

“An Anchor to the People”: Hurricane Katrina, Religious Life, and Recovery in New Orleans

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Hurricane Katrina was a monster storm. As it approached the Louisiana coast on Sunday, August 28, 2005 the hurricane strengthened to a Category 5. Its devastating winds of 115-130 miles an hour extended over 100 miles from its center. Americans watched with horror on Monday morning, August 29, 2005 as the killer storm made landfall in Louisiana and threatened the city of New Orleans. Built largely below sea level, the city was protected by a 350-mile levee system, one that proved to be tragically vulnerable. Though initially it appeared that the city had avoided a direct hit, over the following eighteen hours the levees began to breach, and within hours 80 percent of the city was flooded under six to twenty feet of water. The hurricane and floods destroyed some 300,000 homes, about 80 percent of which were in New Orleans. An estimated 1,330 people died—again, about 80 percent of whom lived in New Orleans—and in Louisiana over 70 percent of those killed were older than sixty. Over 1 million people evacuated and approximately 770,000 were displaced, the largest number of Americans forced out of their homes and communities since the Dust Bowl migrations of the 1930s. The images of the tragedy that unfolded—people trapped and dying on rooftops, evacuation centers like the Superdome and New Orleans Convention Center spiraling into disaster, scenes of looting, violence and disorder—were seared into the national consciousness and cast in high relief the failure of the government at every level to respond adequately to the unfolding tragedy.¹

Confronted with a growing catastrophe, faith-based groups and agencies, along with other non-governmental organizations (NGOs), rushed to fill the void. In its own assessment of its response, the federal government acknowledged that “faith-based organizations . . . provided extraordinary services.” They ran mobile kitchens and recovery centers, provided emergency shelter, organized food and clothing drives, and converted facilities into distribution centers. “More often than not, NGOs successfully contributed to the relief effort in spite of government obstacles and with almost no government support or direction. Time and again, government agencies did not effectively coordinate relief operations with NGOs.” Time and again, by its own admission, the government proved to be more a hindrance than a help. “Even when agencies matched non-governmental aid with an identified need,” the federal report noted, “there were problems moving goods, equipment, and people into the disaster area. For example, the government relief effort was unprepared to meet the fundamental food, housing, and operational needs of the surge volunteer force.”²

Hurricane Katrina destroyed churches and scattered congregations throughout the city. In the aftermath, many churches and religious organizations changed their mission. They did their best to compensate for the inadequate responses of local, state, and federal governments. Churches acted as first responders, then became instrumental in rebuilding efforts. Churches have been devastated, but at the same time they have served as relief centers and islands of stability and reconstruction for neighborhoods in crisis. Churches and faith-based groups from across the nation have poured millions of dollars into the city and brought in over one million volunteers to help rebuild. Never before in United States history have churches and faith-based groups played such a fundamental role in disaster recovery efforts, and never before has a city seen its religious life so completely

1. *The Federal Response to Hurricane Katrina: Lessons Learned* (February 23, 2006), 1-9.

2. *Ibid.*, 63.

transformed.

I.

The United Methodist Church's episcopal structure presented that denomination with unique challenges and resources as it responded to the storm's impact. Most of the fifty United Methodist Churches in the New Orleans area suffered damage; some were destroyed, others were located in devastated neighborhoods, and in almost every church, congregants had scattered. In February 2006 the leadership announced its recovery plan. No churches would be closed in the short term. The New Orleans region was divided into seven Mission Zones with a total of thirty-eight churches; each zone had a clergy team and a team leader. Aurora United Methodist Church and St. Matthews UMC hosted Storm Relief/Recovery Stations funded by United Methodist Committee on Relief (UMCOR). Bishop William W. Hutchinson declared that the "United Methodist Church will continue to make disciples for Christ, even in the most affected areas of the city. New Orleans is, in many ways, starting over from scratch. This approach will treat the devastated areas as a mission field, building on bold, creative approaches to deliver the Gospel."³

Assistance poured in from United Methodist Churches across the nation. Individual churches sent chain saw brigades to clear trees and volunteers to help clean and gut homes. They sometimes adopted displaced families and established storm centers. As disaster struck, the Church's leaders established the United Methodist Storm Recovery Center (UMSRC) in Baton Rouge, and within months disaster recovery stations were operating around New Orleans. The UMSRC helped clients rebuild their homes, assisted them in applying for aid from agencies like Louisiana's Road Home Program, and offered counseling services. By 2007 UMSRC had attracted over 28,000 volunteers, served over 32,500 clients, and brought in almost \$30 million in-kind donations. A special national appeal to United Methodist Churches called Hurricanes 2005 raised a denominational record \$66.5 million in gifts. The United Methodist Church's national reach and stature enabled UMCOR to attract national grant support of \$66 million. UMCOR led a consortium of nine social service and volunteer groups from across the nation called Katrina Aid Today with funds from international donations managed by the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA).⁴ UMCOR was already working with FEMA to train relief workers for a group of evacuees housed on a ship anchored in the Gulf of Mexico. The nine organizations had branches in over thirty states giving them a huge network of volunteers and brought with them a pool of trained case managers. By the end of 2006, Katrina Aid Today had provided assistance to approximately 90,000 people and was expected to aid an additional 200,000 by the end of the grant in March 2008. In addition UMCOR helped fund sixteen grassroots relief organizations that served approximately 1,000 families by the end of 2006.⁵

The national reach of the United Methodist Church has been instrumental in attracting and organizing tens of thousands of volunteers whose contribution to rebuilding efforts is immeasurable. The Reverend Amy Mercer, Director of Operations for the Louisiana United Methodist Disaster

3. *Louisiana Now* (<http://www.la-umc.org/extranews2>).

4. The consortium included Boat People SOS, Falls Church, VA; Catholic Charities USA, Alexandria, VA; Episcopal Relief and Development, New York, NY; Lutheran Disaster Response, Chicago, IL; National Disability Rights Network, Washington, DC; Odyssey House of Louisiana, New Orleans, LA; Salvation Army THQ, Atlanta, GA; Society of St. Vincent De Paul, St. Louis, MO; and Volunteers of America, Alexandria, VA.

5. "Miracles of Connection": UMCOR 2006 Annual Report (available online at <http://www.la-umc.org/katrina07>); United Methodist Storm Recovery Center website <http://www.la-umc.org/>.

Recovery Ministry, noted that over 40,000 volunteers have been hosted so far. “They have come from all over the state, the nation and the world. People have been so kind and generous . . . but we don’t want them to forget about us. We still have a long way to go.” Her group has served more than 16,870 clients. Their volunteers gutted more than 3,000 houses, completed more than 1,500 major repairs, and rebuilt more than 465 homes.

