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"A Vital Christian Presence in Social Work"

**SOCIAL WORKERS ASSISTING THE CHURCH:
A LESSON IN HURRICANE KATRINA**

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On Sunday, August 28, 2005, as many of us were worshipping in our various churches, a violent storm was churning off the Gulf coast. People began to leave the area. What was normally a two-hour drive between New Orleans and Baton Rouge took ten hours. Some 25,000 refugees were evacuated to the Superdome. Some people refused to leave their homes, and others were unable to because of age, illness, fear or lack of transportation. On August 29, Hurricane Katrina reached land just shy of New Orleans. The Superdome lost power, and operated with no air conditioning and reduced lighting. Early that same morning, as some were breathing a sigh of relief believing New Orleans had been spared, several levees failed and were breached. The city began to fill up with water – particularly the 9th Ward in the lowest section of the city, home to many of the poorest residents (Knauer, et al, 2005, p. 39).

According to Michael Dyson (2006, pp. 4, 5), Mississippi is the poorest state in the nation and Louisiana comes right behind it. 90,000 people in Louisiana, Mississippi and

Alabama made less than \$10,000 a year in 2004. The poverty level in New Orleans is 76% higher than the national average.

As we know, in the days that followed 20,000 more people were evacuated to the city's convention center and many were later moved to the Houston Astrodome. The damage caused by Katrina spread to include an area the size of Great Britain (Horne, 2006, p. 44). New Orleans was covered in water, sewage and debris. Rapes, homicides, suicides and deaths of natural causes were reported around the city. We would later learn, however, that these reports of violent crimes were exaggerated by the media and the rescue efforts were indeed hampered as a result (Troutt, 2006, p. 99). Hospitals were flooded and left without power. People were hungry, tired and angry. What limited relief resources there were arrived slowly (Knauer, et al, 2005, pp. 38-42).

The National Guard and other active military units were being deployed. Many volunteers were lining up to help, and yet the needs far surpassed anyone's ability to respond. The nation seemed paralyzed and helpless, and the response team was fraught with difficulties. Many found fault with the Federal government – specifically FEMA – and with elected officials.

By Sunday, September 4, 24 people were found dead around the convention center and the Superdome and 250,000 people were displaced from their homes. Mississippi coastal towns of Waveland, St. Louis, Long Beach, Gulfport, Biloxi and Pass Christian were also devastated (Knauer, et al, p. 51, 67). We could continue the litany of disaster: reports were endless. We could further discuss the damage done to the Texas coast and western Louisiana by Hurricane Rita later that September, not to mention the additional damage sustained by New Orleans.

Yet the real work will not be in describing the depth of the catastrophe but rather in the effort to learn from the experience and become better prepared to respond to future disasters. As people of faith we are compelled to respond to the pain and suffering of our brothers and sisters. Jesus' love and grace drives us to move beyond ourselves.

Many congregations have risen up to meet the needs. Yet there is still much the church can learn from social work and much social work can learn from the church. This paper will consider the church's response to the Hurricane Katrina catastrophe and how social work and social work practitioners can influence the relief effort through assessment, networking, advocacy, empowerment and education.

To begin with, as Christians grappling with such devastation we need to consult the Old and New Testaments. In Amos we hear the prophet calling the people to allow justice to roll down like the waters and to make righteousness an ever-flowing stream (Amos 5:24). In the Psalms we read of the Lord's compassion and concern for his people in need. Psalm 116:5 reads, "Gracious is the Lord, and righteous; our God is merciful" (see also Ps 135:14, 119:50). Psalm 46 reminds us that God is our bedrock, our stronghold in the midst of trouble (see also Isa 49:3 and Lam 3:31-33).

Isaiah 30:18 tells us that the Lord is a God of justice. Zechariah 7:9, 10 reminds us that the Lord says to "...administer true justice; show mercy and compassion to one another. Do not oppress the widow or the fatherless, the alien or the poor." There are many other passages that address God's concern for the poor and those in need. There is no question that the Lord's heart breaks for the victims of Hurricane Katrina and that we his people are called to help them. Paul Blom reminds us that God was "in the raging

waters, just as God is now in the debris of demolished homes and bruised lives” (2006, p. 87).

