

Sanctuary of another kind

► Since Hurricane Katrina hit, Our Savior Lutheran Church has become home to evacuees

By **KRISTEN CAMPBELL**
Religion Reporter

Wednesday morning, the fellowship hall of Our Savior Lutheran Church was packed.

Dozens of cots were jammed together there, covering the majority of the floor space in a room that's normally used for potluck suppers.

A TV is off to the side. Red Cross workers occupy a table at the entrance. But mostly it's just cot squished next to cot, a patchwork of displaced dreams.

But for more than a week now, the approximately 200-member church has become a sanctuary to scores of Hurricane Katrina evacuees from Mobile County, Mississippi and Louisiana.

More than a week after the storm hit, more than 50 people were staying at the modest church on Government Boulevard, one of three Mobile County congregations serving as Red Cross shelters.

It all started at Our Savior after the Rev. Bruce Hanson made contact with the American Red Cross Aug. 31, a few days after the storm swept across the Gulf Coast. Hours later, the first guests arrived in the fellowship hall.

At 3 a.m. Sept. 1, he said, more evacuees arrived, taking sanctuary in the church.

"That's why we're here," Hanson said. "Our Lord and his family were refugees. ... It's the least we can do."

Still, it has its price.

With the increase in traffic at the church comes an increase in the use of utilities. There's extra wear-and-tear on the carpeting. The plumbing gets a workout.

Bob Vaisey, a Red Cross shelter supervisor at Our Savior, said the Red Cross reimburses organizations for dam-



Bruce Hanson, pastor of the approximately 200-member Our Savior Lutheran Church, has been organizing aid for evacuees who have come to stay at the church. The church will remain open as a shelter for as long as the need persists.

If you want to help

See page 3D for a list of area churches and national organizations that have set up relief programs for Hurricane Katrina's victims.

ages incurred at facilities during their use as shelters.

But the cost isn't only economic.

"Last week I probably went two or three nights without any sleep whatsoever," Hanson said. "Right now I don't have the time to take care of myself and it's taking its toll."

He keeps a cup of coffee close by. Cookies don't hurt.

And he keeps listening.

Listening to those who call on the phone, to those who come to ask their questions or tell their stories.

There was a man, Hanson said, who has cancer and has been given only four or five weeks to live. He was holding onto

his father, but the floodwaters proved too strong for them both. He watched his father go down in the waters, Hanson said.

One recent evening, Hanson said he heard a child call out, asking to go back home for a toy, but there is no home to which to return.

Then, for others, there is denial about the nightmarish effects of the storm.

"It's the five stages of death and dying," Hanson said. "Acceptance will be months and months away for most of these people."

In the meantime, the church will

Please see *Sanctuary* Page 3D ►