Some UM churches have made an extraordinary commitment to rebuilding New Orleans. For example, Woods Chapel United Methodist Church in Lee Summit, Missouri has a mission project called “Matthew 28 Project.” The church has set up a trailer in New Orleans for a long-term volunteer from their congregation. Every thirty days a new volunteer coordinator arrives from Woods Chapel. “These volunteers serve as construction helpers and interact with work teams and help in other ways. The nice thing is that they automatically have housing because of the trailer set up by their church,” Mercer said. A March 2007 report from one of the Woods Chapel volunteers, Bill Cook, gives some idea of what the work is like. Cook supervised three teams at the time he filed his report. He supplied the groups with tools and transportation and supervised the work. Seven women from Maryland gutted houses. Ten people from the First United Methodist Church in Green Bay, Wisconsin, worked to restore the Methodist Church next door, allowing for the first Sunday service to be held there since Katrina. This was the fifth group to come to New Orleans from the Green Bay church. Cook noted that all twenty of the volunteers slept and ate in an empty child care center nearby, sleeping in bunk beds laid out dormitory style. A set of ear plugs enabled him to get a good night’s sleep over the loud snoring. These groups would depart on Friday, and new groups would arrive the following Sunday. “And, so it goes,” Cook wrote; “week after week, month after month, and—sadly—year after year.”⁶

Despite the fatigue that sometimes plagues volunteers like Cook, a surprising number return time after time. Darrell Guillory, Operations Coordinator for the Eastbank Disaster Recovery Station in Kenner, Louisiana, a suburb of New Orleans, reported that over half of their 13,000 volunteers come back more than once: “It’s like a reunion every time they come.” His station closed over 2,000 cases, and their focus has shifted from gutting houses to rebuilding them. They have rebuilt eighteen houses so far. “The construction process is much slower, but it is very rewarding,” noted Shonell Dillon, Supervisor of Case Management there. Like agencies across the city, Guillory observed that a large percentage of their volunteers were young people. “It really touches me to see their enthusiasm,” he said. “They could be kicking back at the mall and relaxing, but they are here . . . helping Louisiana to rebuild.”

The story was similar at United Methodist stations around the New Orleans area. Dale Kimball, Operations Coordinator for the Slidell-Northshore Disaster Recovery Station, located north of New Orleans, reported: “We should finish our 400th house in October or November. At this point, we are probably 80 percent completed with our cases. I think we should be finished in another nine months on the northshore. We are already working on six houses on the southshore. For us, the end is in sight.” Kimball noted that 12,000 volunteers had worked in his station, an average of 250 people every week during the summer months. The Abbeville station reported 150 major repairs and seventeen houses rebuilt with another 120 or so to come. The Westbank station reported that 1,400 cases had been closed and sixty-five houses were being rebuilt. Over 5,000 volunteers had worked there. The Uptown station, which served the devastated Lower Ninth Ward,

6. Woods Chapel website (<http://www.woods Chapel church.org/>); United Methodist Church Council of Bishops website <http://bishops. umc.org/>.

had eleven homes under construction and 800 cases still open, half categorized as rebuilds.⁷

United Methodist Churches in the hard-hit areas of the city have struggled to rebuild. At seventy-eight, the Reverend Andrew Douglas has no thoughts of retiring. Instead, he ministers to two predominantly black churches heavily hit by the storm. One of the levee breaches occurred only four blocks from his home, which was quickly flooded, destroying everything he and his wife owned. He, his wife, and his sister-in-law evacuated to Jackson, Mississippi where they spent nineteen days sleeping on the gymnasium floor at the New Jerusalem Missionary Baptist Church. When he and his wife, Alice, returned to their home in the Seventh Ward they found that water had filled the house up to the ceiling. “We took a beating,” he said, but he remained steadfast in his faith: “The God you serve will neither leave you nor abandon you,” he said, as he stood outside his ruined home. The couple soon moved into a trailer across the street from one of his churches, Asbury United Methodist Church, which suffered wind damage in the storm. When he gave an interview in May 2006, the neighborhood was still largely abandoned except for the volunteers who were busy gutting houses in the area. His second church, St. Matthew United Methodist Church, saw even more damage. Services had resumed at Asbury by the time of the interview, though the Sunday worship service drew from 160 to 190 people, about half of the attendance before the storm. Church members were scattered from Tennessee to Indiana, to Georgia, to Texas, and high rents, three or four times as high as before the storm, prevented many of them from returning. Despite the smaller congregation, Douglas noted with pride that the church paid its apportionments to the Louisiana conference. He believes that rebuilding churches is essential for the recovery of the city. “If they're not rebuilt, we're going to lose those people,” he said. “We are very present in this neighborhood,” he noted with pride. A large banner on the side of the church building reads, “The United Methodist Church is OPEN. Open Hearts, Open Doors, Open Minds, God is here for you in the midst of the storms of life.”⁸

II.

The response of the United Methodist Church serves as an example of the remarkable efforts sponsored by other mainline Protestant denominations. The Southern Baptist Convention's North American Mission Board (NAMB), the Louisiana Baptist Convention, and the Baptist Association of Greater New Orleans combined forces to create a relief organization called Operation Noah. In Spring 2006 the group began rebuilding houses and churches in New Orleans. By October 2007, almost 17,000 volunteers from all fifty states and Canada had joined the effort. They gutted almost 600 homes, had over 230 under construction, with over 1,400 still on their list. In addition, they gutted three churches, rebuilt another five, had fifteen under construction, and eighteen still on their list. The ultimate goal for the organization is to rebuild 1,000 houses and twenty churches by August 2009. Southern Baptists estimate that 30,000 Baptists have volunteered in the New Orleans area. Several state Baptist conventions have “adopted” sections of New Orleans where they concentrate their volunteer efforts. “We are so appreciative of the tremendous numbers of young people, both high school and college, that have spent their spring breaks gutting homes, mowing, rebuilding homes and building Kingdom relationships,” said Freddie Arnold, association missionary for the Baptist Association of Greater New Orleans. The \$5 million set aside for Project

7. <http://www.la-umc.org/lanow/archives/>

8. UMC Disaster Recovery Ministry, Louisiana Conference website, <http://www.laumcstormrelief.com/>.

NOAH was drawn from \$22 million contributed to Southern Baptist clean-up, recovery, and rebuilding projects. Immediately after the storm, NAMB sent \$11 million to the state Baptist conventions in the hurricane-affected areas.⁹

Presbyterian Disaster Assistance (PDA) raised over \$20 million in donations; they had disbursed \$8 million by the end of 2007 with the intention of spreading out funding over five years. They raised an additional \$3.8 million for church repairs, pastors' salaries, and support to presbyteries in devastated areas. The PDA sponsored 31,350 volunteers who gave over 1 million hours of service; long-term volunteers gave another 70,520 hours of service. The PDA volunteers worked on 3,380 homes and completely rebuilt 565 homes.¹⁰

Episcopal Relief and Development (ERD) developed a four-phase plan to assist with the recovery effort. In the immediate aftermath of the storm the ERD provided food, water, and medicine, and supported case management services, counseling, health care, and rebuilding efforts. Phase Two began in October 2005 and ran until June 2006. Three distribution centers were set up in Louisiana to provide relief and shelter for clean-up crews. Phase Three ran from June 2006 into 2007 and continued crisis intervention and post-traumatic counseling, medical services, volunteer support, and case management. Phase Four will focus on long-term efforts including a mobile medical unit to provide health care in under-served areas, and a free clinic in New Orleans. The ERD operated two Welcome Home Centers: one at John McDonogh High School provided meals, tutoring, and financial aid to students and families, and another in the devastated Lakeview area offered child care, referrals to contractors, access to computers, faxes, copiers, and a laundromat. The center also provided housing for volunteer crews. The ERD assisted with over 60,000 cases, representing nearly 160,000 people. Its most innovative initiative is a housing program called Jericho Road, to which the ERD provided \$2.3 million in seed money. Among its programs, Jericho Road acquired fifty of about 2,000 properties sold by the city of New Orleans for non-payment of taxes and made available to non-profits. The group expects to make scores of homes available to low-income families clustered in the Central City neighborhood to maximize impact. Jericho will sell modular homes at cost, about \$115,000, and equip them with appliances and central heat and air. The program provides financing to applicants who earn 80 percent or less of the average median income for the New Orleans metro area (about \$40,000 for a family of four). With additional funding from the Whitney Development Corporation, Jericho Road expects to invest over \$20 million in Central City. The program installed its first modular homes, built in a traditional shotgun style, in August 2006, and had built thirteen homes by the end of 2007.¹¹

