

Ministry through the storm: Katrina stories

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In the face of Hurricane Katrina, pastors on the Gulf Coast were confronted with the challenge of protecting their families, serving their congregations, sheltering the displaced and finding some way to continue in ministry. Here are some voices from the midst of the crisis.

By Saturday, September 3, we were serving 200 meals a day out of the kitchen. People were donating all sorts of things to us, but nothing had gotten in from the outside. We had generators running, refrigeration, and a TV on which we could watch the latest worthless news coverage. We had to make an agreement to hold each other's hands when we met a media person so we didn't slap 'em. There was little useful information out there. We were blessed by God in the midst of it all, and the church was surely serving the community.

Security was the huge issue. Roving gangs of looters and druggies were around. We had to guard the church at night. It was pretty hairy. We were housing about 35 people from the neighborhood in the education wing.

On Saturday some New Orleans police told us to leave. Another group of police told us it would be better to stay, because our conditions were better than those in most of the shelters.

Whether to leave became a moot point after dark when ten SUVs showed up loaded with National Guard troops and border patrol agents, who said, "We are getting you all out of here. You have an hour." By that time the gangs were getting closer and we could not deal with the security issues. We evacuated about 100 people from the church and community. Some are in a shelter—God knows where.

The church is heavily damaged. We will need a new roof. The bell tower came apart and the bell is loose. The tower itself was moving back and forth four to five feet from the church. It held, but is not structurally sound. All that is insured, but the

ministry is not.

We did get folks out, but we really need to get back in to take care of the community and start the rebuilding process. Lutheran Disaster Relief will tell you that if you get in too late, you never really are accepted.

We have staff to pay, we have no students, no school receiving tuition payments. People are scattered all over and our collections are down. We have a great chance now to teach people about what the church really is. Let's get the focus off the brick and mortar and on to the ministry. Jesus did it with word and sacrament. We can too.

—David Goodine, pastor of St. Paul Lutheran Church, just east of the French Quarter, which sheltered community members in church facilities during the week after the storm. He and others at the church were evacuated on September 3.

Our church is completely destroyed, but we're having a great opportunity to minister. Since September 1 we've been fielding teams that are coming in to clean up.

Probably 60 percent or more of our church family have some type of severe damage to their homes. We're doing our best to meet their needs.

We are trying to be strategic in sending teams to the neighborhood of a church member, where they can also help out others in the neighborhood as a way to share the love of Christ.

We're starting to see a better picture of the New Testament church emerge. Our people are having to get back to the concept that the church is the people of God, not the facility.

For worship, we will gather at a high school auditorium, and we'll be there as long as they let us stay.

We're focused on meeting immediate needs. We are just beginning to think about the future, planning for a ministry base without a facility. A new building is two to three years away.

This is a Sunday school-driven church. At some point we are going to have to look at how to do discipleship classes, how to do youth and children's ministry. In all likelihood it will involve house ministry. We'll just have to reinvent church for First

Baptist.

—Brian Upshaw, senior associate pastor at First Baptist Church in Gulfport, Mississippi.

At 4:30 a.m. on Sunday, August 28, my spouse woke me up. “Cliff, that storm has taken a northern turn. We are going to get out of here.” I knew it was the right decision, but I thought about the sermon I’d prepared, and the few who were still in town and might come to worship. What would they say if I abandoned them?

I sent a group e-mail to all the members telling them that I had decided to “evacuate”—that awful word. My spouse packed a few plastic bags of with extra clothes. No time for the pictures, the memories, the keepsakes, the diplomas. It was time to get out and get out quick!

Then I thought, “What about Ann?” She is an 80-year-old neighbor, with no relatives in town, no car, no resources. I woke her up. “It looks like it’s the big one,” I said. “Are you ready to go?”

I was surprised when she said, “Give me 15 minutes.”

So 15 minutes later, with a few clothes and bags loaded, Ann was in the car with my wife, Nieta, and we were headed north.

The next four days were spent writing e-mails to church members, to the presbytery, to the clerks of session. Four days of receiving hundreds of e-mails offering help, money, a place for someone to live, help in rebuilding. Then, after all the CNN reporting, after several informative e-mails, we knew the truth: no church, no job, no home, no computer, no clothes. Three feet of water in that old church, three feet of water in our house. Those 1865 pews were soaking. All that tradition gone. We have our lives and our tenuous contacts with our friends. This is what matters.

The questions are endless. How many members will return to New Orleans and come back to church? How many will return to help clean out the church? Will the Child Development Center work again? These are questions we are unable to talk about now. Now is the time to notify the insurance agent, find the treasurer and the checkbook, send e-mails asking about who is still missing, what is that new phone number, how do we write checks, how do we get mail, when will they let us in to check on the church.

What will become of that homeless program, the kindergarten program, the plans for a new intern? All those questions and discussions that were once so important mean absolutely nothing now. All I really want to do is see and hug those members scattered to the ends of this country and worship with them again.

—Cliff Nunn, pastor of First Presbyterian Church in New Orleans.

The main thing we're doing is trying to take care of people. We're working to provide shelter and taking baby formula to rural areas, where the Red Cross hasn't reached. The Red Cross was initially overwhelmed. The relief work is all very ad hoc.

We got a pass from the military on September 8 to go into New Orleans to get some of the diocese functioning. We went to Christ Church Cathedral and the diocese office. The cathedral has some water problems, but it will be all right. And we were not looted.