The New Testament also affirms the Old Testament’s call to justice. Jesus reached out to those who were powerless in his society – lepers, women, little children, the paralyzed, and those who were mute, deaf or blind. Jesus showed grace to them as he did to others. In Matthew chapter 20 we read the first shall be last and the last shall be first. Jesus’ concern was to lift up those who had been trampled down, ignored and disenfranchised from society.

We see the connection with those caught in the turmoil of Hurricane Katrina’s aftermath. The initial shock has worn off as the public’s apathy has caused most of us to move on with our everyday lives. Meanwhile, others continue to be homeless, victimized and traumatized by the events of over one year ago. Yet Jesus has not forgotten. His care is still with those who are without a voice.

The rest of the New Testament reminds us that we are to meet the needs of those who have less – Acts 2:44, 45 tells us it was common practice for believers to share everything they had and to give as needs arose. Paul admonished those at Corinth and Rome to remember the saints in Jerusalem who were in need and to give generously to them (1Cor 16:1-3, Rom 15:25-27). There is no doubt we are called to respond to our brothers’ and sisters’ needs. Yet sometimes the church’s desire to help goes askew. We need more than good intentions and a concern for justice to respond to human tragedy. We need guidance, an understanding of the larger picture and an ability to assess where we can be most useful.

By engaging congregations, social workers in the church can make a difference in appropriate and truly helpful ways by responding to such tragedy. Social workers who are members of congregations can be advocates for those whose voices are not heard. They can present response plans to their mission committees, they can be willing to arrange relief efforts and can network with national disaster teams to determine what is still needed. Social workers who are pastors can remember to look at the whole picture and the whole person while seeking to preach, teach and lead their congregations to practice compassion, hospitality and generosity.

Social workers in agencies can network both within the system and within their circle of influence to keep the needs in the Gulf coast region in the forefront of everyone's minds. There are many ways social workers can make a difference and be effective change agents. Assessment, networking, advocacy, empowerment and education are just some of those ways.

Why might we need assessment? Why is just responding with our hearts not the best practice? Churches, relief organizations, denominational bodies and secular groups did that soon after the storm passed. The Internet is full of sites testifying to their generosity. Most major Christian denomination has made time for the response and clean up efforts.¹ Many congregations have collected food, clothing and other needed resources. Some churches have even sent teams to help in the rebuilding efforts. While the response has been great, the problems are still overwhelming.

What may be popular in year one is not necessarily going to be sustained five to ten years after the disaster. However, some organizations are now beginning to create long-range plans. For example, the Presbyterian Church (USA) through Presbyterian Disaster

Relief has committed to spend at least the next seven years in the Gulf region providing support.² The United Methodist Church also continues to provide long-term relief.³

Local churches particularly need to develop plans for responding to such needs. The best way to do so is with a needs assessment. What are the needs of the Gulf coast region? How long will they exist? How many are going unmet? What can a particular congregation do – what do they uniquely have to offer that best meets those needs? For example, do survivors need canned goods, or does a lack of storage space negate their usefulness? Are school supplies still needed if schools are open, or have many children been sent out of the area? Are people even in need of clothes when they still have no place to live? Is there a need for winter coats or are the temperatures too warm to even have such a need?

Our social work training helps us to look at the whole picture. It teaches us to make judgment calls and to listen to the needs. It trains us to see the best places where our resources can be put to the most use. Often times in church response programs, we are ruled by our passion and call to help which is not necessarily an accurate assessment of what is most needed.

As already mentioned, networking is key to a successful response. Most churches however are not equipped with such skills. Questions should be considered: Have other local churches been contacted before a trip of their own is arranged? Perhaps partnering with another local congregation will maximize resources and save much work and administrative effort on the part of a single church. It may also give smaller churches a chance to participate in the effort in ways they might not have been able to on their own.⁴ Networking uses the best available resources and joins together fellow believers. Not

only do we maximize what we have to offer, but we can also grow together in fellowship and learn from each other as we respond to such tragedies.