As attention shifts from short-term relief to long-term assistance, a number of faith-based agencies like Jericho Road are focusing their efforts on low-income housing. Church World Service, a humanitarian relief agency based in New York, formed a \$4 million partnership with Habitat for Humanity to provide \$10,000 grants to families for home repair. The grant repaired 443 houses by 2007 and expected another 202 to be completed by Spring 2008. As of August 2007 Habitat for Humanity completed 59 new homes with another 115 under construction in the New Orleans area. Among Habitat's partners in New Orleans is the Baptist Crossroads Project (BCP), organized before the storm by the First Baptist Church of New Orleans. Originally, the BCP planned to fund the construction of forty homes, but in the wake of Katrina, the church expanded that vision to fund an

9. Operation Noah website (<http://www.namb.net/site/>); Colorado Baptists website (<http://saturatecolorado.com/>).

10. These figures apply to the entire Gulf Coast region. “Report on Response to 2005 Hurricanes” available at <http://www.pcusa.org/pda/response/usa/gulfcoast/katrina-2yearslater.htm>.

11. *Times Picayune*, February 25, 2007; *Churchwork*, September 2006; Jericho Road website (<http://www.jerichohousing.org/churchwork.html>); Episcopal Diocese of Louisiana website (<http://edola.org/news/>).

additional 300 homes in the heavily damaged Upper Ninth Ward. The project will require an estimated 60,000 volunteers over the next five years. “We’re going to try to bring a new city out of the flood zone,” Dr. David Crosby of the First Baptist Church explained, “and prayer is a key to it.”¹²

The most notable project sponsored by Habitat and supported by Baptist Crossroads, and the largest project currently underway in the city, is the Musicians’ Village, located in the Upper Ninth Ward. The storm scattered New Orleans’ musicians across the country, and high rents, a housing shortage, and the evaporation of the tourist industry made it impossible for many of them to return. Two of the city’s most famous artists, Harry Connick, Jr. and Branford Marsalis, envisioned the Musicians’ Village as a solution to their problems. “Music is the essence of New Orleans,” Connick insisted, “and we adamantly refuse to surrender it to the wind and water.” That star power has made the Musicians’ Village one of the most high-profile projects in the city. President George W. Bush, former President Jimmy Carter, presidential candidate Barack Obama, and Crown Prince Haakon of Norway are among those who have worked as laborers on the project. The Dave Mathews Band gave a \$1.5 million challenge grant, the band Little Feat donated \$20,000, while BP American contributed \$250,000 and Shell Oil added \$500,000. Habitat acquired eight acres as a site for the village; construction began in March 2006, and by December 2007 seventy homes had been completed or were under construction. The homes, built in traditional New Orleans styles and painted in bright tropical yellows, pinks, and blues, sell for \$70,000. Residents are also required to donate 350 hours every year to projects with children. At the center of the Village is the Ellis Marsalis Center for Music, a \$5.5 million facility with a 150-seat performance space and a state-of-the-art sound and lighting system. Perhaps most importantly for the musicians, the Center will contain recording studio facilities that will enable them to record and distribute their music. Habitat has acquired an additional 300 lots in the area immediately surrounding the Village for additional construction, many of which will be used by Baptist Crossroads. Bandleader Fredy Omar, who bought one of the homes in the Village, said, “I’m excited about the future, about my new home, and about the new opportunities that will become available as we rebuild. I am especially honored that I will be living in the Musicians’ Village and cannot wait to begin teaching music to the neighborhood children.”

The project has not been without controversy. Many musicians, whose careers are not always financially stable, have not been approved for mortgages, and many others have not bothered to apply given their poor credit histories. Joseph Andrews’s band mates in the Rebirth Brass Band call him “the poster child” for the Village because his picture appears next to Habitat’s online donation form for the project, even though he was rejected. The New Birth Brass Band played at the Village for two of President Bush’s visits, but Andrews’s band mates did not qualify either. Indeed, half of the original applicants were rejected, and Habitat has opened the project up to non-musicians. Case workers have used gig notes and newspaper notices of performances to prove income for applicants. Cherice Harrison-Nelson, counsel queen for a Mardi Gras Indian tribe called Guardians of the Flame and a successful Village applicant, has assisted some musicians in their efforts to gain entry into the Village. She noted that “Creative people are creative 24/7. They pay

12. Church World Service website (<http://www.churchworldservice.org/Emergencies/domestic/2005/katrina.html>); Baptist Crossroads Project website (<http://www.baptistcrossroads.org/>); New Orleans Area Habitat for Humanity website (http://www.habitat-nola.org/projects/baptist_crossroads.php).

their bills creatively too.” While Harrison-Nelson praised Habitat for their efforts, she observed that “working for a community and working in a community are two different things.” As of February 2007, of forty-eight approved applicants, thirty were musicians, with 117 applications from artists still under review.¹³

III.

The Catholic Church, the largest denomination in the New Orleans area, faced unique challenges. Before Katrina, the Archdiocese of New Orleans had 480,000 members out of a total population of 1.4 million and 142 churches in eight parishes. In addition, the church’s parochial school system served approximately 50,000 students in over 100 schools, roughly the same size as the city’s public school system. The losses suffered by the Archdiocese were staggering. The storm damaged 1,274 buildings owned by the Church; 864 buildings had severe wind damage and 397 had severe flood damage. The Church estimated the total loss at \$250 million. As disaster struck, priests ministered to those in need. Two priests comforted people stranded in the Superdome after the storm, three others ministered to storm victims at Louis Armstrong International Airport where the sick were being treated, and two more worked at local hospitals under terrible conditions and were among the last to leave, nearly a week after the storm struck. Priests ministered to rescue workers and to the traumatized people they rescued, while others gave succor to the families of policemen, firefighters, and rescue workers who were living on boats on the Mississippi River.¹⁴

Though damages were severe, the Church’s infrastructure survived and made it possible for the Church to respond quickly to the crisis. Catholic Charities stepped in with over \$7 million in direct survival assistance to over 700,000 people, established community centers to provide emergency assistance, and established a clinic in a downtown hotel to immunize, treat, and counsel first responders. Second Harvest, established by the Church to fight hunger in the region, attempted to meet the desperate needs of people trapped in the city. The New Orleans facilities were deserted and quickly looted, but within forty-eight hours from the time the storm made landfall, Second Harvest employees and volunteers worked from Baton Rouge and then out of a vacant Wal-Mart building in Baker, Louisiana in a valiant effort to get supplies to those trapped in the Morial Convention Center and other places around New Orleans. Three weeks after Katrina struck, Hurricane Rita hit western Louisiana, also served by Second Harvest. The scope of the tragedy was unprecedented and stretched resources to the limits. In an average year before the storms, the agency distributed about 14 million pounds of food, but in the year after Katrina, the agency supplied over 50 million pounds of food in southern Louisiana. Soon the Church had set up ten community centers to offer emergency assistance throughout the New Orleans areas. Second Harvest distributed an average of 10 million pounds of food a month, and Church agencies gave \$200,000 in direct aid every week to those in need. By 2007, Second Harvest had distributed 70 million pounds of food to an estimated four million people.¹⁵

As quickly as possible, the Church moved from its focus on emergency relief to an effort to promote recovery. Within two weeks after disaster struck, the Archdiocese of New Orleans Office of Catholic Schools reopened schools in the areas where damage was less severe. The practical and psychological impact of the reopening of schools was especially important at a time when only a few public schools had reopened; families with children could return to the city, and the Catholic

13. New Orleans Area Habitat for Humanity website (http://www.habitat-nola.org/projects/baptist_crossroads.php); *Christian Science Monitor*, February 15, 2007; *Times Picayune*, August 26, 2006, January 2, 2007, June 12, 2007.

