

FAITH IN THE GULF

LESSONS FROM THE RELIGIOUS RESPONSE
TO HURRICANE KATRINA



By DESIREE EVANS, CHRIS KROMM and SUE STURGIS

Institute for Southern Studies

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Volunteers from a local church deliver water to Katrina survivors in Bogalusa, La. (Photo by Win Henderson/FEMA)

ABOUT THIS REPORT

Faith in the Gulf: Lessons from the Religious Response to Hurricane Katrina was researched and written by Desiree Evans, Chris Kromm and Sue Sturgis of the Institute for Southern Studies.

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The Bible quotes used in the report are drawn from the New Revised Standard Version, and the Quran quotes are from the A.J. Barberry translation. Cover photo by Russell K. Frederick/Kamoinge, Inc.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

FOREWORDS 2

FAITH AND KATRINA BY THE NUMBERS 4

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY 6

INTRODUCTION 7

REFUGE FROM THE STORM: FAITH LEADERSHIP IN KATRINA RELIEF AND RECOVERY 8

 Faith Groups as First Responders

 Sidebar: The Diverse Faith Response to the Gulf Coast Disaster

 From Response to Relief Services

 Anchors for the Community

 Sidebar: Addressing Government Barriers to Faith-Based Assistance After Disasters

 A Nation Moved by Faith

 Crossing Faith Lines

FAITH IN THE FUTURE: REBUILDING AND THE SPIRIT OF RENEWAL IN THE GULF 15

 The Long-Term Challenge of Rebuilding

 Housing: The Key Barrier

 More Than Houses

 Investing in Communities

 A Prophetic Voice for a Better Future

CONTACT INFORMATION FOR ORGANIZATIONS MENTIONED IN THE REPORT 22

SOURCES 25

FOREWORDS

The Institute for Southern Studies has compiled an admirable and comprehensive study on the power of faith in action. We here in New Orleans experienced this firsthand, as individuals and groups from around the world arrived in the aftermath of one of the worst natural disasters in modern history to hand out food, water, clothing and pastoral care. When the government wasted time arguing over process, faith groups mobilized brigades of willing volunteers and helped us muck out our homes, churches and buildings.

And it has not stopped. We are three years on from Katrina and Rita and the needs are still here, and the faithful are still coming.

The Gulf Coast was dealt a merciless blow from two hurricanes in succession, and yet it has also been transformed by the boundless energy and generosity of strangers from far and wide. These strangers come because they are called to care for the weak, the poor and the needy, and in that process they become friends and family to us all.

We thank the Interfaith Center on Corporate Responsibility for commissioning this report and hope that it helps to explain the unique and important role of the church in not only disaster relief and recovery, but in our society as a whole.

The Right Reverend Charles E. Jenkins III
Episcopal Bishop of Louisiana



New Orleans' Temple Sinai welcomes back residents after Katrina.
(Photo from Katrina's Jewish Voices/Jewish Women's Archive)

Judaism's explicit social protections make clear that the moral test of any society is what it does for the most vulnerable. While America's public institutions failed that test when Hurricanes Katrina and Rita devastated the Gulf Coast, many nongovernmental agencies did significantly better. The Jewish community stood tall among them. Millions of dollars and tons of relief supplies flowed from the Jewish community to the affected region. Hundreds of Jewish communities provided support to displaced evacuees around the country and thousands of Jews have traveled to join in rebuilding efforts.

Despite these efforts, hundreds of thousands remain dislocated, New Orleans faces an uncertain future, and ravaged communities still flounder, powerless to address the structural causes of deprivation that afflict them and their families. The stricken faces of people airlifted off roofs and huddled together in abandoned hospitals and shelters revealed an ominous message about race and poverty. There is something terribly wrong with our society when the victims of a natural disaster are not random but rather the result of governmental policies and risk assessments that betray our highest religious and national values and the most urgent needs of our people.

So the Jewish community's federations, synagogues, denominations and activists like Jewish Funds for Justice continue their varied efforts to heal the wounds of devastation and despair. But not only Jews—really all of us—like the prophets of old must become visionaries, advocates and activists who demand a society in which the floods of inequity and deprivation will no longer doom the poor and weak. Rather, as the remarkable projects described in this report make inspiringly clear, we can use our power to create that society in which the waters that well up are called “justice” and the mighty stream, “righteousness.”

Rabbi David Saperstein, RDS
Director, Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism

Rabbi Marla Feldman, RMF
Director, Commission on Social Action of Reform Judaism



Ruined choir robes were still hanging at Brooks United Methodist Church in New Orleans almost one year after Katrina. (Photo by Mike DuBose, United Methodist News Service)

As one of the early responders to the devastation of lives and property brought on by Hurricane Katrina, Catholic Charities of the Archdiocese of New Orleans welcomes the Institute for Southern Studies' report, which captures the impact that communities of faith have had in rebuilding our area. As the report reveals, during the last three years people of all faiths have worked side by side to bring help and instill hope in the people of New Orleans. Through this experience of working in partnership with the generous people of other churches, synagogues and mosques, our own Catholic faith has been made stronger. As one of the early responders to the devastation of lives and property brought on by Hurricane Katrina, Catholic Charities of the Archdiocese of New Orleans welcomes the Institute for Southern Studies' report, which captures the impact that communities of faith have had in rebuilding our area. As the report reveals, during the last three years people of all faiths have worked side by side to bring help and instill hope in the people of New Orleans. Through this experience of working in partnership with the generous people of other churches, synagogues and mosques, our own Catholic faith has been made stronger.

Communities of faith have provided much of the money, manpower, and organization needed to begin the road to recovery for the region. Just as we have since the Ursuline Sisters began ministering to the people of Louisiana in 1727, the Catholic Church of New Orleans has responded to both the immediate needs of people and helped to build a new future for our community. Over the last three years, the generosity of the Catholic community has enabled Catholic Charities to:

- give \$15,035,538 in direct assistance to families who needed it most to people to rebuild their lives.
- provide case management to 54,660 people.
- gut 1,925 homes, rebuild 113 homes with 717 more homes under construction, and begin the process of developing 1,524 homes.
- distribute 156,489,689 pounds of food to the hungry and agencies that feed the hungry.
- supply 61,715,858 meals to the hungry.
- offer crisis intervention and counseling to 864,547 people.
- serve 4,483 people with medical services.

Our own statistics and the other examples in this report are just a small snapshot of the work that faith-based communities are continuing to do in New Orleans. We are the forever responders who will be here long after FEMA and other government organizations have gone. Catholic Charities is pleased to be included among the stories of courage, compassion and vision of our partners in faith.

Jim Kelly and Gordon Wadge

Co-Presidents, Catholic Charities Archdiocese of New Orleans

FAITH AND KATRINA BY THE NUMBERS

A STORM OF BIBLICAL PROPORTIONS

Square miles of the Gulf Coast declared a federal disaster area in the wake of Hurricane Katrina: **90,000**¹

People displaced by Hurricane Katrina: **1.3 million**²

Housing units across the Gulf Coast damaged or destroyed by Katrina and Rita: **302,000**³

Gulf Coast health care centers damaged: **100**⁴

Licensed childcare centers damaged in Alabama, Louisiana and Mississippi: **3,000**⁵

Estimated economic impact of Katrina alone: **more than \$150 billion**⁶

Houses of worship in the Gulf Coast damaged or destroyed: **900**⁷

Houses of worship in New Orleans that were still not in operation two years after the disaster: **313**⁸

Age of some of the seven Torah scrolls destroyed by floodwaters in New Orleans' century-old Beth Israel orthodox synagogue: **more than 250 years**⁹

Number of houses of worship that received grants for rebuilding



Food being prepared in a New Orleans field kitchen set up by the Arkansas branch of the Southern Baptist Disaster Relief.
(Photo by Win Henderson/FEMA)

or repairs through the Bush-Clinton Katrina Fund: **1,151**¹⁰

THE FAITH RESPONSE

Within the first 48 hours after Katrina, meals being served per day by Southern Baptist Disaster Relief volunteers: **500,000**¹¹

Gallons of water purified by Southern Baptist Convention volunteers in the first year following Katrina: **21,595**¹²

Hot meals served by Salvation Army volunteers in the first year following Katrina: **5,668,226**¹³