Assessment and networking are useful but advocacy is a unique and often overlooked contribution social work can make to the response. Churches often steer away from political issues and justice concerns even though we are called to respond to the needs of others. It is hard to take a controversial stand in one's community as the pastor of a church, yet it is not impossible and in certain situations is even necessary. When justice is ignored, when the have nots are without a voice, when society does not see the bigger picture, advocacy is needed. On the macro level institutional injustices should be addressed, and on the micro level what the church does to respond may make a difference for even one family.

Perhaps the church has decided to host a displaced family. As they get to know this family they may learn advocacy is needed with the insurance company, department of welfare or even the federal government. Social workers can assist congregations and particularly pastors in the art of advocacy. They can also help churches discover what public resources exist in their area that can help such families.

As mentioned, sometimes individuals and churches have already done so or will in the future open their homes to displaced families. Boundary issues and understanding how one can be helpful or harmful in such situations is essential. Volunteers can benefit from understanding that self-determination and empowerment are important concepts to put into practice. Survivors of disaster need to find their voices again. Allowing them to make as many decisions as possible is certainly more helpful than deciding for them. It could be as simple as offering them choices over where they will stay, what bedding they

would like or what type of meal they would enjoy or perhaps even offering them the option of preparing the meal themselves. Facilitating self-determination and empowerment will go a long way in helping individuals and families regain their self-confidence and rebuild their lives. Social workers are in a key position to help churches learn these important skills.

Many congregations can also benefit from some teaching on justice issues. Social workers versed in the Scriptures and able to speak about their passion to reach out to the poor, voiceless and disenfranchised can make a difference in various ways. Social workers can particularly help congregations to think about their own biases and prejudices. As we have often heard repeated, the 11 a.m. hour on Sunday is the most segregated hour of the week.

It is hard to reach out beyond our comfort zones. It is difficult to confront our own shortcomings and prejudices and yet it is necessary. Until we are challenged to do so we may fail to see our blind spots. A social worker in our congregation teaching a Sunday school class, speaking to the mission board, meeting with the pastor, serving on the leadership board has a responsibility to address these issues.

Taking it just a little further, many congregations lack the awareness of power imbalances in our society. We all saw the television images of people in New Orleans crying out for food, water and assistance. Yet few regular churchgoers would be able to verbalize the big issues. Those who had power were not able or did not make the resources available fast enough for survivors who languished in sweltering heat, putrid water and makeshift “refugee” camps. Even the media references to such evacuees as refugees makes one wonder if we were in the United States or a nation ravished by

poverty and war. Many of the people victimized by Katrina were not able to get out of New Orleans because they lacked viable transportation, limited resources to pay for evacuation and even had multiple medical ailments that made evacuation improbable. Education is the biggest area where social work can affect change. Social workers have many skills, both counseling and interpersonal that can be shared and taught within the congregation.

Very few of the general public were aware or willing to admit that in New Orleans in particular there was a high demographic of mostly African Americans of limited means who had few educational opportunities (Daniels, Kettl and Kunreuther, 2006, p. 112). Renters depended on the owners of the buildings to repair and keep up their homes. Thus it was not surprising that their homes – already in disrepair – collapsed under the flooding conditions. Many people also relied on public transport and did not have cars of their own (Daniels, Kettl and Kunreuther 2005, p. 114). The issue in some cases was lack of options rather than a desire not to evacuate. Some simply had to live with what they had no power to change. So often well-meaning Christians do not have all the facts. We want to help but do not comprehend the larger issues such as racism, classism and other “-isms” that have been institutionalized in our society.

Stanford professor Paul Romer said, “A crisis is a terrible thing to waste” (Daniels, Kettl and Kunreuther, 2006, p. 1). What can we learn from this situation? Perhaps here is an opportunity to raise the consciousness of America’s pew sitters. Believers can be challenged to look beyond the media images and asked to consider the injustice that has brought the Gulf Coast to its knees. It was not simply an act of God, or a weather

phenomenon. The devastation was exacerbated by issues such as poverty, classism and racism.

Such dialog and dissemination is not easy, but it is necessary. Perhaps by using this opportunity to open the eyes of our congregations the Lord can bring healing and hope through his people in areas beyond the Gulf coast and might perhaps change the way even one of us relates to our neighbors. Not only can social workers raise the bigger issues and teach about injustice and institutional discrimination but the teaching of basic social work skills can also be accomplished. These skills can prepare volunteers for the rigors of ministry to people who have lost everything and are in dire need of physical, spiritual and emotional support.

