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## Ministry restores homes of those who can't afford repairs

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When church members tried to help homeowners hurt by hurricanes Bertha and Fran in 1996, they found that 'a lot of the work that needed to be done was not (from damage) caused by the hurricanes,' recalled Leon West.

Homes were in disrepair because people did not have the money or the ability to maintain them, said West, who helped found the Wilmington Area Rebuilding Ministry and now serves as its project manager.

'It was a social disaster, instead of a natural one,' he said. 'It's evolved into something bigger than we expected.'

Since then, the ministry, which started as an outreach of the area's Methodist churches, has repaired hundreds of old houses 'from the roof down' in New Hanover, Brunswick, Pender, Bladen and Columbus, said Ron Fascher, chairman of the group's board.

On a recent Saturday, the group volunteers were joined by volunteers for the Relief Affair team of the Wilmington Historic Foundation to spruce up a home on Wooster Street.

Just the outside work of scraping old paint and painting and glazing would have cost the homeowner more than \$8,000, estimated West, a 76-year-old former insurance salesman who now does much of the behind-the-scenes work

to complete each project.



STAFF PHOTO | CECE NUNN  
Bill Harper (left) and Richard Younts, Wilmington Area Rebuilding Ministry volunteers, work recently on the at least 100-year-old house at 718 Wooster St. The ministry helps people with home repairs in New Hanover, Brunswick, Pender, Bladen and Columbus counties.

All work is done by volunteers, and materials are donated.

Projects can include replacing cabinets, repairing bathrooms, fixing doors and porches, installing wheelchair ramps, replacing siding and more.

To qualify for help from the ministry, an applicant must own the home and meet certain income requirements. Referrals come from social service agencies and word of mouth. 'A lot of times, neighbors will approach us,' as the group works at a home, Fascher said.

The group also organizes its work so it can get to homes in the most need of repairs first. 'If we see there's a house that's really a major threat to safety or where disabled or elderly people live, we'll prioritize that,' Fascher said.

It's a time-consuming process that involves a great deal of paperwork and review. Then, it's time to look for volunteers.

A big help to the ministry recently has been partnerships with groups that share a commitment to helping. Historic Wilmington Foundation, formed in 1966 to help preserve historic structures, is among those groups. The Wooster house project is the third collaboration with WARM since last year, said Patti Jenkins, volunteer coordinator for the Relief Affair team.

Jenkins said the foundation had been active with rebuilding efforts about 10 years ago, but stopped about the time WARM started to fill that role.

'But we still liked doing that (rehabilitation work),' she said of why the foundation is partnering with the ministry. Helping the needy or the infirm fix historic homes prevents them from being torn down, she said.

'We just want to get the word out to help keep historic homes,' she said. 'It really does start a domino effect. We see after we fix a home the other houses are stepping up. We're seeing rehabilitation efforts.'

A historic home is defined as one that is more than 50 years old and is in the historic district.

For West, who has lived in Wilmington for 36 years, the hard work is rewarded by the gratitude of homeowners he's helped. 'They usually can't explain how they feel,' West said.

The WARM web site features some words from someone who tried to convey those feelings.

'After several hurricanes, my mobile home suffered damage to the roof,' the statement says. 'I didn't know where to turn. ... WARM spent several weeks, cutting back shrubbery, installing new underpinning, new storm doors, new porch

lights, new screens, repairing broken windows . . . I don't know how to thank them, they did so much.'