Pounds of food delivered to families and agencies by the Catholic Charities Archdiocese of New Orleans since the storm: **156,489,689**¹⁴

Pounds of relief supplies collected and distributed by Jacob's Ladder, a relief project of the Union for Reform Judaism: **more than 3 million**¹⁵

Emergency response kits distributed by Presbyterian Disaster Assistance and Presbyterian Church USA in the two years after the storm: **18,160**¹⁶

Individuals who received crisis intervention and counseling from Catholic Charities caseworkers since Katrina: **864,547**¹⁷

In the two and a half years after Katrina, people receiving emergency care from the Episcopal Diocese of Louisiana's Office of Disaster Response: **95,081**¹⁸

Number of volunteers sent to the Gulf during the first two years after Katrina by the 35 Christian denominations in the National Council of Churches: **120,000**¹⁹

Number of volunteers sent to New Orleans and other Gulf Coast communities by the Mennonite Disaster Service as of April 2008: **almost 10,000**²⁰

College student volunteers sent to the region by Hillel, a Jewish campus organization: **more than 1,600**²¹

Volunteers hosted by the Jesuits of the New Orleans Province since Hurricane Katrina: **4,000**²²

Number of people assisted with financial and other services by Katrina Aid Today, a collaboration of nine national faith service providers overseen by the United Methodist Committee on Relief: **192,888**²³

THE LONG ROAD TO RENEWAL

Gulf Coast residents who were still living in temporary Federal Emergency Management Agency trailers and mobile homes as of June 2008: **42,000** ²⁴

Percent of Louisiana residents affected by the storms that believe there are not enough services available for recovery: **80** ²⁵

Percent who feel that Gulf Coast rebuilding is not a priority for Congress and the president: **60** ²⁶

Percent who think “most Americans have forgotten about the challenges facing New Orleans”: **65** ²⁷

As of August 2008, portion of FEMA’s \$11 billion post-Katrina Public Assistance funds allocated for long-term rebuilding projects: **49 percent** ²⁸

Of FEMA Public Assistance money for long-term rebuilding, portion that has actually been spent to date in Louisiana and Mississippi: **29 percent** ²⁹

New affordable housing units built in New Orleans by five leading faith-based organizations between 2006 and 2007: **350** ³⁰

Units now under construction or in development by these five agencies: **4,100** ³¹

Hours it took 6,600 volunteers of CrossRoads Missions in Louisville, Kentucky to build 36 pre-fabricated homes for New Orleans in 2007: **7** ³²

“Hurricane Response Homes” built by Habitat for Humanity across the Gulf Coast: **1,300** ³³

Volunteers that Habitat for Humanity New Orleans and the Baptist Crossroads Foundation estimate they will need to build 300 homes in the Upper Ninth Ward over the next five years: **60,000** ³⁴

Amount raised by Catholic, Jewish, Mennonite and Baptist organizations to launch the Isaiah Funds, an initiative to spur Gulf Coast rebuilding through loans and grants: **\$4.5 million** ³⁵

Amount of first loan made by Isaiah Funds in April 2008, to the Gulf Coast Housing Partnership which has 1,000 affordable homes in development: **\$500,000** ³⁶

Rank of “the church” among places that Louisiana residents affected by Katrina continue to turn for needed social services: **1** ³⁷



A Church World Service volunteer works to re-level houses in New Orleans. (Photo by Matt Hackworth, Church World Service)

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

When Hurricanes Katrina and Rita unleashed the largest natural disaster in U.S. history in 2005, the nation's response was equally historic. Even as the government struggled to respond, record numbers of Americans swiftly and generously gave their time, talent and resources to help storm victims. This national outpouring of support echoed what was happening in the Gulf Coast, where thousands of people—many whose lives were also devastated by the storms—turned to help their neighbors in need.

People of faith and religious groups have led the unprecedented civic response to Hurricanes Katrina and Rita. In this report, the most in-depth study to date of the faith response to Katrina, we surveyed the work of more than 80 faith organizations in the aftermath of the storms. Among the findings of this report:

FAITH GROUPS HAVE BEEN LEADERS IN THE KATRINA RESPONSE: For many Gulf Coast residents, faith groups—from local houses of worship to national religious relief organizations—were the most important relief and response agency in Katrina's aftermath. More than any other non-governmental sector—and in many cases, better than government agencies—faith organizations were able to quickly and effectively deliver the people and resources needed to help storm victims in need.

SUCCESSFUL FAITH INITIATIVES SHARE COMMON INGREDIENTS: Among the elements that have made local faith-based groups effective in the Katrina response are their flexibility, ability to act quickly, and their close community ties and understanding of local needs. These advantages have often enabled religious groups to overcome barriers in training, coordination and lack of resources.

NATIONAL FAITH SUPPORT HAS BEEN CRUCIAL FOR THE GULF: The support of national faith institutions has also been decisive in the effectiveness of Katrina response efforts. In Katrina's aftermath, religious groups across the country have mobilized more than 200,000 volunteers and over \$200 million in aid. Baptist, Catholic, Lutheran, Mennonite, Methodist, Presbyterian and other national faith agencies brought years of experience in disaster relief. The most successful faith initiatives in the Gulf Coast have linked the people, expertise and resources of national religious groups with strong, locally based organizations.

FAITH GROUPS ARE A NECESSARY VOICE FOR BETTER GULF REBUILDING POLICY: It is clear that faith-based initiatives in no way replace the need for bold government action to rebuild the Gulf Coast. The scale of the rebuilding task ahead will require effective leadership at all levels of government. Faith groups have played, and will continue to play, a vital role in advocating for better public policy, by bearing witness to the ongoing challenges faced by Gulf Coast residents and serving as an inspiring example and catalyst for effective action.

FAITH GROUPS ARE A VALUABLE VOICE FOR NATIONAL ACTION: Faith-based initiatives in no way replace the need for bold government action. The scale of the rebuilding task ahead in the Gulf Coast will require effective leadership at all levels of government. Faith groups have and will continue to play an important role in advocating for better public policy, by bearing witness to the ongoing need to help Gulf Coast residents, and serving as an example and catalyst for effective governmental action.



A New Orleans church steeple was knocked over by Katrina's winds. (Photo by Greg Henshall/FEMA)

INTRODUCTION

“If there is among you anyone in need, a member of your community in any of your towns within the land that the Lord your God is giving you, do not be hard-hearted or tight-fisted toward your needy neighbor.” — DEUTERONOMY 15:7

Religious faith has always been a powerful force in American life. Writing in the early 19th century, French chronicler Alexis de Tocqueville observed that American civilization “is the result ... of two distinct elements, which in other places have been in frequent disagreement, but which the Americans have succeeded in incorporating to some extent one with the other and combining admirably. I allude to the spirit of religion and the spirit of liberty.”³⁸ In a sense, the spirit of religion is closely related to the spirit of liberty in the United States, which after all is a nation founded by people seeking refuge from religious persecution.

In the South and the rest of the country, the spirit of faith has often served as the conscience of the nation and a catalyst for change. In 1775, the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) established the first anti-slavery society in America³⁹; later, evangelicals and the various other Protestant denominations involved in the religious revival movement of the early 19th century expanded the faith-based fight against slavery.⁴⁰ In the 1950s and 1960s, historically black churches in the South—community institutions largely beyond the reach of Jim Crow—served as centers for the civil rights movement.⁴¹ They sometimes found allies in people of other faiths.⁴² In more recent decades, faith institutions of all colors and denominations have joined with human-rights groups and other nongovernmental organizations to urge debt relief for poor nations, making progress in advancing the cause in Washington.⁴³

People of faith also brought a sense of spiritual calling and social conscience to the tragedy of Hurricane Katrina, a catastrophe that laid bare historic inequities in the Gulf Coast, South and nation. In the storm’s immediate aftermath, faith groups carried out work that was in a sense pastoral—that is, tending to the basic needs of congregants and the wider community. Faith-led relief efforts took on enormous importance because of the government’s inadequate response, deemed a “failure of initiative” by a bipartisan Congressional investigation.⁴⁴

Fortunately, there was no such failure of initiative on the part of faith-based organizations. In many communities across the Gulf, volunteers from faith groups were the first to arrive after the storm and played an important role in feeding, clothing and sheltering survivors. Following the immediate humanitarian crisis, faith volunteers stayed in the region to help survivors with the hard work of cleaning flood debris and gutting ruined homes.