14. *Clarion Herald*, August 18, 2007; *Times Picayune*, November 3, 2005.

15. *Ibid.*; Second Harvest website at http://www.no-hunger.org/about_us/katrina.htm; Archbishop Alfred C. Hughes, “Pastoral Plan for the Next Stage of Recovery, Archdiocese of New Orleans,” February 9, 2006.

schools welcomed all children, whether or not they had attended Catholic schools before. The Office of Catholic Schools provided more than \$2 million in scholarships and educated 500 former public school students at no cost to them. By February 2006 the Church had reopened 107 of 142 parishes – six parishes were permanently closed – and 81 of 107 schools. Donations poured in from across the country and around the world; the Diocese received more than \$60 million in donations that it distributed to schools, parishes, and nursing homes. All told, by August 2007 Catholic Charities had served over 1 million people.¹⁶

As a part of the recovery effort, the Catholic Church, like other churches in the area, turned its attention to housing. Nearly 11,500 volunteers gutted 1,800 homes for the elderly, for people with disabilities, and for the uninsured. In a more ambitious long-term effort, the Church organized a coalition of faith-based groups called Providence Community Housing (PCH) with the goal of bringing over 20,000 displaced victims of Katrina back to New Orleans by restoring and developing 7,000 homes over a five-year period. The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) and the Housing Authority of New Orleans (HANO) chose PCH to oversee the redevelopment of the Lafitte public housing project in the historic Tremé neighborhood. Established as a free black neighborhood in the antebellum period, Tremé had fallen on hard times in recent years. Median household income stood at \$10,500, and nearly 75 percent of children lived in poverty. Four of every five residents were renters. PCH plans to replace all of the 900 apartments in the Lafitte Project and to build 600 affordable homes for working families on the site. In addition, the organization envisioned up to 950 homes and apartments in the surrounding neighborhood. The city awarded PCH almost 200 adjudicated properties in the area. Catholic Charities and other donors have given \$2.5 million to provide services for former Lafitte residents who want to return. State and federal housing agencies will provide over \$100 million to support the project. PCH received \$51 million in low income housing tax credits and \$28 million in funds for housing for senior citizens. PCH aims to restore and build 7,000 homes in the area at a cost of \$700 million. Leah Chase, owner of Dooky Chase restaurant, expressed the hopes of area residents for the rebirth of their neighborhood: “We have to do better things. I never get sentimental about a building. I’m about people . . . if we hustle and work together we can have a good city. We can build this city up one block at a time.”¹⁷

Despite its commitment to the Tremé neighborhood, Archbishop Hughes’ decision to close St. Augustine Parish, one of the city’s most historic parishes located in the heart of the Tremé, led to an uproar and a public relations nightmare. The Archdiocese planned “to close damaged churches, dissolve struggling parishes and re-assign priests” as it struggled to cope with \$84 million in uninsured losses from the storm, but many people questioned the decision to target such a historically and culturally significant parish. St. Augustine was founded by free black people and slaves in 1841, and understands itself to be the oldest predominantly black parish in the country. A few months before the October 1842 dedication of the Church, the free people of color began to purchase family pews. Neighborhood whites responded by launching a campaign to buy more pews than the free people of color. Labeled “The War of the Pews,” the free people of color prevailed and purchased three pews to every one bought by the whites. The free people of color bought pews on the side aisles and gave those pews to enslaved church members. The Congregation of the Sisters

16. Hughes, “Pastoral Plan”; *Clarion Herald*, August 18, 2007.

17. “Building Healthy, Diverse, and Vibrant Communities,” Providence Community Housing website (<http://www.providencecommunityhousing.org/>).

of the Holy Family, the nation’s second order of African American women religious, was founded at St. Augustine in 1842. Among the Church’s most famous members was Homer Plessy whose fight for equality led to the “separate but equal” Supreme Court decision of 1896.¹⁸

Under the ministry of Father Jerome LeDoux, who came to St. Augustine’s in 1990, the Church reemerged as the spiritual and cultural heart of the Tremé. A learned and charismatic man, LeDoux was born in Lake Charles, Louisiana. He attended the St. Augustine Seminary in Bay St. Louis, Mississippi, then spent four years in Rome where he earned a master’s degree in sacred theology and a Ph.D. in church law. He taught at St. Augustine’s Seminary and Xavier University in New Orleans and served as a priest in Texas before taking the helm at St. Augustine. LeDoux transformed the church. He integrated jazz, gospel, brass bands, African drumming and dancing, the Mardi Gras Indian tradition, and West African dress into his services, and encouraged the congregation to participate actively in services. The Church’s decor reflected his unconventional approach. He replaced the traditional pulpit with a huge polished twisted tree trunk, placed the Bible on an easel also made from a tree trunk, and hung little pennants from the balcony emblazoned with the principles of Kwanzaa in Swahili: Faith (Imani), Unity (Umoja), Purpose (Nia). His innovative approach attracted worshipers of all races, backgrounds, and incomes. Despite his popularity and the respect he showed for the history and culture of his church and neighborhood, the Church suffered from the poverty and decline that gripped the Tremé. Membership lagged, the weekly collection hovered in the \$1,500 range, and church buildings were in disrepair. Money was so short that LeDoux seldom took a salary, and perhaps most problematic for the Archdiocese, the Church’s monthly assessment of \$2,000 was \$227,000 in arrears.¹⁹

As a result of the financial troubles brought on by the devastations of Katrina, Archbishop Hughes appointed a committee to draw up a plan to deal with the crisis. He asked Father Michael Jacques, priest at St. Peter Claver and LeDoux’s immediate superior, to head the committee. The committee’s plan called for the closing of seven parishes and the suspending of an additional twenty-three to see whether their congregations could recover. Hughes brought together a group of church leaders to review the plan before it was made public. One proposal was to close the parish of St. Augustine and remove LeDoux. St. Augustine would become a part of Jacques’ parish, a plan Jacques first proposed six years earlier. Present at that meeting was Joe Simon, Reverend Provincial of the Society of the Divine Word, LeDoux’s order, who was a friend and admirer of LeDoux’s for over fifty years. Simon felt that the decision to remove LeDoux was made by Jacques because he saw the popular LeDoux as a rival. According to Simon, “I felt the decision was very personal. He was a threat to Father Jacques. There was no way Jacques could generate the kind of prestige that LeDoux had.” Not surprisingly, Jacques denied that charge and insisted that the decision was “purely administrative.” Simon and other insiders also charged that the original proposal called for the removal of every African American priest in the archdiocese, a result of the highly charged racial atmosphere in the city after the storm. In Simon’s view, “Archbishop Hughes kept saying the plan wasn’t about race. But it was.” A group of priests concerned about the proposal convinced Hughes to accept some revisions, but the decision to close St. Augustine parish and remove LeDoux stood.²⁰

Ironically, Hurricane Katrina set in motion a revitalization of St. Augustine. Unlike many churches in the city, St. Augustine suffered relatively little damage and quickly resumed its unorthodox services. LeDoux’s celebration of New Orleans’ history and culture took on an added

18. St. Augustine website (<http://www.staugustinecatholicchurch-neworleans.org/hist-sum.htm>); *Louisiana Weekly*, June 4-10, 2007.

