

## **Minnesota SGI-USA Members Join Flood Relief Efforts**

**By SUSAN POEHLER**

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Throughout June, SGI-USA members joined Salvation Army volunteers in giving aid to those hardest hit by recent floods in the East Grand Forks, Minn.– Grand Forks, N.D., area. Although no members were directly affected by the floods, Minnesota members formed a Flood Assistance Committee. They met late in May at the Minnesota Community Center, forming several sub-committees, each with a contact person and sign-up sheet.

Minnesota members had the option of volunteering for the phone bank, data entry, flood cleanup or warehouse duty. An area was also set up within the community center for donation of needed goods such as rubber boots and gloves, tools, cleaning supplies and nonperishable foods. Members wishing to make cash donations to the relief effort were directed to the WECARE program.

During several weekends in June, members traveled by bus to help with the flood cleanup. Volunteers from Iowa, Michigan and South Dakota joined the Minnesota group at the gymnasium of the University of North Dakota, sleeping Spartan style on cots as had flood survivors from Grand Forks and East Grand Forks just weeks before.

Rising early in the morning, the men and women were organized into several work groups of six people each. After hurried breakfasts, volunteers boarded school buses for downtown Grand Forks and its surrounding areas. Bulldozers and steam shovels were already cleaning away the huge piles of debris that lay in the street. At one end of the city lay the charred remains of businesses burned in the unexplained fire that had followed in the wake of the flood.

Waters of the Red River had now receded, but discolored waterlines on doors, windows and walls of the city remained. Silt and mud covered floors inside the buildings. Inches of water still remained in basements. And late in the afternoon, as the temperature rose, a rancid smell oozed out of what was left of the once bright riverfront city.

“You can’t know what it was like,” a woman from Grand Forks said, staring across at the river. “I only had 20 minutes to evacuate my home. What do you take? I didn’t want to leave, and when I tried to get back later, they wouldn’t let me cross that bridge.” She pointed to gnarled tree trunks that had fallen over in the flood and still clung to the bottom of the bridge, seemingly suspended in mid-air.

Three boys on bikes seemed slightly stunned but, with an air of importance, had become unofficial tour guides, gesturing first toward the Minnesota bank of the Red River, then toward the North Dakota bank. “It was 40 miles wide from one side to the other,” they said.

Minnesota SGI members helped a business owner and her husband, Raymond, clean up what remained of their clothing consignment shop, viewing the racks and racks of clothes scattered in heaps in front of the store.

Among the muddy clothes, a white crepe blouse rippled in the breeze. Raymond came to greet us. He had a hard time looking at us. He looked embarrassed. We felt his sense of heaviness, of loss.

“We didn’t have any flood insurance,” he said. “We just didn’t think this would ever happen. My wife doesn’t come down here anymore because she can’t look at the place without crying.” One of us put a hand on his arm and said: “We’re so sorry you lost your shop. We’re here to help you get through this.”

As we began our work, we were careful to consider his wishes about how to proceed. He consulted his wife often on a cell phone. As they began to make decisions together about how we should proceed, things came to life, seemed to brighten.

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“My son wanted these pipes,” he said. “Who will help me put them in the truck?”

Federal aid had been promised; the bill was stalled in the legislature. Help was needed now, and we were glad to be there. After two days, our work time had come to an end. We had stripped the building to its foundation using crowbars and shovels. We had cleaned out the muck left by the river with power sprayers, wet-dry vacs and squeegees. We had worn face-masks, goggles, rubber boots and gloves. We had taken water and air breaks. And we had made some friends.

Raymond gave us a large box of sweet rolls. “They’re from the wife,” he said. “She’s very grateful.”

In a sudden inspiration, we took a group picture together. Someone said, “Here’s to future construction....”

But Raymond replied: “We’re not sure we’re going to rebuild. The city may decide to build a dike; we’re waiting to see.”

Three weeks later, the disaster relief money would become available but would be held back from individual flood victims while the Grand Forks City Council discussed options for flood control plans and came away undecided.

We made one last tour of the two floors we had stripped and cleaned with Raymond, wondering if we had missed anything. Out back of the shop near a pile of boards and drywall slated to be picked up by the city lay a paper bag full of blue and white figurines. A boy. A girl. A painted plate of a horse and carriage. A flower basket candy dish. All were covered with the Red River mud — but not a single one broken. Did they want them? A last decision needed to be made. He called his wife on the cell phone. “Yes, we’ll take these,” he said.

On the bus ride home to Minnesota, Nichiren Daishonin’s “Rissho Ankoku Ron,” in which the destiny of the land and the people are shown to be inescapably linked, came to mind. Also something about purifying the land — what was that? Oh, yes. “The Daishonin teaches we should seek the pure land in this *saha* world.... ‘Pure land,’ in other words, indicates taking action to improve the environment and construct a better society.... [Then] the *saha* world is itself the Buddha’s Land of Eternally Tranquil Light” (Daisaku Ikeda, *Lectures on the “Expedient Means” and “Life Span” Chapters of the Lotus Sutra*, vol. 2, pp. 76–77).

**WT**