

The church after Katrina

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A couple of weeks ago I went on an unforgettable mission trip to New Orleans and encountered a church that gave me a lot to think about.

Prince of Peace Missouri Synod Lutheran Church was once a thriving church and school. It was flooded when Hurricanes Katrina and Rita destroyed thousands of homes, businesses, and community buildings along the Gulf Coast from Texas to Alabama in 2005. But with assistance from the wider church, Prince of Peace's expansive building was renovated and converted into a volunteer camp, now called Camp Restore (a separate nonprofit agency), which brought in thousands of volunteer workers to do hurricane clean-up.

Camp Restore has become a thriving center that provides bunk-style housing and meals and matches volunteers with work sites where they do everything from hanging drywall to playing bingo with senior citizens. They average more than 3,000 volunteers per year.

Meanwhile, Prince of Peace is a tiny shadow of its former self. At one time, they housed more than 100 members and a busy Lutheran school. Since Katrina decimated the population of their community, they are down to about ten members.

I asked Bill, the church's president, what it was like to experience such a massive loss of members all at one time. "Well, honestly," he said, "we had other things to be thinking about."

Those "other things" included the clean-up and restoration of an entire city. "The only people who stayed," Bill explained, "were the people who still had a house, a job, or a family here. Everyone else left."

Today, Bill occasionally stands in line to eat breakfast and meet some of the volunteers that crowd his church's sanctuary for meals at long dining tables. Recently, after years of meeting on Sunday mornings, the tiny congregation decided to try worshiping on Wednesday nights. They invited the volunteers to join them,

and the first Wednesday they tried it, they ran out of communion elements, because they weren't expecting so many people in worship.

I had the privilege of worshiping alongside the congregation one Wednesday during my stay, and was joined by about 30 other volunteers. Although in many places, Missouri Synod Lutherans do not share communion with people of other traditions, we were all welcome to kneel and partake at Prince of Peace.

I had to wonder what the Prince of Peace congregation is made of: they have survived one of the fiercest hurricanes in history and stayed in place. Yet they have also take a huge leap into new territory, allowing their building to be transformed from a traditional church and school into an entirely different kind of ministry in rapid response to an emerging need, making all the sacrifices necessary in order to do that.

What can you and I learn from this tiny, amazing congregation?

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