Many of our churches are taking teams to the Gulf coast region to do physical labor. Yet as we have learned from other disaster responses such as the September 11 terrorist attacks the volunteers are also impacted by devastation. Who prepares them before they go? Who debriefs them about what they have seen and experienced? Often times this important work goes undone.

Social Workers can also help congregations to avoid “blaming the victim.” Victims who broke into stores in search of food for their families did so under duress. The poor who lived paycheck to paycheck had no reserve or savings to begin again (Daniels, Kettl and Kunreuther, 2005, p. 115). Everyone – rich, poor, powerful and powerless – was in the same circumstances. One survivor, the Executive Director of the New Orleans Housing Authority, Nadine Jarmon, – who holds a Ph.D. – describes the atmosphere in the days following the storm: “We ran out of food and water, just like everybody else. So we ventured down and we went into one of the stores. People don’t understand. When

you're desperate, you've got to be resourceful. We tried to get some food. So we looted." (Dyson 2006, p. 140). The media portrayed some evacuees as "looters" while others simply "found food." These portrayals were often accentuated by race. African Americans were often wrongly depicted as looting when they were simply trying to survive (Troutt, 2006, pp. 87-89). Thus our stereotypes need to be examined and our biases exposed, before we can avoid prejudging the victims' behavior.

As social workers we can equip those who will volunteer to gain basic counseling skills like attentive listening, paraphrasing and empathy. We can provide them with exercises, role plays and discussion points to ponder before they go. We can teach them the importance of boundaries to protect themselves and others.

Often times when volunteers participate in such a project they are unprepared for the emotional toll the trip will take on them. The stories they will hear, the devastation they will see may overwhelm them. For some well-intended volunteers may come home and find not just their consciousness has been raised but that they are battling depression or anxiety because of the impact of having been immersed in such a setting. There is a fine line between helping and entering the situation. When we let go of our personal boundaries or we allow them to blur, we often are limited in our ability to help. Upon returning someone needs to encourage discussion of what has been seen heard and experienced in such traumatic situations. A social worker who is a resource for the local church can be invaluable in the training and debriefing process.

Knowing the signs of post-traumatic stress disorder and knowing the signs of depression and suicidal thoughts can help volunteers to know when they are in over their heads. Often well-meaning people will not be aware of deeper issues and may miss an

opportunity to offer resources or referrals to people who are crying out with no one to hear them. With just a little assistance from the social work community, churches can be better prepared to respond to such human tragedies.

Social workers can also encourage volunteers to be attentive to the whole person. Many of the evacuees will have spiritual questions and struggles that should not be ignored. Taking a lesson from the mistakes of Job's friends Eliphaz, Bildad and Zophar (Job ch. 2ff), volunteers can learn how powerful a ministry of presence is. They may not be able to answer people's spiritual questions such as: How can a loving God allow such suffering? They may not be able to quell all the doubts and faith crises that have arisen for such individuals. However, their presence, their note or package sent communicates the love of God that is still active and vibrant in this broken world. In such tragedy there is opportunity to minister grace and spiritual healing and not just physical comfort. Olasky (2006) cites the mission statement of a home for children with cerebral palsy as an example of tragedy turned into opportunity. The statement reads, "We believe God doesn't make mistakes...It is a high calling to provide quality care to those physically and mentally challenged in such a way that would be pleasing and honoring to our Heavenly Father and bring emotional and spiritual healing to those who brought them into this world" (p. 215). Olasky correctly encourages us to seek opportunities to bring spiritual healing and hope to victims of Katrina.

Conclusion

We have briefly touched on many different ways that social workers can make a difference in the response to Hurricane Katrina. It is evident that social workers can help

church leaders and congregants to become more aware of the needs and issues surrounding the crisis.

As churches are better educated and equipped to respond, the people who have been labeled victims will be the beneficiaries. We are commanded in Scripture to care for the poor, disenfranchised, widowed and orphaned. We are called to show compassion as Jesus did to all people in all circumstances, particularly those who are on the fringes of society. As believers we need more than a good heart, we need to be equipped with skills that will benefit and not do harm to people who have already been injured multiple times over.