Today, three years after the storm, religious groups continue to play an important role in the rebuilding of the region’s homes and communities by providing not only materials and labor but also much-needed financing. These efforts offer ways for faith-based groups to leverage their considerable

resources to help families and communities in need, and to create models of compassionate care for governments and others to follow.

In the course of carrying out their relief and recovery work in the Gulf, people of faith witnessed injustices—families trapped in toxic government-issued trailers, immigrant workers abused by employers, affordable housing funds diverted to other uses. This has led some faith-based groups to work that is more prophetic in nature—that is, striving to incorporate compassion in government policies. They have been among the organizations advocating effectively for the needs of Katrina survivors at the federal, state and local levels. Involvement in this policy work is critical, because while faith organizations play an important role after disasters, their best efforts are no substitute for an adequate government response to a catastrophe of Katrina’s scope, where the economic impact is estimated in the tens of billions of dollars.

In this latest installment of the Institute for Southern Studies’ Gulf Coast Reconstruction Watch report series, we look at the role faith groups have played and continue to play in the region’s recovery and renewal since Hurricane Katrina. To date, there has been no in-depth study of the role of faith-based organizations in Katrina’s aftermath. This report is by no means a comprehensive account, but we hope it shows how important faith groups’ work has been in helping Gulf Coast residents rebuild their homes and communities, and in helping to fulfill the promise of America as a land of religious liberty and justice for all.

Institute for Southern Studies
August 2008

REFUGE FROM THE STORM:

FAITH LEADERSHIP IN KATRINA RELIEF AND RECOVERY

*“...in the shadow of your wings I will take refuge, until
the destroying storms pass by.” — PSALM 57:1*

On the morning of August 29, 2005, one of the deadliest and costliest hurricanes in the history of the United States struck the Gulf Coast. Hurricane Katrina, followed on September 24 by Hurricane Rita, had an enormous impact on communities from Alabama to Louisiana. Katrina would claim more than 1,800 lives, displace more than a million people from their homes, and cause as much as \$150 billion in damage.⁴⁵

From mega-churches to storefront houses of worship, from mosques to synagogues, many faith institutions were themselves victims of the 2005 storms. They are also among the many heroes of the disasters. Throughout the Gulf Coast, survivors attest to the tireless work of faith groups large and small in saving lives and homes. In the vacuum created by the failed government response, faith institutions in the region rushed to the aid of evacuees, often being first on the ground to provide much-needed immediate relief and assistance to victims through humanitarian aid and care.

The heroic response of local faith institutions was echoed by an outpouring of support from people of faith outside the Gulf Coast. Hundreds of churches, synagogues and other houses of worship across the country opened their doors to displaced residents and evacuees, providing food, shelter, job assistance, and financial aid.

Faith organizations also displayed an extraordinary ability to quickly, efficiently and effectively mobilize their extensive networks to deliver people, resources and humanitarian aid for the service of those devastated by Katrina. First hundreds, then thousands of volunteers poured into the region. Faith-connected charities and service organizations—as well as individual houses of worship—collected millions of dollars in aid and quickly launched major service programs.

These faith institutions also displayed an extraordinary willingness to cross faith lines, forming groundbreaking partnerships and interfaith coalitions that contributed greatly towards the success of Katrina emergency efforts.

An August 2006 editorial in the New Orleans Times-Picayune pointed out what many in the city had come to believe: “Faith-based organizations and churches have been a god-send for the metro area ... showing an ability to organize, mobilize and get things done that has frequently eclipsed the public sector.”⁴⁶

FAITH GROUPS AS FIRST RESPONDERS

*“...for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty
and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger
and you welcomed me ...” — MATTHEW 25:35*

To many in the Gulf Coast, faith groups were the first line of defense in seeking refuge from the storms. Locally and nationally, faith institutions mobilized thousands of local and national volunteers in the largest domestic disaster relief effort to date. After Katrina passed and the floodwaters receded, faith groups swung into action, dispatching small armies of work crews, counselors, and religious leaders. These volunteers found and delivered thousands of hot meals and tons of supplies, shuttled desperate families in need of transportation, and staffed mobile medical units to attend to those suddenly without care, especially the elderly.

“There’s a lot of talk about first responders—but a lot of times, churches and faith groups get there before the police, fire departments and others even arrive,” said Landon Williams, director of housing and small business development with the Louisiana Disaster Recovery Foundation. “[People] know that, regardless of their faith, they will rarely get turned away if they’re in need.”⁴⁷

The scale of the immediate response mobilized by faith institutions is staggering:

- In the year after Katrina, Catholic Charities distributed 40 million pounds of food and Salvation Army volunteers served 6.6 million hot meals.⁴⁸ After 115 days in operation, Christ in Action from Manassas, Virginia had served over 420,000 meals and repaired 500 houses in Gulfport, Mississippi.⁴⁹
- In the first six months after the storm, 6,000 Southern Baptist Disaster Relief volunteers from 36 states descended on the Gulf Coast to deliver hundreds of “pop up” shelters and run mobile kitchens and recovery sites.⁵⁰
- The evangelical Operation Blessing delivered 11.4 million pounds of supplies in the first year, delivered nearly \$5 million in cash grants, and staffed a free dental clinic.⁵¹

Faith organizations quickly became the go-to resource for tens of thousands of hurricane victims—stretching the ability of religious groups to respond. As the Mississippi NAACP noted in a report a year after the storms, “[T]he faith community that was the first responders and most effective in delivering services are still called to perform similar duties without much assistance, compensation and training for what they do.”⁵²

Many Gulf Coast residents came to view the services provided by faith organizations as the most reliable and effective in serving their needs.

The fact that local faith leaders found their capacity to respond far outstripped by the scale of the tragedy at hand was compounded by the chaos of the overall emergency response, as well as the fact that many Gulf Coast faith leaders were themselves storm victims. Yet despite these challenges, faith organizations created a patchwork safety net that allowed hundreds of thousands of residents to meet basic needs. As an Aspen Institute report on the religious and nonprofit Katrina response found:

Their response was not perfect. Sometimes the shelters created by small churches and organizations did not conform to acceptable standards and created unhygienic situations. Sometimes the pressure of the situation exacerbated tensions between organizations, and they fought over territory or engaged in one-upsmanship about who could do the job better. In the rush to be helpful, others assumed roles too far outside of their professional expertise, or descended helter-skelter upon victims with duplicative or confusing service options. Yet overall their quick action produced a web—however fragile and imperfect—of social and human services that sustained many during a particularly precarious time. Whereas in a normal emergency, they might be depended upon to provide secondary assistance to the natural first responders such as the American Red Cross, Salvation Army, and Catholic Charities, in this disaster they too became primary responders.⁵³



Islamic Relief USA's hurricane disaster relief center in New Orleans. (Photo courtesy of Islamic Relief USA)

THE DIVERSE FAITH RESPONSE TO THE GULF COAST DISASTER

While this report focuses on the role played in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina and Rita by the nation's largest religions and denominations, the response to the disaster reflected the diversity of faith traditions in the United States. People from various spiritual traditions participated in relief efforts, raised money and sent volunteers to the storm-struck region.

- By the second anniversary of the disaster, for example, Islamic Relief USA had provided more than \$3.2 million in aid that benefited more than 62,000 people.⁵⁴ Islamic Relief is one of 10 Islamic groups that participated in the Muslim Hurricane Relief Task Force, which worked to coordinate Islamic aid efforts after the storms. In the first month following Katrina, the task force disbursed more than \$2 million in aid.⁵⁵
- The Tzu Chi Foundation, a Buddhist relief organization, deployed volunteers throughout the Gulf Coast and made eight trips to South Mississippi in the first 10 months after the hurricanes, donating nearly \$1.2 million to the region's recovery.⁵⁶ Tzu Chi mobile clinics also drove through Houston, providing dental and medical assistance to Katrina evacuees.
- Other smaller faith groups also took action in the Gulf. Hindus in Atlanta worked with Sewa USA, a Hindu volunteer organization, to assist families who had been relocated to Atlanta.⁵⁷ The international humanitarian nonprofit United Sikhs launched the Ghanaia Katrina Hurricane Relief project, which sent teams of volunteers including medical professionals to aid the displaced.⁵⁸

FROM RESPONSE TO RELIEF SERVICES

“Give, and it will be given to you.” — LUKE 6:38

The swift and agile response of faith institutions in the immediate aftermath of the storms established their reputation as reliable and effective service providers. In the months after Katrina, faith organizations further solidified this reputation, expanding their services to assist tens of thousands of families across the region.

