

Storm and stress: Ministry after Katrina

by [Rich Preheim](#) in the [June 27, 2006](#) issue

On Palm Sunday, when Christians remember Jesus' entry into Jerusalem, First Presbyterian Church in New Orleans enacted its own triumphal entry—or reentry. Since Hurricane Katrina and the breaking of the levees flooded the church with 28 inches of water, the congregation had been holding services in a room on the church's second floor.

Seven months later, building renovations were far enough along that the congregation could return to the sanctuary. So on April 9, the last Sunday of Lent, members concluded their upstairs worship service by carrying their chairs down to the sanctuary in preparation for Easter Sunday.

Passion Week heralds the imminent end of Christ's earthly ministry. But for those weathering Katrina's aftermath, there is no end in sight to their journey. "There are enormous needs," said Hope Morgan Ward, bishop of the United Methodist Church's Mississippi Conference. "And it's going to go on for years. Years and years."

The storm literally and figuratively shook churches' foundations, dramatically altering every aspect of congregational life. Buildings were damaged and destroyed. Members were forced from their homes, some ending up hundreds of miles away—perhaps permanently. Some members died. Ministries have had to be created, reshaped or eliminated. Even the regular act of worship has had to take new forms.

"We're not back to normal, and I don't know what that would be like," said Nelson Roth, pastor of Gulfhaven Mennonite Church in Gulfport, Mississippi.

Located several miles inland on the north side of the city, Gulfhaven has two advantages over other congregations on the Gulf Coast: it has been able to stay in its meeting house (although the roof had to be replaced and other repairs continue), and none of its 106 families moved away. With a viable facility and all its members,

Gulfhaven has a future as secure as that of any church in Katrina's path.

But not every congregation is going to survive. Dan Krutz, executive director of the Louisiana Interchurch Conference, estimates that southern Louisiana will lose about 20 percent of its congregations. The Catholic Archdiocese of New Orleans has already shut down more than 30 churches. Southern Baptists estimate that 25 out of their 140 congregations in southern Louisiana have closed permanently, with another 40 or so still not operating. The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, the United Church of Christ, the United Methodist Church and other church bodies have all had congregations lock their doors because of Katrina.

For those that remain, the future is cloudy. Franklin Avenue Baptist Church in New Orleans—with more than 7,000 members, many from the city's Ninth Ward—was decimated by the flooding. Pastor Fred Luter estimates that only 20 percent of the church's members are still in the New Orleans area. Until mid-April he and his wife were living with their daughter in Birmingham. Other members of the pastoral staff had scattered to Texas, Tennessee and other cities in Louisiana. They had left behind a church building filled with eight feet of water.

Luter in 2001 became the first African American to give the convention sermon at the Southern Baptists' annual meeting. (The site was the Superdome, which later became a symbol of the chaotic aftermath of the storm.)

"The hurricane was unlike anything our city had seen before," said Luter, who served on Mayor Ray Nagin's Bring New Orleans Back Commission, helping draft a post-Katrina master plan for New Orleans. "The city wasn't prepared, the state wasn't prepared, the federal government wasn't prepared. . . . Never, ever, man, did we realize it would be this bad."

Franklin Avenue has continued its ministry, albeit in a vastly different form. Since January Luter has been a sort of circuit rider. On the first and third Sundays of the month he begins the day with a service for the members still in New Orleans, who gather at 7:30 a.m. at First Baptist Church. Then he drives northwest for a 1 p.m. service in Baton Rouge, where a number of members have relocated. The first service draws about 1,400 people; more than 400 attend the second. On the second and fourth Sundays, Luter preaches an afternoon service at First Baptist Church in Houston, where about 600 Franklin Avenue members live. Luter hopes to be back at the Franklin Avenue building by the end of the year, but he can't know how many

will be there with him. "That's the \$10,000 question," he said.

Many other pastors are faced with the same question. Worship attendance is half what it used to be at First Presbyterian and at St. Paul Lutheran in New Orleans. In nearby Slidell, turnout at Christ Episcopal Church is down about 25 percent, although Krutz, who is its interim rector, said, "People are still coming back, so things could still improve."

While these and other congregations hope for their numbers to increase, Brian Upshaw anticipates the reverse. He is senior pastor at Gulfport's First Baptist Church, which lost its building to Katrina. Now meeting in a high school auditorium, the church attracts about 500 people for worship, which is only 100 fewer than before the storm. But some congregants are still unsure about remaining in the area, particularly as a new hurricane season arrives. "I don't think the last has been told about relocation from the coast," Upshaw said.