19. *Louisiana Weekly*, June 4-10, 2007; *New Yorker*, February 28, 2007.

20. *Louisiana Weekly*, June 4-10, 2007; *Times Picayune*, November 3, 2005.

resonance after the storm; attendance at Mass began to climb, as did the weekly collection, and LeDoux celebrated the emergence of what he called the “Katrina congregation.” The Church also provided relief to the community; it operated a free food pantry, feeding a hundred people every day, a clothing distribution center, and a counseling center. Under those circumstances, the February 2006 announcement of the decision to close the parish and remove LeDoux met with outrage. Michael Valentino, a local businessman who sat on the parish council at the time, pledged to raise \$1 million to support the Church. A request from the parish council for meeting with Hughes got no response. LeDoux, Valentino, and Sandra Gordon, parish council president, met with Jacques to argue their case, but their efforts were unsuccessful. Hughes’ announcement that the plan would go forward led to loud protests. Allegedly, Hughes criticized LeDoux for wearing dashikis instead of traditional garb and for integrating jazz into his services. He also charged that LeDoux was fanning the protests.²¹

Later in March, LeDoux left town for a meeting, and a dozen protesters occupied the rectory. Led by Suncere Ali Shakur, the group included only two parishioners, a fact not lost on the church hierarchy. Tensions rose higher and higher as the Archdiocese continued to stonewall. Jacques Morial, a parishioner and a sit-in participant, said, “We were prepared to stay for months. We were doing what we thought we had to do.” On Sunday, March 26, 2006, Father Jacques came to St. Augustine to celebrate the first Mass since Father LeDoux was removed. Jacques, who is white, dressed in kente cloth for the occasion. In a testament to the high tensions surrounding his appearance, Jacques was accompanied by ten plain-clothed policemen, many of them members of St. Peter Claver. Protestors confronted Jacques and walked up and down the aisles with signs carrying messages like “We Shall Not Be Moved” and “Obey God, Not Money.” As the service continued, more and more protesters crowded the aisles and stood behind the pulpit as the Gospel was read. Jacques tried to deliver a homily, but he was continually interrupted by cries from the congregation.

When the protesters led the congregation in singing “We Shall Overcome,” Jacques gave up his attempt to preach and left the Church. As he departed, he was surrounded by an angry crowd demanding that the Church remain open. Some parishioners remained in the Church for an all-day prayer vigil. Jacques noted that this was the first time in his twenty-six year ministry that he had been forced to cancel a Mass. He said, “I can understand some of their feelings. They are hurt and they want their church. Some people even approached me and said, ‘Father, this is not about you. This is bigger than you.’” The following day, Archbishop Hughes had the holy sacrament removed from St. Augustine because, he said, the events of the previous day had desecrated the Church, which would remain closed for “the foreseeable future.” The controversy received national attention when the Reverend Jesse Jackson and Al Sharpton attended a prayer vigil at St. Augustine and protested the closing. Networks like CBS and MSNBC reported on the controversy, and major newspapers carried stories in support of the church.²²

As a result of the sit-in, the protests, and the national media coverage, representatives from the Archdiocese and St. Augustine sat down for talks on April 5 and 6. The Archdiocese made some concessions. Most importantly, Hughes agreed to reopen the church and to give the parish eighteen

21. *Louisiana Weekly*; Save St. Augustine Parish website (<http://www.savestaugparish.org/ap-20060217-let.htm>).

22. MSNBC website (www.msnbc.msn.com/id/12239172); *Washington Post*, April 10, 2006; *New York Times*, May 22, 2007; CBS News, April 9, 2006 (<http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2006/04/09/>); Nola.com website (http://www.nola.com/weblogs/nola/index.ssf?/mtlogs/nola_nolaview/archives/2006_03_26.html); Catholic Online website (http://www.catholic.org/national/national_story.php?id=19222); *National Catholic Reporter*, April 7, 2006.

months to meet a series of benchmarks. These included increasing church membership by 300-400, expanding church ministries, and improving finances and administration. On one point, however, Hughes stood firm; the beloved Father LeDoux had to go. Hughes claimed that LeDoux was about to reach the mandatory retirement age of 75 (though there were ways around mandatory retirement, and after his resignation LeDoux was appointed priest to a Ft. Worth, Texas church). LeDoux, who had no thoughts of retiring, was stunned, as were his parishioners. The St. Augustine members who negotiated the agreement that kept the church open said it was the best deal possible under the circumstances, but others were not convinced. LeDoux looked back on his long tenure at St. Augustine with deep emotion: “We treated each other as family,” he said. “There is no greater gift and no greater reward in life than to be allied with your family members so that all feel wanted, needed, accepted and appreciated. That is what I experienced, and it was a very wonderful thing. I love them, I consider them part of my family still, and that will never change. Nor will my love and appreciation for them.”²³

Hughes reconsecrated the Church and came on Palm Sunday to conduct the first Mass since the Church was closed in March. The service was a staid affair compared to LeDoux’s Palm Sunday services where he arrived riding a donkey as his joyful parishioners lined his path with palm fronds. Accompanied by his armed guards, Hughes announced, “What a historic morning for us to gather.” Despite their sorrow that LeDoux would no longer be their priest, parishioners rejoiced that their church would remain open and have a chance to survive. Leola Brown, a 77 year-old church member summed up the views of many of her fellow parishioners: “It’s a joyous day, a great celebration,” she said. “It shows the Lord answers prayers. This is my church. I want to attend it while I’m living and be buried from it when I die.” In June 2007 the entire city celebrated LeDoux’s fiftieth anniversary in the ministry. The sanctuary at St. Augustine rang with the jazz music that LeDoux loved, and the service was followed by a second line parade led by the Tremé Brass Band. Mayor C. Ray Nagin proclaimed Sunday June 3, “Father LeDoux Day.” Also on hand to pay tribute to LeDoux was the entire New Orleans City Council, which celebrated St. Augustine Church’s “musical, cultural, historical, and spiritual significance, its diversity, and its vital role in our city’s recovery.” The lessons of the struggle to save St. Augustine were not entirely lost on Hughes, who issued a pastoral letter called “Made in the Image and Likeness of God: A Pastoral Letter on Racial Harmony” in which he acknowledged that he and others made mistakes in their effort to close the church. Hughes said that the heated reaction to his proposal to close St. Augustine taught him that there was a “deeper, unfaced racial issue” in the community.²⁴

As the example of St. Augustine illustrates, churches anchor neighborhoods as they try to rebuild. New Orleans is a city of neighborhoods, all with their own distinctive characteristics. One of the most distinctive is the Vietnamese community called Versailles, located in New Orleans East, which was heavily damaged by flooding. The Vietnamese community originated in the exodus from South Vietnam following the fall of Saigon in 1975. On the eve of the storm, some 22,000 people lived in the neighborhood, one of the largest Vietnamese communities in the country. The overwhelming majority of the residents are Catholic, members of Mary Queen of Vietnam Catholic Church. The Reverend Vien The Nguyen is the pastor of the Church and the leader of the

23. *Louisiana Weekly*, June 4-10, 2007.