The Episcopal Diocese of Louisiana’s response to the disaster is illustrative of how faith organizations took action and performed pastoral care in the first year after the storm. “We wanted to respond in a comprehensive manner to the needs of the New Orleans community; we wanted to ensure a holistic recovery,” said Nell Bolton, director of the Office of Disaster Response with the Episcopal Diocese of Louisiana.⁵⁹

In the storm’s immediate aftermath, the diocese set up the office to coordinate volunteers helping with the distribution of food, water, and cleaning supplies. They also set up feeding ministries and a mobile medic unit that traveled into the affected neighborhoods. By June 2006, the Office of Disaster Response had organized volunteers to gut over 900 homes. In 2007 alone, its mobile medical units served almost 9,000 people, and its feeding program served more than 75,000.⁶⁰

In the later recovery phase of the response, many faith institutions took up case management work and provided social services that were scarce after the storms. They included the Episcopal Diocese, whose Office of Disaster Response partnered with G.R.A.C.E. Community Services—a faith-based organization headquartered in Houston that specializes in disaster response—to provide disaster case management services.

Similar social service initiatives, such as the work of the Catholic Charities Archdiocese of New Orleans, have been helping survivors find jobs, housing and psychological support. In the first two years following Hurricane Katrina, Catholic Charities provided case management to more than 45,000 affected families and individuals, and crisis intervention and counseling to more than 852,000 individuals.⁶¹

The United Methodist Committee on Relief managed a \$66 million grant from the Federal Emergency Management Agency that allowed UMCOR to organize Katrina Aid Today, a consortium of case management organizations helping victims of the 2005 hurricanes. The original grant period of two years was extended by six months through March 2008.⁶² At its peak, the consortium had 138 offices in 34 states, and as of early June 2007, Katrina Aid Today had delivered nearly \$50 million in services to over 130,000 individuals.⁶³

Many Gulf Coast residents came to view the services provided by faith organizations as the most reliable and effective in serving their needs. A Louisiana State University survey found that the state’s residents scored faith groups’ responses higher than those of city, state, and federal governments. “Louisiana residents rated the response of religious organizations as highly effective, giving them an 8.1 on a scale from 1–10 with 1 being highly ineffective and 10 being very effective,” the survey reported. “Respondents evaluated the effectiveness of government response—at all levels—much more negatively. Respondents rated New Orleans city government and state government at 4.6, local governments other than New Orleans at 6.5, and the federal government at 5.1.”⁶⁴



A camp housing Presbyterian Church volunteers in D'Iberville, Miss. (Photo by FEMA/Mark Wolfe)



The Main Street Missionary Baptist Church in Biloxi, Miss. held services outdoors after Katrina.
(Photo by FEMA/Mark Wolfe)

ANCHORS FOR THE COMMUNITY

“Weeping may linger for the night, but joy comes with the morning.” — PSALM 30:5

In the three years since Katrina, the return of churches, synagogues and mosques has been a driving force in the city’s overall recovery. In some cases, religious institutions have provided the spark for reviving entire neighborhoods.

An estimated 900 houses of worship in the Gulf region were damaged, destroyed or unusable after the hurricanes, according to the Religion News Service.⁶⁵ Roofs and doors were ripped off by winds, and rain flooded sanctuaries. Congregations lost buildings, sacred materials, records and holy texts. The storm displaced entire faith communities, scattering members and leaders across the country.

In New Orleans East, Mary Queen of Vietnam Church stands as an example of a house of worship that has served as an anchor for every level of a community’s recovery. After Katrina devastated much of New Orleans East—including the 9,000-strong Vietnamese-American community of Versailles—many officials wrote off this area in the northeast corner of the city. In the storm’s aftermath, Mayor Ray Nagin even asked residents to not come back. But the vision of Fathers Vien Nguyen and Luke Nguyen of Mary Queen ended up turning New Orleans East into one of the Katrina recovery’s most inspiring success stories—a revival that all started with a candlelight service. “We spread the word that we were having a Mass, for people to come back,” said Father Luke Nguyen, another pastor at the church. “On our first Mass on October 9, 200 people came.”⁶⁶

Mary Queen of Vietnam Church became a one-stop recovery center. Potable water was driven in every day. Cafeteria-style meals were cooked up on gas generators. Dozens of medical volunteers were organized into a free clinic. And one by one, the community came back. Six months after Katrina, 2,000 people were attending weekly Mass. Forty-seven of the 53 Vietnamese-American owned businesses had reopened. Almost every house with wind damage had a new roof.

The church’s ability to provide an anchor for community action proved essential when the area became increasingly involved in local politics—including the city’s decision to place nearby the Chef Menteur landfill, a massive dump for hurricane debris that threatened water supplies. Mayor Nagin, who used his post-storm emergency powers to open the dump, eventually closed the facility under intense community pressure.

Many houses of worship across the Gulf Coast came to see their role much like Father Vien described the evolution of Mary Queen of Vietnam—as a place that not only tended to his parishioners’ spiritual need, but their desire to have a voice in a better future for their community. “It’s not the act of God that we struggle with, the act of God is done,” he said. “The problem is the human acts, that is what we struggle with.”

An estimated 900 houses of worship in the Gulf region were damaged, destroyed or unusable after the hurricanes



A Biloxi, Miss. landmark since the 1800s, this church was destroyed by Katrina. (Photo by FEMA/Mark Wolfe)

ADDRESSING GOVERNMENT BARRIERS TO FAITH-BASED ASSISTANCE AFTER DISASTERS

The enormous amount of aid that faith-based groups provided to disaster victims in the aftermath of the 2005 Gulf Coast hurricanes was delivered despite barriers that in too many instances were created by the government itself.

So concluded the 2006 official White House report titled *The Federal Response to Hurricane Katrina: Lessons Learned*. Based on a review led by Homeland Security Advisor France Fragos Townsend, the report found that faith-based groups and other nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) had not been adequately integrated into the National Response Plan, which at the time served as the federal framework for disaster response. “We must recognize that NGOs play a fundamental role in response and recovery efforts and will contribute in ways that are, in many cases, more efficient and effective than the Federal government’s response,” the report said.⁶⁷

In March 2006, the Bush administration created a Center for Faith-Based and Community Initiatives in the Department of Homeland Security to better integrate faith groups into disaster preparedness and response efforts at every level of government.⁶⁸ And in January 2008, the White House replaced the National Response Plan with the National Response Framework, which shifted primary responsibility for coordinating federal support for mass care from the Red Cross to the Federal Emergency Management Agency, a division of Homeland Security. The NRF puts FEMA in charge of convening voluntary organizations that provide emergency support services and responding to requests for assistance from the

states, which continue to hold principal responsibility for post-disaster mass care needs.⁶⁹

In February 2008, the Government Accountability Office, the oversight arm of Congress, released an audit of the NRF that found lingering problems in coordination of government and volunteer sectors. While the Red Cross agrees that FEMA should be the primary agency for mass care since it has the authority to direct federal resources, the shifting roles present implementation issues, according to the GAO. “For example, while FEMA has enhanced responsibilities for coordinating the activities of voluntary organizations, it does not currently have a sufficient number of specialized staff to meet this responsibility,” the report said.⁷⁰

Also holding a key role following emergencies is National Voluntary Organizations Active in Disasters, an umbrella organization of 49 agencies that includes many faith-based groups. Like the Red Cross, NVOAD has an official emergency support role in the NRF, but the GAO says the group’s limited staff resources “constrain its ability to effectively fulfill its role in disaster response situations.”

GAO found that FEMA made progress in addressing problems faced by churches and other local voluntary organizations in accessing public assistance reimbursement for mass care-related expenses after Katrina. For example, local voluntary organizations sometimes had trouble getting accurate information about reimbursement opportunities following the disaster. But GAO said FEMA still had not addressed some communication problems, including a lack of staff training on reimbursement policies and poor presentation of public information on its website.