Faith obviously provided no shield against Katrina's 140-mile-an-hour winds and 20-foot swells or against the breaking of the levees. David Goodine, pastor at St. Paul in New Orleans, said the storm challenged the notion that God acts like a cosmic rescuer. "People drown, get sick and die, they suffer tremendous loss—from home to family members to marriages to employment to health," he said. "I believe that people here are coming to understand God as more resource and companion on the road."

The post-Katrina road has left many travelers physically and emotionally stressed, if not broken. "Everybody's been depressed and wanting to stay in bed," Roth said. As victims struggle to reclaim their lives, church activities often fall low on the list of priorities, below repairing homes, grappling with red tape and working multiple jobs to pay the bills. "People are very stressed and have a hard time adding anything else to their schedule," Goodine said. "Most are overwhelmed at present." As a result, his congregation has canceled all programs except for worship and a few Bible studies.

In Gulfport, First Baptist previously offered a wide range of programs, including Sunday and Wednesday evening activities. The church has dropped "about everything except Sunday morning," Upshaw said.

What remains is an increased emphasis on fellowship and celebration, on supporting and encouraging each other. "When we are able to gather as a church family, it is

perhaps more precious to us,” Upshaw said. That’s why Luter has traveled more than 20,000 miles since December. He’s trying to keep the scattered members of his congregation linked despite the distances. Goodine called fellowship “an absolute essential.” At St. Paul, he said, “people are spending as much time after worship talking as they are for worship.”

While the storm left many congregations exhausted, they distinguished themselves with their relief work, particularly in comparison to other agencies. “In the short run, hardly anyone had anything good say about FEMA and the Red Cross. Things just did not come through,” Krutz said. “I heard time and time again that it was the churches that came through.”

In the first days following Katrina, the biggest needs were food and lodging. As official shelters quickly filled up, congregations also acted quickly, housing displaced people in churches and private homes and providing meals, clothing and even medical care. “The community has definitely noticed that the church has been here since Day One,” Upshaw said.

Katrina has given congregations a mission for the longer term, one newly centered on the local community. “It’s brought a clear focus to our life together,” Ward said. “It gave us a new focus of responding to the needs in this area.” Cliff Nunn of First Presbyterian said his congregation’s assignment is to open its doors to the public and take a leadership role when asked. “It’s a new understanding of the purpose and place of the church in society,” he said.

First Presbyterian has become a community center in the uptown district of New Orleans. The neighborhood association meets there, and a clothes washer and dryer and four showers have been installed for the use of construction workers as well as area residents. “There are people in this neighborhood who don’t have showers,” Nunn said. Residents also make use of the church’s phone, the only one in the vicinity that is working.

Another important component of First Presbyterian’s ministry is its preschool, which reopened in January. When businesses and schools began resuming operation after the Christmas holidays, Nunn noted, workers needed child care. The preschool has 60 children plus eight teachers—the same numbers as before Katrina. “The demand after Katrina was so great that we could have had four times the number enrolled,” he said. “But we had space limitations. The board of health has a limit on the

number of children allowed in a room.”

Gulf Coast congregations are hardly alone in their posthurricane efforts, as the wider Christian fellowship has rallied around its storm-stricken sisters and brothers. “It’s been tremendous how the body of Christ has come together,” Upshaw said.

A North Carolina Baptist men’s group has adopted Gulfport for a massive project to build houses, purchasing four temporary modular buildings (each of which can sleep 25) and placing them on First Baptist’s property to house volunteer teams. The summer schedule is full, booked with groups that will not only work on construction but will also lead vacation Bible schools, children’s clubs and block parties.

Elsewhere in Mississippi, Methodist congregations have hosted groups from every state in the union and from other countries—including some from Bolivia and some Indonesian survivors of the 2004 tsunami—Ward said, noting that some congregations have been getting 50 to 100 volunteers a week.

In New Orleans, denominational lines will blur this summer as First Presbyterian and a nearby Episcopal congregation jointly sponsor a Bible school led by Methodist youth from New Mexico. St. Paul has hired a full-time coordinator to handle the flood of volunteer teams coming to the Big Easy.

It is impossible to determine how many volunteers have responded to Katrina. They have come from denominational agencies and parachurch organizations and through congregation-to-congregation relationships. Kevin King, director of Mennonite Disaster Service, says the total number easily runs into the tens of thousands. His organization, which is at work at three locations in Louisiana and one in Mississippi, has had more volunteers in the first five months of 2006 than in all of 2005.

Support has also come in monetary form. Among the millions of dollars has been \$46,600 from a United Methodist congregation in Redkey, Indiana. After merging with another congregation last fall, it sold its church building on eBay, with the proceeds going to the Katrina efforts of the United Methodist Committee on Relief.