24. *Ibid.*; Nola.com website

(http://www.nola.com/newslogs/tpupdates/index.ssf?mtlogs/nola_tupdates/archives/2006_12_15.html); MSNBC website (<http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/12239172/>); Catholic New Service website

(<http://www.catholicnews.com/data/stories/cns/0602073.htm>); CBS News website

(<http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2006/04/09/ap/national/mainD8GSMSE80.shtml>); *Times Picayune*, June 3, 2007.

community, or as he put it, “I am an anchor to the people.” As the storm approached, Nguyen invited residents who were unable to evacuate to take refuge in the multi-story rectory. Nearly 500 people, many of them elderly people with special needs or young children, crowded into the building. They huddled together as the winds and rains whipped through the city on Sunday, and on Monday morning they emerged thinking that the worst was over. But within hours the waters began to rise, and Nguyen heard that the levees had failed. He called his parishioners back into the rectory as flood waters poured into New Orleans East. The Church and the rectory, built on higher ground, stood like islands of hope in the devastated area. The group was rescued two days later, though Nguyen stayed behind with a paralyzed stroke victim and his family who could not evacuate by boat.²⁵

Once the city dried out, Nguyen set out to reunite his scattered flock. As he put it, “We do have a plan. Our plan is to return, reclaim, rebuild.” He outfitted the Church’s fifty-person van and set out across Arkansas, Texas, and Louisiana picking up community members and bringing them back home. By the end of October, just a few weeks after the storm, over 500 people had returned, making Versailles the largest community in New Orleans East. The residents had to bring in water, and they cooked using gas generators and served food cafeteria style. The lack of electricity posed a serious challenge to area residents, so Nguyen gathered signatures on a petition and convinced Entergy to restore power to his community in early November while the rest of New Orleans East remained dark. The recovery moved at a snail’s pace in most areas, but Versailles began to bounce back under Nguyen’s energetic leadership.

Still, the community’s challenges were far from over. The city opened a landfill about a mile away from the Church, and soon trucks were dumping tons of debris there. Because the pit was never properly lined, toxic waste quickly contaminated ground water. Again, Nguyen went into action. He petitioned the city, sought the support of nonprofit agencies, and organized demonstrations in front of City Hall. The landfill was closed. FEMA proved to be a more difficult challenge. Nguyen persuaded FEMA to open a park on church property with 199 trailers for area residents whose homes were flooded. In one of the bizarre examples of red tape and incompetence that have plagued recovery efforts, FEMA filled only 68 units while the others sat empty. Clearly frustrated, Nguyen said, “I have over 200 people signed up who are still needing trailers. Most of my older people are still floating around and asking me why they are rejected. They have no place to stay . . . and I don’t know why.” As he contemplated the many battles he had fought in his efforts to rebuild Versailles, he said, “it’s not the act of God that we struggle with . . . It’s the human acts. It’s what people have done to impede our recovery.”²⁶

Despite the setbacks and frustrations, Nguyen and his parishioners have ambitious plans for the future of their community. Within a year of the storm, about 65 percent of the residents had returned, 47 of 53 Vietnamese-American businesses had reopened, and about 3,000 people assembled for Mass every Sunday. Their recovery plan included a French Quarter-styled business and residential development and a 300-unit retirement community. In one of the more creative community projects to emerge after the storm, a new foundation set up by the Church purchased a 20-acre plot to open a community farm reminiscent of Vietnam. The farm will include family plots,

25. *Times Picayune*, September 3, 2006; Nola.com website (http://www.nola.com/katrina/?/katrina/stories/east_church.html).

26. *Times Picayune*, September 3, 2006; Nola.com website (http://www.nola.com/katrina/?/katrina/stories/east_church.html).

commercial plots, ponds to raise fish, room for chickens and goats, and an open-air market. Ever since their arrival in Versailles, Vietnamese residents created a bit of home in backyard gardens that supplied their families with fresh produce, especially traditional produce unavailable in local grocery stores. They also developed a large community garden that was damaged beyond reclamation. Elderly residents are particularly active gardeners, but Nguyen hopes that the communal garden will encourage cooperation between older and younger residents. The project has attracted wide support from institutions like Tulane University, Louisiana State University, and MIT, and funding from the Ford Foundation, the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, and Winn-Dixie. Nguyen expressed the can-do spirit of the resourceful Versailles community. “Our request is for the government to get out of the way,” he said. “If you offer us help, we appreciate that, but don’t impede us.” Their success is highlighted by the lack of progress over much of New Orleans East. Before the storm, an estimated sixty-six churches served the residents of New Orleans East, but as of July 2007, only thirty-one of those had reopened.²⁷

IV.

Before the storm, about 10,000 Jews called New Orleans home; it was one of the South’s largest, most prominent, and historically important Jewish communities. Even before Katrina, the numbers of Jews in the city was falling, partly as a result of the economic stagnation of the city, and the population was an aging one. An estimated one-third of the Jewish community has not returned to the city since Katrina. The majority of Jews were members of Reform temples, and there are four Reform synagogues in the city along with two Orthodox synagogues and one Conservative synagogue. Two large and imposing Reform synagogues located Uptown on St. Charles Avenue suffered relatively little damage. One of the Orthodox synagogues, Beit Yisrael Synagogue, flooded during the storm and ten feet of water stood in the building, destroying its Torah scrolls and holy books. Over a century old, the congregation had declined to about one hundred members with only about twenty-five attending Shabbat services. Half its members left after the storm. Still, the congregation is fighting to survive.

A new rabbi, Uri Topolosky, arrived in 2007. He expresses confidence in the survival and growth of the Jewish community. “We are now rebuilding the community . . . and we already have ten new members. I believe Orthodox Jews will come here because this is the kind of place where you have a real opportunity make a change and be a part of defining the community,” Topolosky said. “This is a special place for Jews, even the fact that we are now using a room lent to us in the Reform temple which is a very rare thing for an Orthodox community, while we look for a new place to rebuild our synagogue shows how special Jewish life is here.” In fact, all nineteen major Jewish congregations and agencies survived the storm, but only massive outside subsidies have made that possible. Jewish groups have sent about \$28 million to the city, and almost half of that went to non-Jewish relief efforts. Unless the community rebounds, the long-term viability of Jewish congregations and agencies remains threatened. The Jewish community has launched an unusual program designed to bring more Jews into the city. An advertisement in a New York City Jewish newspaper read, “DO you have a pioneering spirit? Are you searching for a meaningful community where YOU can make a difference?” Designed by an Israeli advertising firm and based on programs intended to draw Jewish immigrants to Israel, the program hopes to bring 1,000 Jews to the city over the next five years. Jews who move to the city qualify for \$5,500 to cover moving and housing costs, interest-free loans of up to \$30,000, half priced tuition to Jewish day schools, and free memberships

27. *Times Picayune*, September 9, 2006; July 30, November 25, 2007.

to local synagogues and to the Jewish Community Center. Grounded in the Jewish concept of *tikkun olam*, or “healing the world,” the campaign has attracted newcomers like Hal Karp, who moved from Dallas to teach in the public schools, and who expressed his desire to “help fix the . . . world down there.”²⁸

V.