Speaking at a May 2008 White House-sponsored roundtable on the role of faith-based organizations following emergencies, Homeland Security Secretary Michael Chertoff acknowledged that other barriers remain as well. Among the problems he said still needed to be addressed was the need to improve credentialing so volunteers can quickly get to work helping those in need, and better manage logistics to connect those who want to offer help with those who need it.

“We want to do everything we can to harness this energy and the broad network of faith-based and community groups into our planning and execution so that we can bring the maximum resources to bear most quickly and most effectively in communities that are affected by disasters,” Chertoff said.⁷¹

A NATION MOVED BY FAITH

“...Yet better it is for him who volunteers good.”

— THE QURAN 2:184

Local houses of worship and religious networks in the Gulf Coast responded heroically in the face of tragedy, but they couldn't do it alone. Another critical ingredient to the success of the faith response to Katrina was the national outpouring of support from hundreds of faith-based organizations across the country. More than any other group outside the public sector—and often more effectively than governmental agencies—faith organizations nationally mobilized people, resources and expertise that allowed Katrina survivors to rebuild their lives.

In the storms' immediate aftermath, hundreds of faith institutions in 48 states opened their doors to hurricane victims. Turning Point Ministries International in Houston sprung into action when 250,000 storm refugees came to the area. Working with Somebody Cares America, they raised \$1.5 million in gift cards for evacuees, distributed \$30 million in emergency supplies, made grants to 113 organizations totaling \$1.2 million, and raised another \$5 million to help other agencies who were already on the ground working such as Genesis Food Bank in Mississippi and Good News Camp distribution centers in New Orleans City Park.⁷²

Out of the over 1 million national volunteers that went to the Gulf Coast in the first two years after Katrina, faith-related groups were the single biggest sector represented.

Faith organizations also took the lead in dispatching tens of thousands of volunteers to the Gulf Coast. In the first two years after Katrina, more than 1.1 million volunteers poured into the Gulf Coast, providing more than 14 million hours of service in what is the largest volunteer response to a disaster in the nation's history, according to the Corporation for National and Community Service.⁷³ An analysis of volunteer records by the major faith organizations that sent volunteers to the region suggests that faith-related groups were the single biggest sector represented among Katrina volunteers.⁷⁴ Busloads of volunteers from every faith tradition staffed relief centers, delivered vital services, and delved into the monumental task of cleaning up debris, gutting houses, repairing buildings and beginning the long road to recovery.

Student religious associations were a critical piece of the faith volunteer effort, sending thousands of volunteers to the Gulf Coast during spring and winter breaks. For example, the Hillel Alternative Break program continues to bring Jewish college students to the region to help rebuild houses. By April 2008, Hillel—the world's largest Jewish campus organization—had sent more than 1,600 college students to assist the people of New Orleans and other communities in the region.⁷⁵

Faith organizations were also unique in their ability to quickly mobilize resources, especially sorely needed relief funds. Of the over \$6 billion in charitable contributions made in the wake of Hurricane Katrina, a substantial share was mobilized by and channeled through faith-based organizations.⁷⁶ For example, according to a 2008 report released by the National Council of Churches—an ecumenical coalition of mainline Protestant, Orthodox, African-American and historic peace churches—more than \$160 million was collected for Gulf Coast Recovery by 18 of the Council's denominations.⁷⁷ A survey of all of NCC's 35 members found they sent around \$250 million in financial aid to local churches and relief agencies.⁷⁸ The United Methodist Committee on Relief ranked sixth in Newsweek's 2006 “Big Names in Katrina Relief” in terms of total amount raised, which by 2007 amounted to around \$67 million.⁷⁹ United Jewish Communities and the Jewish Federations of North America rallied the Jewish community to raise more than \$28 million for Katrina relief by the storm's second anniversary.⁸⁰ Lutheran Disaster Response, a collaborative ministry of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America and the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod, held its first spring break project in March 2006, sending 1,100 students and faculty from 54 different colleges and universities to New Orleans and other Gulf Coast communities⁸¹



Hand-painted sign that stood on the former grounds of St. Clare Catholic Church in Waveland, Miss. following the hurricanes. All that was left of the once large brick church was its foundation. (Photo from St. Clare Recovery)

CROSSING FAITH LINES

Let there be one nation of you, calling to good...

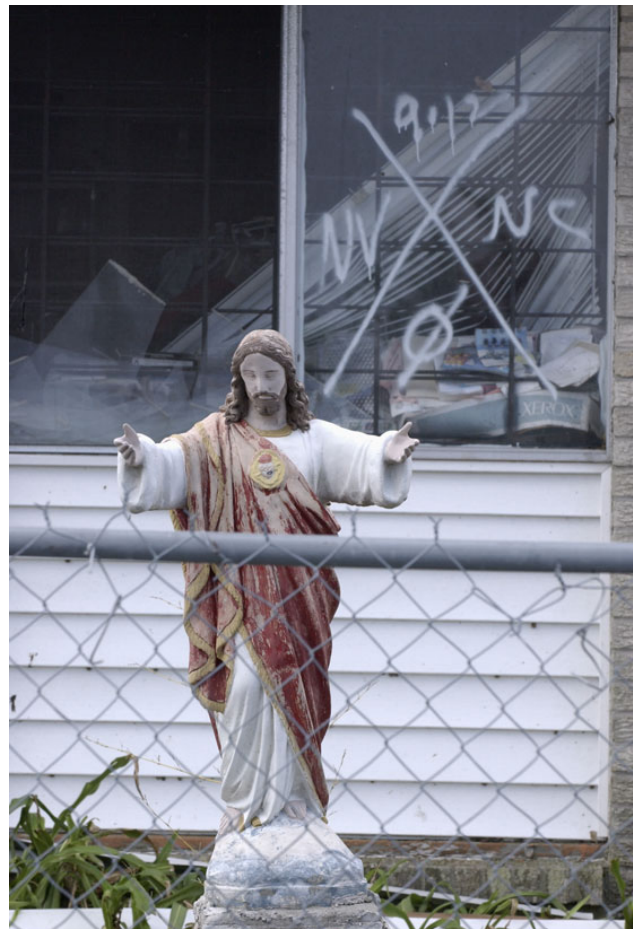
— THE QURAN 3:104

The faith response to Katrina was also marked by a unique level of interfaith cooperation that proved essential to success. A powerful example of this collaboration is St. Gabriel the Archangel Roman Catholic Church, an African-American congregation in New Orleans' Gentilly neighborhood that sat under 12 feet of water for three weeks. The majority of the surrounding community's housing was destroyed, and three members of the parish died in the storm.⁸² When Father Doug Doussan was able to return to his church five weeks later, he found a place devoid of life. "The mud and the silence seemed to say 'there is only death here.'" Father Doussan told himself at the time, "It is impossible to think that St. Gabriel's parish could ever come back to life."⁸³

But come back it did. Father Doussan quickly set to work phoning and emailing his parishioners—350 families displaced to 22 states—with updates, spiritual encouragement, and information about how St. Gabriel could help them return. He opened up the church to the wider community, allowing organizations to hold meetings there. To encourage parishioners to come home, the church helped them purchase up to \$1,800 worth of building materials.

A December 2007 article in the *Journal of American History* pointed out that Father Doussan was able to communicate effectively to archdiocese leaders "the church's capacity to rebuild and the role the church needed to play in rebuilding the neighborhood."⁸⁴ It went on to say that the resiliency and sacrifice of St. Gabriel "epitomizes the best features of the African American church experience" in New Orleans. The article quoted Kermit Mogilles, a St. Gabriel parishioner who has participated in the church's outreach efforts, saying that the churches will be "beacons of hope to the revitalization of communities."

National interfaith support also helped St. Gabriel serve as vital force for reviving Gentilly. Doussan estimates volunteers helped about 100 families return in the first year by cleaning out and gutting homes. And it was volunteers with the Philadelphia-based Jewish-Catholic Interfaith Community Building Group—formed in 1996 in response to a spree of black church fires in the South—who restored the church's statue of St. Gabriel to mint condition.



