

# CHAIN SAW GANG STILL ON MISSION TO HELP

By **ERIN AILWORTH** - SENTINEL STAFF WRITER

Churchgoers with chain saws. No, they are not a band.

And the screech echoing from the foot of the driveway Saturday wasn't some guitar player's latest improvisation. It was a saw blade being sharpened with a portable grinder powered by the battery of a blue Chevy Suburban.

The metal-head wielding the tool was Kevin McDonough of the First Presbyterian Church of Maitland's Chain Saw Gang. The volunteer group formed after Hurricane Charley in 2004 to cut and clear trees and other debris from their neighbors' yards.



Kevin McDonough of the First Presbyterian Church of Maitland Chain Saw Gang sharpens a blade during a training session with members of Asbury Methodist Church on Saturday. The group formed to clear trees downed in the 2004 hurricanes,

Having also dealt with the aftermath of hurricanes Frances, Jeanne and even Katrina, the team has plenty of experience. But with the quiet 2006 hurricane season ending soon, the gang has turned its efforts to training others.

On Saturday, it was a trio from Asbury United Methodist Church in Maitland.

"We take all different types of players. We've got experienced folks. We've got inexperienced folks. We've got men. We've got women. We've got kids," said Chain Saw Gang leader Mark Albright. "It's not about religion because hurricanes do not discriminate in that manner. It doesn't say, 'Oh, I'm going to hit the Presbyterians It hits everybody."

On Saturday, Albright and his group gathered with their trainees at Ed and Colleen Elmore's house on Sylvan Avenue in Orlando.

During Hurricane Charley, a neighbor's oak trees smashed through the couple's fence. In their 80s, the Elmores lacked the finances and the ability to remove the trees themselves. So the debris had lain in the backyard for two years, rotting and being overtaken by a tangle of vines.

Finally, the couple called Orange County Commissioner Linda Stewart. She rang up Albright, who had been looking for people to train,

"When I go out, I like to walk a project With the customer to determine what you can do, what you can't do, if you're going to walk away from it," Albright told the Methodists before the cutting and heavy lifting began. "That's

my first safety tip: Don't ever be bashful about walking away."

He ended his spiel with a fist of necessary equipment and advice about always having a game plan.

"Do you have any questions of me at this point?" he asked.

"No," replied Asbury member Dianna Bates, 59. "We'll probably find some as we go."

Then the show began. The Asbury trainees helped set up tables and haul ladder's and hand trucks while McDonough and gang member Leo Contrucci sharpened several orange Stihl-brand chain saws.

"We pretty much start and end the day the same way," McDonough said as they did maintenance on the tools. "There's really no substitute for a sharp saw blade."

Despite having access to power Saturday, McDonough used his sport utility vehicle for power to mimic methods used after a hurricane.

"Lets face it," he said, "wherever you go in a disaster situation, you might not be able to hook up [to power] ... so if you've got 12-volt equipment and a car

battery, you're good to go."

Sweat dripped, muscles bunched, eyes squinted and sawdust flew as blades bit into tree trunks in the back yard.

"I'm here to learn --- the tight way," Asbury member Bill Erdman said as he watched fellow church member Bruce King, 51, slice through wood. The Asbury members had some experience with disaster cleanup but said they came out Saturday for the hands-on practice.

"I figure we all need as much training as we can get, and it's good to work with the community," said Bates, a member of her church's disaster-response team.

In less than three hours - and with frequent stops to discuss cutting techniques and safety points - the group was packing stumps and branches into a truck to be hauled away.

- "I feel like I should have done more work," Albright said as he watched the work wind down. "I'm not even sweaty."

Erin Ailworth can be reached at [ailworth@orlandosentinel.com](mailto:ailworth@orlandosentinel.com) or 407-420-5507.