doing it. If we don't grab that young man that's been down once for selling crack and show him how he can get his education and guarantee him that we can find somebody that will employ him, you know, so we got to make partnerships with businesses like Wal-Mart and things like that to say, "Yeah, we got a fellow that's been down, but we're going to certify that he's able to do the job." If we don't do that, it's going to keep happening.

Smith: What else should we have talked about today that we didn't talk about, related to the storm or the recovery in this community?

Adams: I really don't know anything we didn't really, really cover very well, really. I don't know anything that we didn't cover. It's been a great experience for all I've been through, and I thank God I was alive for it. I thank God I've had the privilege of helping more people than I probably would have ever had if it hadn't happened.

Smith: OK. Well, thank you a lot for your time.

(end of interview)