A religious statue stands next to a New Orleans house with markings indicating rescue workers searched it and found no bodies.

(Photo by Jocelyn Augustino/FEMA)

Father Doussan praised the work of national faith groups for helping to resurrect New Orleans after Katrina. "This city is being rebuilt by the determination of residents coming back, the tens of thousands of volunteers, and financial contributions from churches and other institutions," he said. "The outpouring of physical labor and financial assistance has helped to rebuild this city."

FAITH IN THE FUTURE: REBUILDING AND THE SPIRIT OF RENEWAL IN THE GULF

“Your ancient ruins shall be rebuilt; you shall raise up the foundations of many generations; you shall be called the repairer of the breach, the restorer of streets to live in.” — ISAIAH 58:12

In the aftermath of Hurricanes Katrina and Rita, the speed, coordination and effectiveness of the immense faith response to the disaster earned religious groups a national reputation and the respect and gratitude of storm victims across the Gulf Coast.

Today, the region faces a different and daunting challenge: shifting from hurricane relief and recovery to the long-term task of rebuilding and reviving entire communities.

From Biloxi to New Orleans, tens of thousands of families remain uprooted and displaced due to a shortage of affordable housing. Vital institutions such as schools, hospitals and childcare centers have yet to return to pre-Katrina levels. Neighborhoods remain in shambles and thousands of people have yet to fully piece their lives back together.

Faith organizations will be critical to the success of the long-term rebuilding effort. The leadership of faith organizations in the wake of the storms has uniquely positioned religious groups to be at the forefront of rebuilding initiatives. Perhaps more than any other civil society organizations, faith groups also bring a long-term vision, moral commitment and coordinated expertise and resources that will be critical ingredients to rebuilding the region.

The Gulf Coast is now at a critical moment. While national attention to the Katrina aftermath has faded, vital decisions remain about the region's future. After three years of hardship, many families and communities are still waiting for rebuilding efforts to reach the critical mass needed to succeed.

Speaking in New Orleans' Jackson Square on September 15, 2005, President George W. Bush said: “To all who carry a burden of loss, I extend the deepest sympathy of our country. To every person who has served and sacrificed in this emergency, I offer the gratitude of our country. And tonight I also offer this pledge of the American people: Throughout the area hit by the hurricane, we will do what it takes, we will stay as long as it takes, to help citizens rebuild their communities and their lives.”

Faith organizations can play a catalytic role in ensuring that our country lives up to its promise of rebuilding communities and lives in the Gulf Coast.



(Photo by National Council of Churches USA)



The Rev. Irvin Boudreaux discusses recovery efforts at Brooks United Methodist Church in New Orleans nearly a year after Katrina. (Photo by Mike DuBose, United Methodist News Service)

THE LONG-TERM CHALLENGE OF REBUILDING

*“Those who oppress the poor insult their Maker,
but those who are kind to the needy honor him.”*

— PROVERBS 14:31

The Gulf Coast has come a long way since Hurricanes Katrina and Rita struck in 2005, but immense barriers remain to rebuilding and renewal in the region.

According to one estimate, the total economic losses the Gulf Coast sustained from Katrina alone came to over \$150 billion dollars.⁸⁵ Given the scale of the tragedy, officials estimate it will take up to 10 years for the region to fully rebuild.⁸⁶

The pace of renewal has been greatly slowed by a lack of resources, especially from the federal government. As of August 2007, two years after the storms, total federal spending in response to Hurricanes Katrina and Rita totaled \$116 billion—a considerable sum but still far short of the total needed to revive the storm-ravaged region.⁸⁷

What’s more, the lion’s share of federal spending since Katrina struck has been spent on emergency relief and response, not long-term rebuilding needs. According to an August 2007 analysis by the Institute for Southern Studies, only about \$35 billion of the \$116 billion total appropriated by Washington had gone towards long-term rebuilding.⁸⁸

Meanwhile, the federal funds that have been directed to long-term rebuilding have often failed to reach those in need. In the same study, the Institute also found that out of the \$35 billion that had been earmarked for long-term rebuilding

by the two-year mark, more than half had not been spent.⁸⁹ As of August 2008, city leaders in New Orleans reported they had only \$1.3 billion in federal funding available to cover the city’s remaining rebuilding projects.⁹⁰

Compounding the lack of adequate public resources for rebuilding has been a massive shortfall in private insurance dollars reaching hurricane victims. Following the disaster, insurance companies paid out more than \$40 billion for hurricane damages. But a class-action lawsuit brought by homeowners argued that thousands were wrongfully denied coverage argued that thousands of homeowners were wrongfully denied coverage, limiting their access to much-needed rebuilding funds.⁹¹

In the aftermath of Katrina, people of faith and religious groups confronted this shortfall of public and private resources by leading a record-setting level of charitable giving for the Gulf Coast. As of August 2007, over \$6.5 billion in charitable giving had been made for Katrina causes, far out-pacing contributions made in the wake of 9/11 (under \$3 billion) and the Asian Tsunami (under \$2 billion).⁹² A substantial share of these contributions were made by, and coordinated through, people of faith and faith-based organizations.

Yet even the combination of government, insurance and charitable giving has not been enough to address the staggering scale of what’s needed. Put together, the total amount of federal rebuilding funds, private insurance claims and charitable gifts—the bulk of which were made soon after the storm and targeted for emergency response—has amounted to \$80 billion, far short of the total required to address the challenge of Gulf Coast rebuilding.⁹³

AFFORDABLE HOUSING: THE KEY BARRIER

“The bricks have fallen, but we will build with dressed stones.” — ISAIAH 9:10

One of the biggest obstacles to rebuilding in New Orleans and the Gulf Coast is the shortage of affordable housing. The hurricanes destroyed or damaged 302,000 housing units across the Gulf Coast.⁹⁴ Poor and low-income residents were especially hard-hit: Seven out of ten of the destroyed or damaged units—216,000 in all—were affordable to low income households, and 92,000 were affordable to very low income households.⁹⁵

Almost three years after the storm, some 42,000 people in the Gulf Coast were still living in temporary FEMA trailers and mobile homes.⁹⁶ In one survey, the majority of families in temporary housing reported low to moderate incomes, and about a third are disabled or elderly.⁹⁷ With affordable housing in short supply, 55 percent of those in temporary housing say they have nowhere else to live.⁹⁸

Currently, federal, state and local leaders have put forward no policy to ensure adequate levels of affordable housing. In Louisiana, the highest estimate of what officials plan to replace is 25,000 affordable housing units—30 percent of the total destroyed by Katrina.⁹⁹ Mississippi’s programs aim to repair or rebuild 47,000 units—barely half of the more than 90,000 that suffered moderate to severe damage.¹⁰⁰

Faith organizations have taken aggressive action to confront the affordable housing crisis in the Gulf Coast. After sheltering thousands of Katrina victims and mobilizing an army of volunteers to gut and repair tens of thousands of homes after the storms, faith institutions have now shifted their focus to rebuilding homes and entire communities.

Some religious housing initiatives are small in scale, centered around a neighborhood or house of worship. Others are large-scale developments that aim to bring 100 to 300 units of rental housing on the market at a time.

Given the large number of projects underway, the precise number of homes and rental units built by religious groups is difficult to determine. As of October 2007, five of the leading home building groups in New Orleans—the Episcopal Diocese of New Orleans’ Jericho Road Project, First Evangelist Baptist Church, Habitat for Humanity, Providence Community Housing, and Volunteers of America—had brought 350 housing units on the market.¹⁰¹ Today, these same five agencies have more than 4,100 housing units under construction or in development, with several hundred due to be available by the end of the year.¹⁰²

The number of housing units being built by faith-based groups is small in relation to the scale of the Gulf Coast’s affordable housing crisis. But when clustered in target neighborhoods such as Central City New Orleans, New Orleans East and Biloxi, Mississippi, they are providing to be a vital spark for neighborhood revival. In these communities they have also played a catalytic role in stimulating other governmental and private investment in housing and other services that can help tip the scales towards renewal.

“Each project may seem small on its own,” said Landon Williams, who heads up housing initiatives at the Louisiana Disaster Recovery Foundation. “But together, these faith-based housing initiatives are beginning to reach critical mass.”¹⁰³

As of October 2007, five leading faith groups in New Orleans had brought nearly 350 new affordable housing units on the market. Today, these same five agencies have more than 4,100 units under construction or in development.

