Through the power of prayer, the Rev. Mary Moody envisioned great things for Heard Chapel AME, where she serves as minister.

Her prayers, with the help of a lot of hands from the Greater Baton Rouge Federation of Churches and Synagogues, are being answered. The rundown church building atop a hill on Colorado Street is being transformed.

For more than two months, volunteers from area churches representing a host of denominations have donated time, skills, building materials and funds to help renovate the church.

The volunteer contingency works under the auspices of the Greater Baton Rouge Federation of Churches and Synagogues. There is a dual purpose to its mission: restoring the crumbling building for its 70-member congregation and opening a much-needed Holy Grill No. 2.

Like its counterpart, Holy Grill No. 1 on North Baton Rouge, the new food mission will serve hot lunches five days a week and provide space for community gatherings. Moody says there is great need for such a facility in the predominantly low-income neighborhood sliced by East Washington Street.

A start-up date has yet to be announced for Holy Grill No. 2, but early January 1992 is a possibility.

Much work remains on the church's interior and an estimated $30,000 in building supplies, kitchen equipment and plumbing are needed, most of which Moody and federation workers hope will be donated soon.

One recent Saturday morning found volunteers washing the whitewashed cinderblock walls with Clorox, filling cracks in the mortar and restoring windows.

Inside the church, workers hammered huge planks to reinforce termite-damaged wood pilings. Moody is in her fourth year as minister at Heard Chapel. She has come full circle in her family: Heard Chapel was the first church her parents joined when they moved to Baton Rouge decades ago. They transferred membership to a church in the family's Evergreen Street home area, but Moody says she never forgot her parents' religious roots.

"I had a choice of this church and another here in town," Moody says. "I prayed about it a lot, about being a presiding elder, and God guided me here. I had envisioned many wonderful things could be done here in this community, and here I am.

"There were surely more than a dozen church members when Moody arrived, and the building was decaying from the foundation to its termite-damaged roof rafters. There were cracks in its cinderblock walls, thick vines pushing their way into the mortar, and a rotting, waterlogged ceiling that threatened to fall on the congregation during services.

Vandals had broken more than two dozen window panes, many of which were covered with cardboard.

New additions to the original structure likewise were in deplorable condition, largely due to the rotting roof, Moody says.

Moody and her now 76-member flock persevered, hoping that divine intervention would assist them in restoring the chapel to its original, simple grandeur. They are awed by the radical changes that continue to transform the building into a modern, attractive — and safe — church.

"It's marvelous, simply marvelous what's been done," says church member Carolyn Pickett. "These workers have done so very much, so very many things to our church. The people are so cooperative and so giving. We're very, very grateful."

Volunteers work to restore chapel, open food mission

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PRAYER
& SWEAT

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Highland Presbyterian Church volunteer John Nease works on dried wood putty from a window frame, above. More than two dozen broken panes were replaced as part of the ongoing renovation of Heard Chapel AME. At left, the Rev. Mary Moody stands in front of her church with members Larry Holiday and brothers Darryl, 8, Calvin, 6, and Eric Jones, 7.
There have been mishaps along the way, but none strong enough to break the federation volunteers' spirit. In fact, one volunteer says, "We just dug in our heels and worked harder."

The first test of their faith came on a dark, stormy night several weeks ago. "Now this is going back a little piece when we first got started a couple of months ago," says volunteer Bob Evans with First Christian Church. "We had a steering committee and decided we'd try to tackle the roof. We got the money together and got the roof off and it was eaten up with termites. We also found termite damage beneath the flooring. "Anyway, we covered up most of the roof with plastic and figured it'd hold for a little while. Lo and behold, that night a real bad storm with high winds hit."

"A freak storm, you understand," Moody interjects. "It was just awful." The worst happened. "Water poured through and knocked down the ceiling and it was just a mess."

Evans continues. "Like Rev. Moody says, it was just awful."

With their spirits only slightly dampened, the volunteers regrouped "and we dug in our heels," Evans says. "We got a suspended, tile ceiling donated and the floor tile'll be replaced. So good came of it after all."

With the termites eradicated, work is in full swing securing the building from the elements and replacing the wood foundation.

Architect Chris Whitmire crawls from beneath the church to discuss progress. Caked in dirt, his neck ringed with blackened sweat, Whitmire estimates that "we're about 70 percent complete on patching the hole in the floor. We replaced the roof and 28 panes of glass are being replaced. I guess now most of the work being done on Saturdays by volunteers is almost like maintenance."

Work remaining includes earthwork to build slopes and sidewalks for handicapped accessibility, installation of toilet facilities and construction of the kitchen/dining area for Holy Grill No. 2, Whitmire says.

Rolfe Miller, a volunteer from St. Aloysius Catholic Church, serves as the project's finance chairman. He says fund raising is under way to secure the estimated $30,000 to $32,000 to get the grill started. Churches, individuals and companies in the Baton Rouge area are ideal resources for donated monies, supplies and expertise, he says.

"I just feel so blessed with all the community networking going on," Moody says. "There are people here from all over, from all denominations and all kinds of professional expertise. Women and men of all colors. It truly is a blessing."