While there are uplifting stories of faith and determination in the devastated and overwhelmingly black Lower Ninth Ward, the neighborhood’s churches are either closed or fighting for survival. Before the storm, the Lower Ninth had about 7,000 residents with an estimated 46 churches, second only to New Orleans East in the number of churches located in the neighborhood. By October 2006 only six churches had reopened, and only two more by July 2007. The major problem confronting churches is that only a tiny fraction of the pre-Katrina population has returned to the area. Nicknamed the “Mighty Ninth,” before the storm the area was about 99 percent black and working class, but also an area of high rates of home ownership. Nationally, about 49 percent of African Americans own their homes, but in the Lower Ninth that rate of home ownership stood at 57 percent. Many families had lived there for generations and were committed to rebuilding. With the help of community action groups like ACORN and Common Ground, they fought Mayor Ray Nagin’s proposal to turn the low-lying area into green space. It was a center of black culture, home to many social aid and pleasure clubs, churches of many faiths, and the birthplace of some of the city’s most famous musicians including Fats Domino and Kermit Ruffins.

Rich in culture, the Lower Ninth was also impoverished. The average household income was slightly less than \$20,000, thirty-six percent of the population lived in poverty, and almost fifteen percent of residents were unemployed. Over thirty percent of residents had no vehicle available, a statistic that helps explain the many hurricane-related deaths as flood waters poured through the breeches in the levees. By December 2007, less than ten percent of the population had returned. Actor Brad Pitt has been the most high-profile proponent for rebuilding the Ninth Ward, pledging \$5 million of his own money to the effort. “We started here because it really looked like the least likely to come back, and it needed so much help,” he explained. “It’s going to take a long time to address the issues here, but this is a viable, viable start.”²⁹

The poverty, the huge scale of destruction, and the slow pace of rebuilding in the Lower Ninth helps explain why so few churches have reopened. In addition, many of the churches were small, non-denominational churches without the outside resources that those churches affiliated with large denominations could rely upon. Even in their diaspora, faithful residents of the Ninth Ward regrouped in their places of exile in Baton Rouge or Houston where pastors gathered the remnants of their congregations and held services in hotel rooms, borrowed churches, or, in the case of Reaping the Harvest Full Gospel Baptist Church, in a funeral home. Led by the Reverend Troy Lawrence, Reaping the Harvest Church reopened its doors in the Lower Ninth in October 2006. Its newly painted, newly carpeted sanctuary looked better than before the storm. Reaping the Harvest benefited from a \$32,000 grant from World Vision, an evangelical relief agency, and another \$20,000 from the Bush-Clinton Hurricane Relief Fund. But in the Lower Ninth joy is still mingled with

28. “New Orleans Sees Resurgence of Jewish Life in Hurricane Katrina Aftermath,” Haaretz.com, November 4, 2007 (<http://www.haaretz.com/hasen/spages/917736.html>); *Los Angeles Times*, July 19, 2007; *Times Picayune*, March 25, 2007.

29. *Times Picayune*, October 12, 2006, July 30, 2007; Dollars & Sense website (<http://www.dollarsandsense.org/archives/2006/0306wagneredwards.html>); *Boston Globe*, December 25, 2007; Make It Right 9 website (<http://www.makeitrightnola.org/>);

sorrow. The congregation of Reaping the Harvest marched into the church joyously singing “We’ve Come This Far by Faith.” The first service since the storm was dedicated to two members, Kendra and Kendricka Smooth, and two other members of their family who drowned in their flooded attic.

In contrast, the Second Rose of Sharon Church, located in the most devastated area in the Ninth Ward, struggles to survive. By late 2006 the small red-brick church was still only a shell with a bare cement floor, no furniture, no electricity, and no water. The Church’s pastor, the Reverend Joe Tyler, sees his modest church as key to the rebuilding effort. “This is important,” Tyler said. “This is history. We cannot let this neighborhood down, no matter what the politicians do. The politicians are making it a struggle. But if we come back, the people come back.” Home to a small congregation of thirty before the storm, only a dozen had returned by October 2006. His week-night Bible study might draw only two people, but Tyler remained steadfast. “I don’t care if only one shows up,” he said. “We’re coming back.” Tyler observed that Rose of Sharon had withstood three hurricanes and floods—Betsy in 1965, and Katrina and Rita in 2005—and he expressed his confidence that his church and his community would survive. “If God let this building stand through three hurricanes, you know it’s going to continue to stand.” Ministers across the Ninth Ward agree with Tyler that an essential part of their mission is to encourage the rebuilding effort. The Reverend Douglas Heywood of the New Israel Baptist Church echoed Tyler’s sentiments. “The church is the heartbeat of the community,” he said. “One of the reasons people will come back is because of the church.” The Reverend Joe Campion ministered to two Catholic Churches in the Lower Ninth Ward, St. Maurice and St. David. His two churches drew 800 people to Sunday Mass before the storm. Now about 135 people attend services at St. Maurice; St. David remains closed. Campion sees all the churches in the area as mission churches: “We’re right back to our humble beginnings . . . My job now is to evangelize the people and assist in the restoration of the neighborhood.”³⁰

VI.

As these examples suggest, Katrina has challenged ministers in unprecedented ways. The Reverend Cory Sparks, minister to Carrollton and Parker United Methodist Churches in predominantly white and relatively affluent parts of the city, found that the storm “has revolutionized our thinking about ministry.” He observed that the storm “caused us to move out beyond our walls in almost every way.” Within days of the storm, members of his congregations served as rescue workers, aided with relief efforts, and distributed food, water, and flood buckets in their neighborhoods. Carrollton Church installed showers for volunteer workers and played host to up to eighty volunteers from Methodist groups from Ohio, Pennsylvania, and Oklahoma. Sparks led his congregation to look to the future: “What if we think less of a vision just for this church and more of a vision for this entire city, of rebuilding this city in a way that is more just, righteous (and) at harmony with nature and neighbor?” His churches have taken a leadership role in the rebuilding process, helping to plan for better flood protection, improving energy efficiency, and educating people about climate change. The Carrollton church joined a neighborhood group and a nonprofit organization to renovate an abandoned school that had blighted the neighborhood. The new school, built to be greener and more energy efficient, would serve as a career academy to train students in construction. These initiatives, called “Operation New Creation,” hold out the possibility of “preserving the beauty, confronting the tragedy and transforming the city.” Along with ministering to his two churches, Sparks also served four other churches as a part of the Methodist Mission Zone

30. *Times Picayune*, August 25, October 12, 2006. The Bush-Clinton Katrina Fund made grants to 1,100 houses of worship; 54 percent of those in Louisiana (<http://www.bushclintonkatrinafund.org>).