Key to the success of faith-led home building projects has been their ability to tap a large base of volunteers, many with valuable construction expertise. Mennonite Disaster Service has earned a reputation for quickly deploying highly skilled construction teams. Presbyterian Disaster Assistance has rebuilt 565 homes and has pledged to build 350 new homes a year.¹⁰⁴ Baptist Builders—a collaboration of six leading Baptist organizations—organized the “2007 Baptist Blitz Build” to build 12 homes in 12 days for relocated families in Baton Rouge.¹⁰⁵ The group Baptist Men sent 16,000 volunteers to the Gulf Coast by early 2007, building 400 homes in Gulfport, Mississippi alone.¹⁰⁶ Several of these projects were coordinated through Habitat for Humanity, the Christian housing ministry that has built 101 homes in New Orleans since Katrina.¹⁰⁷

Faith organizations have also brought a valuable ability to leverage national resources and technical assistance. Providence Community Housing—a Catholic nonprofit that aims to restore, rebuild or construct 7,000 homes in five years for 20,000 residents—has partnered with Enterprise Community Partners, a national affordable housing developer, and attracted over \$265 million in state and federal tax credits.¹⁰⁸ “We bring resources, visibility, expertise, planning—all the pieces needed to make affordable housing happen,” said Andreanecia Morris of Providence.¹⁰⁹

Faith groups working in the Gulf have also put aside religious differences to cross denominational and faith lines. One of the most innovative partnerships is the Jericho Road project spearheaded by the Episcopal Diocese in New Orleans. Targeting Central City, a large swath of downtown that was once a center of African-American commerce but has become a symbol for urban blight, the Episcopal Church wanted a housing program that not only built homes but could play a part in the revival of the wider community. “Hurricane Katrina was a call to arms for disaster relief,” said Jericho Road Director Brad Powers. “It was also a call to end 40 years of urban neglect.”¹¹⁰

Since the one-year anniversary of Katrina, Jericho Road has constructed 17 houses eligible to low- and middle-income residents. It wouldn’t have happened without a pioneering alliance with CrossRoads Missions, an evangelical Christian charity based in Louisville, Kentucky.

Drawing on its experience in ministries from Appalachia to Mexico, CrossRoads mobilized its volunteers to quickly produce pre-fabricated homes that could be pieced together in Central City. “They’re assembled, numbered, Bible verses are written all over them, they’re disassembled, and then they’re shipped across the country,” said Bill Miller of CrossRoads Missions’ New Orleans operation. One Saturday morning in 2007, a group of 6,600 CrossRoads volunteers in Kentucky built 36 homes in just seven hours. Nearly half have been re-assembled in New Orleans by volunteers.¹¹¹



Mennonite volunteers from Maryland clean up after Katrina on Grand Isle, La. (Photo by Marvin Nauman/FEMA)

MORE THAN HOUSES

*“Be hospitable to one another without complaining.
Like good stewards of the manifold grace of God, serve
one another with whatever gift each of you has received.”*

— 1 PETER 4:9–10

Reviving communities involves more than building houses, and faith organizations have played a unique and important role in helping renew other key pieces of the Gulf Coast’s devastated social and economic infrastructure.

Houses of worship themselves have often been key to a community’s recovery. It’s been a challenge: Nearly two years after the storm, 30 percent of New Orleans’ 1,502 houses of worship had yet to return to operation.¹¹² However, the return of a church, synagogue or mosque has often been a spark for a community’s revival.

Rebuilding houses of worship has also allowed faith institutions to resume or expand social services they were forced to shut down or scale back after the storms. For example, Katrina devastated most of the 122 churches with which Frances Hawkins of the Baptist-based McFarland Institute had been working to promote Christian health ministries in New Orleans. As of fall 2007, that number had slowly built back up to 90, but many were still getting back on their feet.¹¹³

Faith-based groups have also invested tens of millions of dollars in rebuilding schools, colleges, hospitals and clinics and other vital pieces of the Gulf Coast social infrastructure. CHRISTUS Health, the Catholic health system, has invested over \$2 million in Louisiana recovery projects, including projects to stabilize the region’s devastated health care system.¹¹⁴ Mennonite Economic Development Associates has teamed up with Good Work Network—a nonprofit that helps connect small entrepreneurs with needed resources—to support the re-opening of child care centers throughout New Orleans.¹¹⁵

Less quantifiable—but just as important, according to New Orleans residents—is the vital role that the rebuilding of faith institutions plays in nourishing the social, psychological and spiritual needs of storm-ravaged communities.

“Bringing back houses of worship is important for our souls,” said Mary Baudouin with the Jesuits of New Orleans.¹¹⁶

INVESTING IN COMMUNITIES

“...be patient; surely God is with the patient.”

— THE QURAN 8:46

Faith organizations have also taken a role in helping communities address economic barriers, especially the lack of what some call the “patient capital” required for long-term rebuilding.

The biggest and most promising initiative to date is the newly launched Isaiah Funds, a partnership of Catholic, Jewish, Mennonite and Baptist institutions that has raised \$4.5 million for Gulf Coast rebuilding. Using a creative mix of loans and grants, the Fund is aiming to invest in affordable-housing projects, promising small business ventures and community centers in areas devastated by the hurricane. The group made its first commitment for \$500,000 this spring to the Gulf Coast Housing Partnership, which has finished about 600 units of affordable housing since the storm and is working on an additional 500 units, including projects in New Orleans’ Central City neighborhood.¹¹⁷

The founding backers of the Fund are all faith groups that have earned a reputation for their extensive involvement in Gulf Coast recovery from the beginning: the American Baptist Home Mission Society, CHRISTUS Health, Jewish Funds for Justice, Jesuits of the New Orleans Province and Mennonite Mutual Aid Community Development Investments.

The project draws on key ingredients that have made faith initiatives after Katrina successful, including focusing on close partnerships with local organizations and working across a broad range of faith traditions. “There was a massive, beautiful, immediate cash response by people all over the United States and people all over the world,” said Jeffrey Dekro of the Jewish Funds for Justice. “But very little was put aside for capital investment. As a consequence, especially in low-income communities, there’s a paucity of financial capital to do work that needs to be done today. That’s especially true given that public sector money has continued to be so delayed.”¹¹⁸

The Isaiah Funds build on previous efforts by faith groups to inject financial resources into storm-ravaged communities. Religious organizations have used their dollars to help shore up community banks and credit unions, institutions that are especially critical institutions in neighborhoods where the only access to credit and capital often comes from pawnshops and predatory lending operations. “People simply cannot come back to New Orleans unless they can get some start-up capital to repair or rebuild,” said Lynette Colin, formerly a Central City branch manager with HOPE Community Credit Union and now the executive director of the O.C. Haley Boulevard Merchants and Business Association in Central City.¹¹⁹

The Jewish Funds for Justice has mobilized more than \$3 million in grants, loans and deposits to institutions including HOPE, ASI Federal Credit Union and Liberty Bank & Trust. These organizations concentrate on underserved communities; ASI, for example, estimates one out of 10 of its members did not have bank accounts prior to joining.¹²⁰ These financial institutions also provide community services such as grants, financial literacy classes, and low-interest loans and training to business start-ups that can help kick-start economic activity in struggling neighborhoods.

The biggest and most promising faith-led rebuilding effort to date is the newly launched Isaiah Funds, which have raised \$4.5 million for grants and loans—the “patient capital” needed for long-term rebuilding.

Religious groups have understood the need to nourish Gulf residents’ ability to take advantage of economic opportunities. CrossRoads Missions and Jericho Road, for example, have teamed up with Café Reconcile, an innovative job training center in New Orleans, to match local youth with an initiative to construct 36 homes in Central City.¹²¹ Mennonite Economic Development Associates is launching a program where established construction companies will mentor small businesses engaged in new construction.¹²²

“Faith groups have been invaluable to our efforts to rebuild Central City,” said Colin. “They were here from the start, and they’ve shown they intend to stay as long as it will take.”

A PROPHETIC VOICE FOR A BETTER FUTURE

“Do not seek your own advantage, but that of the other.”