While the churches in various ways try to address the physical, emotional and spiritual demands of their communities, their efforts have placed increased burdens on pastors. For example, work groups are an invaluable part of the recovery process. But having to handle such a huge number of volunteers from across the country led

one of Upshaw's colleagues to tell him that she felt like a travel agent. "We're not equipped to do all these things," he said. "We've never done this before."

The workload only compounds the fact that clergy are also victims of Katrina. "I've cried more in the past seven months than I did in the previous 49 years of my life," said Luter. Pastors have lost their homes and possessions, watched their churches disintegrate, and tried to pick up the pieces. Goodine's wife, Elizabeth, was laid off from her job teaching religion at Loyola University, as the New Orleans Jesuit school has slashed its faculty in response to storm-induced budget cuts.

At the same time, pastors are responsible for trying to provide much-needed spiritual leadership in the face of adversity and to help meet physical needs. It's an enormous workload under extremely taxing conditions. "Even when they are affected, [pastors] don't put aside their duty, their ministry to provide care for all sorts of people," said Kevin Massey, assistant director of the ELCA Domestic Disaster Response.

Since so many church members are no longer in the vicinity and those who are face their own financial difficulties, weekly offerings are down—which naturally affects pastoral salaries. According to one report, 19 ELCA congregations in southern Louisiana are unable to support their pastors. In a worst-case scenario, the Louisiana Conference of the United Methodist Church may have to pay \$3.3 million this year to pastors whose congregations are unable to support them.

All of which makes pastors especially vulnerable. Goodine recently took a counselor-administered psychological test, which determined that he is not comfortable and happy at present. That was no surprise to him. "I had to laugh," he said.

Denominations' responses to the needs of their clergy have included offering counseling, retreats and conferences on dealing with the stresses resulting from Katrina. Each Methodist pastor in the affected areas has been linked with a clergyperson elsewhere to receive support and encouragement, and United Methodist-affiliated Duke Divinity School has made available six faculty members to provide pastoral care to Methodist ministers. Lutheran Disaster Response, a joint program of the ELCA and the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod and the recipient of a FEMA grant for Katrina work, prefers to use local counselors because they usually have a better understanding of the situation.

There are other methods of coping. Nunn, who is waiting to move into his house after months of living in a trailer on his church's property, said, "I get my exercise, I eat well, I try to make sure I get plenty of sleep, I do a lot of praying." Roth meets monthly with another Mennonite pastor who lives about an hour away and who escaped much of Katrina's fury. With tickets provided by a visiting volunteer group, Upshaw and his son went to a NASCAR race in Alabama. Katrina has "affected wait times in restaurants, and it's affected the price of groceries," he said. "When you go to other towns, it's different. You feel normal a little bit."

There is a sense among many churchpeople that God has been at work through all the traumas and the long road to recovery. "Almost everyone you talk to would say they probably saw three or four miracles for every tragedy," Krutz said. "People came through for each other in so many instances. Needs were met by people who had never seen each other before and probably would never see each other again."

While there are amazing stories, such as those about people surviving the floodwaters by hanging onto trees, more common are the accounts in which the right individual appeared at the right time. For the repairs to its church building, First Presbyterian hired personnel from a local temp agency. "Just when you need sheetrock workers, sheetrock workers show up," Nunn said.

As evidence of God's work, Upshaw cited his congregation's discussions last summer about moving to a location that allowed for expansion. Since Katrina destroyed its building, the congregation has since offered a contract on a new property. "The Lord was providential in our already having the relocation discussion," Upshaw said.

While Katrina has reduced the numbers of worshipers throughout the region, some congregations have been able to celebrate the arrival of new members. In February five new members joined Gulfhaven Mennonite—people who had not been attending before Katrina. And the current membership class has another half dozen such candidates. "They were people we made contact with through our clean-up and rebuilding efforts," Roth said.

In Biloxi, Mississippi, a longtime United Church of Christ mission is becoming a congregation as a result of its outreach to Katrina victims. And a New Orleans street ministry is exploring joining the UCC.

More frequently, though, new members are Christians from other congregations needing a new church home. First Presbyterian recently welcomed a couple who

joined simply because they were looking for a congregation that was functioning. New UCC congregations are starting in Baton Rouge and Covington, Louisiana, for church members who have relocated to that area. Hosanna Lutheran Church in Mandeville, Louisiana, has received a denominational grant for a children's ministry because of the influx of young families.

So the churches of the Gulf Coast continue in ministry as best they can, proceeding with faith though the circumstances are more difficult than any of them had ever envisioned. Recovery is estimated to take a decade or longer. But that doesn't mean that the circumstances are hopeless. "Who knows what might come of this," Roth said. "Only God knows."