

# Traveling repairmen help rebuild churches

by [Paul Riede](#)

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MEMPHIS, N.Y. (RNS) Brent Howard left his job as a home remodeler in Ohio in 2007, moved his young family into a trailer and began traveling to wherever he was needed.

Over the past 4 1/2 years, he has helped build or repair Baptist churches in New York, Pennsylvania, Illinois and Iowa. While he works, his wife home-schools his 10-year-old son and 11-year-old daughter. The family allows traveling clergy to use their home back in Ohio, asking only that they pay for the utilities.

Howard is part of a group of "missionary builders" with ChurchCare Construction, a group dedicated to building and repairing Baptist churches at low cost. Congregations pay for the land and materials, but in most cases, the labor is free.

"If you're not a believer and you don't understand the Lord's call on your life and that you have a purpose and plan for your life, you probably wouldn't understand," said Howard, 37.

"The Lord puts you in places and positions, gives you the ability to do things, and it's not for your own gain, it's for his purposes, and that's basically why I do what I do now."

Howard will soon be dispatched to the First Baptist Church of Memphis, which was

destroyed by heavy snow last February. Using insurance money from the destroyed church and free labor from ChurchCare, the new building -- twice the size of the old one -- will be built for half the normal cost.

"If this group didn't come, we would just have to rebuild where we were and not have enough parking or anything else and just have to put up with it," said the church's pastor, Arthur George.

ChurchCare, part of the Ohio-based group Baptist Church Planters, will bring four missionary builders to begin construction in April. The four will get help from volunteers from the congregation and from visiting crews from other Baptist churches across the country.

Dale Murphy, 53, said he felt the same call. He sold his house and moved his family into a 32-foot trailer after leaving his plumbing and heating business in Cortland, N.Y., after 24 years. He is currently working on a church near Newark, N.J., but will be on the job at First Baptist this spring.

Murphy, like the other builders, depends on a number of Baptist congregations to support him. He said the ideal level of support for maintaining his family with health insurance and other necessities is about \$34,000 a year.

"I just felt called and I had to check it out, and the doors opened up and everything fell into place and the Lord just had that will to get me into missions," he said.

Howard Fraser, a 56-year-old retired engineer and director of construction ministries for ChurchCare, said the builders will go anywhere they are needed in North America.

Volunteers include men like Ron Cornell, 61, who retired five years ago after 30

years as an electrician at a nuclear power plant. Now he travels to church building jobs with his wife, living mostly off his retirement benefits.

Howard said his calling has been good not only for the congregations he has helped, but for his family as well.

"Some would say that my kids are at a disadvantage because they're traveling and moving all the time," he said. "I think they have quite an advantage over most kids in what they're able to experience, and just real-life situations and meeting new people and being adaptable to different circumstances."