— 1 CORINTHIANS 10:24

It is clear that faith groups cannot replace the central role of government leadership in rebuilding the Gulf Coast. After surveying the critical role that nongovernmental agencies, including faith-based groups, have played post-Katrina, an October 2007 report by the Public Affairs Research Council of Louisiana and the Nelson A. Rockefeller Institute of Government concluded:

“The scale of devastation is so vast in Louisiana and across the Mississippi Gulf Coast that only the government has the capacity to handle significant rebuilding. The nonprofit sector was not meant to replace government as the primary agent of recovery.”¹²³

The report goes on to state that religious and other nonprofit groups can “buttress” and “fill in the gaps” of government programs, drawing on their unique strengths. “For the [Gulf Coast] recovery to proceed in a timely and substantial way,” the report found, “government must take the lead while the nonprofit, community-based, and faith-based organizations play a strong supporting role with their focus on the human element of the disaster.”¹²⁴

Other interfaith coalitions have been among the strongest advocates for New Orleans residents and a speedier, fairer recovery. All Congregations Together, a congregation-based community organization, and Louisiana Interfaith Together, part of the PICO national network of faith-based community groups, led efforts to accelerate and expand assistance to homeowners and renters and addressed other recovery issues.

Many leaders of faith-based projects in the Gulf Coast agree. “What we’re doing is important, but only government can take on a job this big,” said Brad Powers of the Jericho Road project in New Orleans. “We need to take an active role advocating for a better government response.”¹²⁵

This has led several faith organizations to complement their rebuilding and investment initiatives with efforts to strengthen the voice of Gulf Coast residents in decision-making and remind Washington leaders—and the public at large—of their obligations to rebuild the Gulf Coast.

In New Orleans, the Jeremiah Group—an interfaith organization affiliated with the Industrial Areas Foundation—brought its 13-year history of organizing on housing, education and other neighborhood issues to the challenges faced by Katrina survivors. Their community outreach found key issues standing in the way of rebuilding: “No matter who we talked to, the people would come together and say housing was their main priority,” recalled Jeremiah’s lead organizer, Jackie Jones. “People could not afford the increasing rents, and the process of getting money to help repair and get back into their homes was much too slow.”¹²⁶

The scale of devastation is so vast in Louisiana and across the Mississippi Gulf Coast that only the government has the capacity to handle significant rebuilding. The nonprofit sector was not meant to replace government as the primary agent of recovery.

The combined political muscle of several congregations enabled Jeremiah to score some important victories. The group helped push through reforms to Louisiana’s troubled Road Home compensation program for homeowners, getting an amendment to the state’s contract with private administrator ICF International that added performance benchmarks of at least 10,000 grant closings per month. Jeremiah leaders also prevented Louisiana from cutting funds for more affordable rental units—a big win for renters in New Orleans.¹²⁷ The Jeremiah Group is now promoting Project Homeownership, which calls on Louisiana officials to set aside 50 percent of properties sold back to the Road Home program for those wanting to buy homes, with a \$50,000 per home subsidy to make them affordable for working families.¹²⁸

“These leaders have been able to do all this while rebuilding their own congregations. It’s very powerful,” said Brod Bagert Jr., the local IAF organizer. “Congregations are coming on board to be at the policy-making center of rebuilding in New Orleans.”¹²⁹

Faith groups have also been instrumental in advocating for better post-Katrina rebuilding policy on the Mississippi Gulf Coast. A third of the groups making up the STEPS Coalition, an umbrella of grassroots organizations in Mississippi, are faith-affiliated. STEPS has spearheaded efforts to ensure that Mississippi lives up to its legal obligation to ensure 50 percent of federal recovery funds go to benefit low-income residents; as of December 2007, only 23 percent had gone to low-income Mississippians.¹³⁰

The support of national faith organizations has also been vital to the success of advocacy efforts in the Gulf Coast. For example, the Hispanic Apostolate of the Catholic Church in New Orleans teamed up with national allies including Interfaith Worker Justice of Chicago to draw attention to problems facing the region's burgeoning new immigrant workforce.

Gulf Coast advocacy has found critical support from faith-linked foundations and charities. The Catholic-affiliated Campaign for Human Development, Jewish Funds for Justice, and the Unitarian Universalist Association of Congregations-Unitarian Universalist Service Committee Gulf Coast Relief Fund have channeled millions of dollars directly into support for grassroots-led efforts to mobilize communities around pressing needs.¹³¹

Nationally, faith organizations have also played a vital role in keeping the issues of Gulf Coast renewal on the public policy agenda. In 2005, for example, the National Council of Churches established a Special Commission on the Just Rebuilding of the Gulf. The following year it released a Gulf Coast report card documenting the triumphs and failures of rebuilding in the region, and called on its network of 100,000 churches representing over 45 million congregants to continue advocating for speedy and fair recovery policy.¹³²

In a similar vein, in 2006 the Samuel DeWitt Proctor Conference—an interdenominational consortium of African-American faith leaders and congregations—established the Katrina National Justice Commission to examine the local, state and federal response to Hurricane Katrina from the perspective of the African-American church community. The Proctor Conference convened hearings in Washington, D.C., New Orleans and Houston similar to the 9/11 Commission hearings to gather accounts of problems in the disaster's aftermath and to identify critical next steps for long-term reconstruction and restoration.¹³³ The Conference coupled its findings—released in a 2006 report titled “The Breach: Bearing Witness”¹³⁴—with policy education and lobbying to hold federal agencies accountable. As Proctor Conference General Secretary Dr. Iva E. Carruthers stated: “We are called to help those who have been further marginalized by Katrina. We are called to take care of those who have been displaced. We are called to restore hope in Katrina victims and in this nation, as we seek to redress the effects of this disaster and to fulfill the promises of American democracy.”¹³⁵



Archbishop Alfred Hughes greets parishioners following the first services held at New Orleans' St. Louis Cathedral after Katrina. (Photo by Greg Henshall/FEMA)

Today, people of faith and religious institutions continue to play a key role in keeping the Katrina tragedy and Gulf Coast rebuilding on the national radar in another way: by continuing to sponsor service trips and deploy thousands of volunteers a month to the region. In addition to supplying much-needed time, energy and expertise, they have become valuable ambassadors for change in the Gulf Coast. The first-hand testimony of volunteers who have returned to their home communities has provided a vital link between the Gulf Coast and broader public. The ongoing efforts of national faith communities to remember and respond to Katrina has made religious organizations nationally one of the most important allies Gulf Coast residents have for mobilizing needed federal support.

“Tell everyone you know about what’s happening down here,” said Pam Dashiell, a longtime leader in the Holy Cross neighborhood in the Lower Ninth Ward. “Don’t let them ever forget.”¹³⁶

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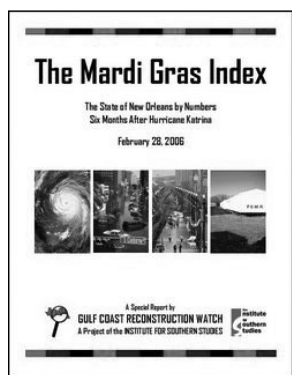
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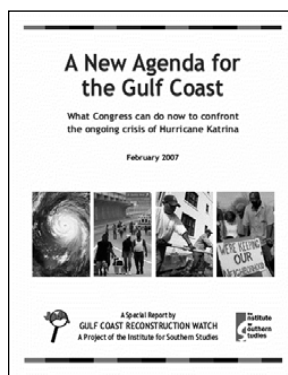
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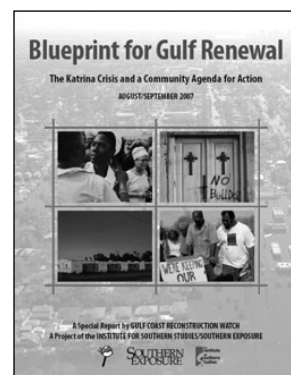
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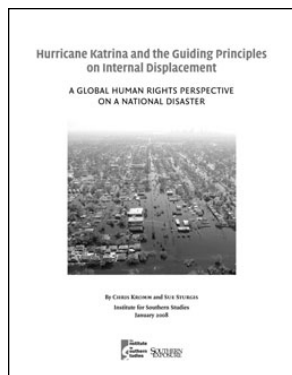
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