In Baton Rouge the infrastructure is so strained that phones don't work, traffic is snarled, and the shelves are three-quarters empty. It's like Moscow in the Soviet days.

We don't need more people coming to help. The infrastructure can't take it. There will be a time for that later. Right now we need funds for refugees. And I have half a diocese of clergy who don't have jobs, with office staff to care for.

We are grateful for the generosity of churchpeople, especially the generosity of the Episcopal Church, which has been tremendous. Our Episcopal family has its fights. But a healthy family can fight and then, when the chips are down, come together.

—Charles Jenkins, bishop of the Episcopal diocese of Louisiana, based in New Orleans. He has been working out of Baton Rouge.

In Mississippi we've received about half a million displaced people from Louisiana who came either before the storm or after. Churches across the state are sheltering people from Louisiana. We have churches serving thousands of people out of fellowship halls without electricity or running water. We're just using what we have to feed people. I'm amazed at the level of creativity.

We've gotten a blessed chaos of shipments, many sent by other Methodists, folks across the country who knew churches or members in Mississippi and so sent help. The Methodist Book of Discipline speaks of connectionalism as a "blessed web of

interactive relations,” and we see that now. Everyone just wants to help, no one’s falling prey to trying to control this.

We had loss of life in three churches where people sought refuge but were just swept away by the floodwater. There is tremendous griefwork to be done. But we can’t tend to it because folks have so many immediate needs for food and shelter.

During the hurricane we had churches sheltering people in their attic or second floor, churches that sent out folks in boats to rescue people. We had one person swimming in the flood who motioned to a Hispanic woman in the shape of a steeple over his head, since he couldn’t speak Spanish—that was his way of saying, “Come to my church!”

I’ve not heard anyone ask, “Where was God?” I’ve heard many say, “God was with us.” Many will and have asked that, of course. We have all levels of sadness but also a tremendous sense of God’s presence. With the psalmist “we have seen the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living.” There has been loss of life and possessions, but the preaching I’ve heard insists that no one is asking about stuff, but whether people are OK.

Someone phoned the Methodist building, saying he’d called information and said there had to be a Methodist conference building in that area code. He was a Methodist, and he was trying to find his two children. We sent someone to the convention center, they announced the children’s names on the loudspeaker, a couple brought them forward, and they were told their father was in Houston looking for them. That’s part of what we’re doing—connecting people.

— *Hope Morgan Ward, bishop of the Mississippi Conference of the United Methodist Church, based in Jackson.*

We’ve been focusing on providing shelter, food and clothing. We provide showers, three hot meals a day. We’ve put funds in people’s pockets, and we’ve provided transportation.

We’ve been stressed, but our people have handled it very well. We have a tremendous kitchen and serving ministry.

We’ve had to put pressure on the Red Cross and FEMA to get benefits to the churches in our city that are sheltering people. We met with the mayor and city

council, to get them to help. At first the Red Cross and FEMA were giving assistance only to people at identified shelters, like the Lake Charles Civic Center and Burton Coliseum. Food, blankets, clothing, medical aid were not being made available to those being housed in the churches. Our people were supposed to go to those shelters. But a lot of our people didn't want to go. They wanted a more homey atmosphere. After a week the Red Cross relented and started giving out supplies.

On the Sunday after the storm I preached on "Preparing for life," based on Mark 1:1-13. I said we prepare for life by receiving the Holy Spirit, we prepare by receiving a divine call, and we prepare by being tested. And we were being tested. I wanted people who had been displaced to not get discouraged by the state they were in, but to see it as preparing them further for life.

—H. Leon Williams, pastor of Reeves Temple Christian Methodist Episcopal Church in Lake Charles, Louisiana, which housed 50 people taking refuge from the storm beginning Saturday, August 27. Williams attended a summit of black ministers who met in Memphis September 12 to discuss efforts to speed delivery of aid to the region. Attendees included Jesse Jackson and Red Cross chief Marsha Evans.

When our team arrived in Baton Rouge, that city had doubled in size virtually overnight. We saw long lines for gas, monitored by police. Electricity was sporadic and telecommunications proved frustrating at best. Police convoys and emergency responders crowded the streets. The radio crackled with announcements of people trying to locate missing kin. The displaced arrived in shelters that were manned by warm and gracious volunteers, but the lack of air conditioning, adequate supplies and answers to critical questions tested everyone's stamina.

The Terrebonne Readiness and Assistance Coalition (TRAC), a Church World Service partner agency in Houma, Louisiana, was housing and feeding 958 people. But how long could this be sustained? How long could communities like Houma—under a curfew due to lack of electricity—sustain help to disaster survivors? That was a question being asked all across Louisiana and in other states too.

The immediate needs in the affected areas were physical. But CWS was poised to work on spiritual care, care for the caregivers and the long-term efforts to rebuild communities where the common lament is that the world they knew no longer exists.

The United States has more displaced persons in its midst than at any time since the Civil War, more internally displaced persons than some Third World countries. It is a diaspora that has quickly dispersed to nearly every region of the country, a diaspora largely of the poor, those who rely most on faith communities and family.

In the end, the response to Katrina is about respecting the dignity of disaster survivors. While the nation debates the inadequacy of the federal response (and it was made clear in virtually every conversation I had in Louisiana that our nation had not risen to the occasion), I worry that communities most heavily impacted by Katrina—rural and urban poor, people of color and the underemployed—will still not command the response or respect that is their due.

—John McCullough, executive director of Church World Service, who arrived in Baton Rouge on Wednesday, August 31, to meet with interfaith agencies.