Moral decisions in the megastorm

by G. Jeffrey MacDonald in the November 28, 2012 issue

State Police, National Guard and Seacaucus Firefighters help families as they are rescued from their homes on Edstan Drive in Moonachie, NJ, Oct. 30, 2012. *RNS photo by William Perlman/The Star-Ledger*

As Hurricane Sandy bore down on the barrier islands of New Jersey, Gov. Chris Christie gave stubborn residents one more thing to worry about. Their decisions to defy evacuation orders, he suggested, were “selfish” and morally unjustified.

“This is putting first responders in significant, significant danger” as they prepare to rescue the uncooperative, the Republican governor said as the storm winds pummeled the shorelines in late October. “It is not fair to their families for you [on the islands] to be putting them in that danger because you decided that you wanted to be hardheaded.”

The ethical debate continued along with the cleanup of Sandy. The idea of evacuation as a moral duty has gained traction among some local officials, theologians and hurricane survivors. But others find the notion misguided, uncompassionate and a threat to individual liberties.

The issue hits a tender chord since rugged individualism is a defining value of American culture. But megastorms—or wind-driven brush fires, for instance—can fuel conversations about the limits of that ethic as they expose how interdependent people ultimately are.

“There’s a need to have a discussion about this,” says James Keenan, a moral theologian at Boston College. “We need to educate people that morally you can’t simply say, ‘I’m not going.’ It’s not simply a matter of choice. It’s actually a matter of responsibility to the common good.”

Keenan admits that a rare few might be justified in not evacuating: those with autistic children, for instance, or those with weak immune systems. But nearly everyone who can leave has a duty to do so, he says, lest they unnecessarily put rescuers in harm’s way.

Some hurricane survivors agree. As Hurricane Katrina neared landfall in 2005, Andrew Price canceled plans to evacuate New Orleans when his mother refused to go. A helicopter rescued them after five days. At refugee centers, he saw what police confronted among those who didn’t evacuate. Lawless types stole food and water, plotted rapes and threatened officers who were overwhelmed. In hindsight, he wishes he and his mother had evacuated.

“When I think of the police officers and the Coast Guard who had to come and rescue us, I think you’re behaving immorally if you have plenty of warning and decide to ignore it,” says Price, who now lives in Atlanta. “Sometimes the greater good trumps personal rights.”

But other storm survivors say it’s not so simple. Deidra Hodges could have left New Orleans before Katrina hit, she said, but decided to ride it out with her two middle school–aged children. She was on a tight budget and couldn’t afford a hotel room. She never expected to require a helicopter rescue, she says, and challenges those who deem evacuation a moral imperative.

“It’s harsh to be really judgmental or critical of someone [without] understanding why they’re making the decision to stay,” says Hodges, author of *Hurricane Katrina: One Family’s Survival Story*. “Some people are alone; some are elderly. There are just a lot of people who don’t have anywhere to go or the means to travel.”

At times, those who refuse to evacuate feel a moral responsibility to hunker down. When Hurricane Sandy hit, Mark Denhard of Ocean City, Maryland, told CNN’s HLN network: “I’m just here trying to protect my family and my property and a bunch of my neighbors’ properties.”

Moral justifications to ride out dangerous storms can vary. Some stay put to look after elderly neighbors who can't evacuate or to care for pets that would be unwelcome in many hotels, according to Ray Nothstine, managing editor of the Acton Institute's *Religion & Liberty* magazine. He says individuals must weigh various factors, from the likelihood of requiring rescue to the value of defending personal property; they can't just let officials decide for them.

"Anytime there's drastic government encroachment, even in the case of mandatory evacuations, you're going to see your level of liberty erode," Nothstine says.

What's more, some say rugged individualism has a moral dimension that isn't always fully appreciated. "The spirit of individualism that says, 'I'm going to wait this out and I'll be fine' is the same spirit of individualism that says, 'It's not government's problem, it's our problem,'" says Rita Kirk, director of the Cary M. Maguire Center for Ethics and Public Responsibility at Southern Methodist University. "And so we're going to make sure needs get taken care of."

It's unclear whether discussions about moral duty and interdependence will affect thinking beyond disaster preparedness. But as long as big storms keep captivating the public attention for days or weeks on end, Kirk says, Americans will keep seeing up close how individual decisions have wide ripple effects.

"We're more interconnected . . . and we're aware of each other because of social media," Kirk says. "So we're more aware of the consequences of decisions—not only for the person who chose to stay on the barrier islands, but also for the rescuer who was put at risk." —RNS

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