

Katrina relief official quits after pastors fault fiscal oversight: Fund called "a philanthropic FEMA"

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The executive director of the Bush-Clinton Katrina Fund has resigned her post after prominent members of the fund's religious advisory committee quit and harshly criticized the manner in which the fund made grants to houses of worship.

Fund cochairmen Don Evans and Alexis Herman announced July 14 that Mary Ann Wyrsh would be replaced by Constance Berry Newman, an executive with a Washington lobbying group, while acknowledging the concerns stated by former committee cochairmen, Bishop T. D. Jakes of Dallas and William H. Gray III, a pastor in Philadelphia.

"We respect the concerns of the ministers and share their desire for our actions to work as well as possible for the churches and congregations in need," wrote Evans and Herman. "In the best interests of the mission of the fund to help the people of the Gulf region rebuild their lives, Mary Ann Wyrsh has . . . submitted her resignation as executive director of the fund."

Wyrsh, in resigning, cited her concern about "distractions" and "anything that would slow the momentum we have established for getting assistance to those in need."

The fund, which has awarded \$65 million to various hurricane-related causes, has earmarked \$20 million to help religious organizations, and \$1.5 million of that sum has been approved for 38 recipients. Bill Pierce, a spokesperson, said some of those recipients have received checks and other grants are in process; in addition, "hundreds" of additional grant applications are being evaluated.

Jakes and Gray questioned the financial oversight of the fund that was established by former presidents Bill Clinton and George H. W. Bush. Jakes said "checks were flying out the door" before their committee could verify that grant applicants truly had a need. Gray called the fund "a philanthropic FEMA," referring to criticism of the Federal Emergency Management Agency after Hurricane Katrina last year.

Gray and Associated Press have reported that a majority of the nine-member committee have resigned, though Pierce could not immediately confirm the claim. According to AP, both Gray and Jakes said they had received the resignation letter of yet another leading black clergyman, William Shaw, president of the National Baptist Convention, U.S.A. —*Religion News Service*