

Praying for New Orleans, one block at a time

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An area of downtown New Orleans looks like a war zone following fires, looting and destruction in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina in this Sept. 5, 2005, file photo. (CNS photo/Paul Haring)

NEW ORLEANS -- Millie Campbell slipped the transmission into reverse and backed her blue Chevrolet away from her spotless brick home. "Oh God," she said, "we thank you for the blood of Jesus."

Then the 76-year-old cranked the wheel straight, put the car into drive, and headed slowly up Frenchmen Street, one hand on the wheel, the other turned upward toward the heavens.

"Touch this block in the name of Jesus," she continued.

Her front-seat companion, Betty Minor, 69, filled in the gaps between Campbell's appeals. "Hallelujah ... Glory, glory."

A couple of times a week, on no particular schedule, Campbell, Minor and a half-dozen others drive slowly around assigned neighborhoods, doing just this.

Campbell covers the 7th Ward. Minor covers the 9th Ward and eastern New Orleans.

And they pray. They pray for an end to the scourge of murders sapping the city -- 199 last year, and 17 or so on the streets Campbell drove last week.

Sometimes, driver and passenger join hands, bouncing slowly over the pothole-filled streets of their neighborhood.

"Cover your children, Father God," Minor says. "In the name of Jesus."

The car turns onto A.P. Tureaud Boulevard. "Hope is not in the dollar," Campbell says. "Hope is in you, Christ Jesus."

The pair drive past stoop sitters, past Tony's Historical Parakeet Restaurant and Bar, past the blighted houses and freshly rebuilt homes in neighborhoods undergoing checkerboard recoveries.

"Touch Touro Street, Lord, in the name of Jesus."

Campbell and Minor's group consists of six women and one man. They are from different churches, bound together by an ad hoc prayer group that meets twice a month at Campbell's house. This is strictly their project.

They are among thousands of people off the radar, unorganized, unsponsored, praying daily for the safety of New Orleans.

Usually the people in Campbell's group go solo. Sometimes it's a special trip. But sometimes they pray while doing something else, like going out for groceries. The trips can be long or short. Each person prays wherever he or she is moved to. Campbell and her friends have been doing this for about six weeks.

Across the city, thousands of Catholics formally pray for peace in the city at each Sunday Mass, reciting a special anti-crime petition at the request of Archbishop Gregory Aymond.

Other clergy lead congregations in other ways, and run youth ministries, literacy programs, sports programs, anything to help tamp down crime.

But Campbell and her friends have decided the most powerful thing they can do is drive the city's streets and pray, as the community does its business, unaware, around them.

"We got a problem, but we don't know how to solve it," Campbell insists.

"Well, we do," she says, meaning herself, Minor and their friends. "We're taking it to the Spirit."

Bruce Nolan writes for The Times-Picayune in New Orleans.

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