plan.³¹

Katrina also transformed the ministry of the Reverend James N. Brown, who has officiated at Greater St. Mary Baptist Church in Algiers for twenty-five years. Before the storm, Brown's ministry to his African American church had little in common with Sparks', but like Sparks, Brown's ministry also moved beyond the walls of his church. Brown rode out the hurricane at his home; as the storm roared through New Orleans on Sunday, plywood flew off his windows, trees in his yard splintered, rainwater came through his damaged roof, and a neighbor's roof landed in his yard. When Monday dawned, the electricity was off, but the gas was still working, so Brown went to the church dining hall and prepared two pounds of red beans and rice, the traditional Monday meal in New Orleans. When the beans were ready, Brown walked out the door and offered food to people on the street; three people came in to enjoy a hot meal. Word spread throughout the day; as Brown recalls, "Altogether there were 19 people ate off those two pounds of beans that first day. . . . And before they left, they asked if I was going to do it tomorrow. I told them I would." And day after day, seven days a week, for six months after the storm, Brown and his church fed the hungry. Numbers grew steadily; by the second day fifty-two people came, by the end of the week, a hundred, and by the end of the month, 750 hungry people came for food. More and more people came, so that three months after the storm, St. Mary's served 1,300 meals a day. Within days, three of Brown's deacons and Sunday School teachers, Greg Wilson, Henry Grady, and Jesse Stanley, showed up to help. A few weeks later George Rainey joined the group; he had owned a restaurant and catering service, and knew his way around a kitchen. A man of strong opinions, he ordered Brown out of the kitchen. Brown, still amused by the exchange, recalled that Rainey said, "Rev, you ain't got no business cooking." Brown added, "I would say he's grouchy. He wouldn't."³²

Although the men never asked for donations, word of the food relief mission at Greater St. Mary's began to spread, and supplies and volunteers arrived on the scene. But the challenges continued. On the Friday after the storm struck, military units arrived in the city. Brown watched in amazement as the convoy moved in. He said, "As far as your eyes could see. Big old tanks like you see on television, Humvees, every kind of vehicle they have—hundreds of them, like a parade." One of the jeeps pulled out of line and drove up to St. Mary's. A Colonel Roberts ordered Brown and the others to obey the mandatory evacuation order and leave. The Colonel, who Brown described as a "little bitty fellow," did not appreciate who he was dealing with. Brown replied, "we don't get our orders from man; we get our orders from God." As their exchange grew more heated, Brown stopped and "asked him could I pray with him. And we prayed." From then on, the two men were friends, and Roberts made sure that the military let the St. Mary's mission continue. For awhile, as many as twenty soldiers slept in the dining hall. Roberts even assigned soldiers to work in the kitchen, though Rainey sometimes ridiculed the soldiers' military cooking skills and taught them to cook in New Orleans style. When the media began to report about the work at St. Mary's, truckloads of supplies poured in. A volunteer group from Canada stayed two months; supplies came from twenty-five states. On average, two trailer trucks filled with food, cleaning supplies, clothing, and baby food arrived every week. Soon, trucks brought in appliances, mattresses, washers and dryers, and furniture. Brown transformed part of the large dining hall into a distribution center, then

31. *Times Picayune*, August 25, October 12, 2006; "Through the Eye of a Hurricane: Rebuilding Just Communities" (National Council of Churches USA, Eco Justice Program) at www.ncccecojustice.org.

32. *Times Picayune*, August 6, 2006.

erected several tents outside to hold the surplus.³³

The work was grueling, and it began to take its toll on Brown, who became the point man for recovery efforts in the area. He didn't get a good night's sleep for months after the storm, and lost almost thirty pounds. Opening the hall to community meetings with local officials, he formed partnerships with the Church of Christ and the School of Urban Missions, which brought in more supplies and volunteers. When he wasn't cooking, Brown joined the volunteers in putting tarpaulins on damaged roofs and clearing trees and limbs. When people could not reach St. Mary's, he went to them with truckloads of food and supplies. His doorbell never stopped ringing. About four weeks after the storm, Brown's wife Ellanese came home to find her house and her life turned upside down. Stanley had moved in to avoid a long commute, trailers were parked in her back yard, and a large tent beside her home served as a dormitory for up to one hundred volunteers. To make matters even worse, she hardly saw her husband who worked night and day and came home to collapse and start all over again the next morning.

The storm also brought out another side of humanity that deeply disturbed Brown. Looting began almost immediately after the storm had passed. He saw people carrying furniture and 60-inch televisions down the street, people pushing shopping carts filled with beer and alcohol, people looting the local grocery store, and siphoning fuel from the gas station. Many of the looters were teenagers, and in one case, a woman carried her infant under her arm as she and her friends broke into a service station. When a group broke into a uniform shop owned by the church, Brown and his three friends armed themselves, Brown with a .357 Magnum, and drove the looters out. Brown understood the looting, but he did not condone it, and the scale of the looting and the age of many of the looters left him deeply troubled. In part, he understood that the looting was tied to the inequalities of wealth and high poverty rates that plagued New Orleans, and yet, he could not ignore the feeling that the looting also represented a failure of the religious community to reach those in need even before the storm hit.³⁴

CONCLUSION

The unprecedented destruction caused by the storm has challenged the nation and the city in ways never before imagined. The tragedy resulted in the largest and most sustained relief and rebuilding effort in the nation's history, an effort that has been driven by faith-based groups in the face of the failure of state and federal government efforts. The gains made over the past two years would have been impossible without this response. The response of faith-based groups has been heartening and moving. In the wake of Katrina, almost 500 new charities were created to funnel money, goods, services, and volunteers into the devastated region. Estimates suggest that some 1.5 million volunteers have come into the New Orleans area alone, most of those sponsored and organized by faith-based groups. Despite the government's reliance on these groups to assist with the response, they were not fully brought into the loop. The government's own assessment of the relief effort noted that “faith-based and non-governmental groups were not adequately integrated into the response effort. . . . These groups succeeded in their missions, mitigated suffering and helped victims survive mostly in spite of, not because of, the government. These groups deserve better next time.” As a part of the effort to do better next time, the Department of Homeland Security has established a Center for Faith-Based and Community Initiatives intended to identify barriers that had a negative impact on cooperative efforts. The Center has reached out to the leaders of faith-based groups in the city including the Reverend Ernest Brown and the Reverend Vien The

33. Ibid.

34. Ibid.

Nguyen.

The growing partnership between faith-based groups and the federal government is not without challenges. For instance, within weeks after the storm struck, FEMA announced that it would provide direct reimbursements to faith-based groups involved in providing emergency shelter to hurricane evacuees, a payment structure before available only to the American Red Cross. Some religious groups reported problems in applying for funds, while others saw such direct government funding as conflicting with the separation of church and state and with their missions to serve the poor and rejected the funds. Some faith-based groups question whether the great expectations placed on private groups for disaster recovery and relief offer a real solution to such overwhelming national disasters. The Interfaith Alliance, for instance, has criticized the government's over-reliance on faith-based groups to assist in the recovery effort. Public Policy Director Kim Baldwin stated that Katrina represented the government's failure to deal effectively with issues of race, poverty, and housing. The Reverend Larry Snyder, President of Catholic Charities USA, echoed those sentiments. The federal government would have to step up in its role in rebuilding New Orleans, he argued. "It's going to take a much longer commitment by groups like Catholic Charities but also by our nation," he said. "We need to stand by our promise to them that we will rebuild the city."³⁵

35. "Religious Organizations Get Government's Respect But Roles in Disaster Aid Uncertain," Roundtable on Religion & Social Welfare Policy, August 29, 2006 (<http://www.religionandsocialpolicy.org/newsletters/article.cfm?id=4799>); "Federal Coordinator for Gulf Coast Rebuilding Meets With New Orleans Community Leaders and Faith-Based Organizations," October 19, 2007, Department of Homeland Security website (http://www.dhs.gov/xnews/releases/pr_1192822837965.shtm); *The Federal Response to Hurricane Katrina: Lessons Learned* (February 2006), 49.