As churches assess the needs and what they are best able to offer they can build plans for future responses. As volunteers are equipped with counseling skills and basic social work skills they will be better able to effectively minister to the people and families in the Gulf region. Such ministry may be long range or it may be short term, it may involve advocacy, referrals, resources, new opportunities and situations. The response might involve direct one-on-one contact with the needs or it may focus on financial contributions or gifts of clothing, food and supplies. This training and forethought will also prepare congregations to respond more effectively to future disaster situations.

Social workers who are members of congregations or in leadership positions will be able to offer churches training and skills to make a difference in the response effort. The social worker should not wait to be asked because the church may not be aware of what it is missing and may need social workers to first educate them in this regard. Surely not everything offered will be welcomed or well received. However, as social workers we are used to not always having our services appreciated. We know not to take it

personally. We also are aware that just because our church may be fairly conservative or may avoid justice issues entirely, it does not mean we should be deterred from advocacy or consciousness raising.

The task ahead is mammoth and every willing volunteer is needed. We have an opportunity to not just respond to Hurricane Katrina but to also make an impact on race and class relations in our society. As Dyson reminds us, Martin Luther King, Jr. said compassion for victims on the Jericho Road is not enough; the Jericho Road must be transformed (2006, p. 203). Let us not just apply a band aid to the Gulf region but let us use this opportunity to make a difference in the race and class issues in our nation.

As we network and partner together working within our churches and reaching beyond, we can be used by the Lord to bring grace, hope and healing to the Gulf Coast region. Blom (2006, 57) suggests it will take an army of volunteers to clear and rebuild the 800,000 plus buildings that have been damaged by Katrina. It will take years for the healing to be complete, for it has only just begun.

You may have heard the story of the boy and the starfish, but it bears repeating here. A little boy encounters a beach upon which are stranded hundreds of starfish. The boy begins to throw them back into the sea one at a time. An older man who happens along sees the boy and thinks he is wasting his time saving the starfish. The man tells the boy his efforts will not make a difference. Yet the boy is not deterred and continues in his efforts. As he throws another starfish back the boy turns to the man and says, "I just made a difference to that one."⁵

Perhaps the problems of the Gulf coast are much more than we can handle. Yet we can do our part. We can make a difference one starfish, one church, one family, one

individual, one conscience at a time. In doing so our own lives will be transformed as we step out in faith and watch the Lord work in our midst.

May social work and the church partner together and in so doing be used by the Lord to bring grace and peace to the Gulf region.

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Endnotes

¹ <http://www.umc.org>, <http://pcusa.org>, <http://www.ucc.org/disaster>,
<http://www.ldr.org/index.html>, <http://www.nationalministries.org/katrina>,
<http://www.churchworldservice.org/news/katrina/>,
<http://www.catholiccharitiesusa.org/news/HurricaneRelief05.cfm>,
<http://www.mds.mennonite.net/Projects>

² <http://pcusa.org/katrina/reports/040606katrinastatistics.htm>

³ <http://new.gbqm-umc.org/umcor/work/emergencies/ongoing/hurricanes05/>

⁴ for example, this winter the Presbyterian congregation I pastor will partner with a nearby United Methodist congregation to send a team of volunteers to the Gulf region.

⁵ based on Loren Eiseley's "The Starthrower"

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Emergency Disaster Internet Resources

Government

<http://www.fema.gov/>

Federal Emergency Management Agency

<http://www.bt.cdc.gov/>

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention
Emergency Preparedness and Response

<http://www.hrsa.gov/bioterrorism/>

U.S. Dept. of Health and Human Services,
Health Resources and Services Administration,
The National Bioterrorism Hospital Preparedness Program

<https://www.disasterhelp.gov/portal/jhtml/index.jhtml>

The Disaster Management e-Government Initiative is one of 24 initiatives established by the President's Management Council. The Office of Management and Budget (OMB) sponsors this initiative.

<http://www.ready.gov/america/index.html>

Department of Homeland Security

<http://ndms.dhhs.gov/>

National Disaster Medical System, Dept. of Homeland Security

<http://www.naccho.org/topics/emergency/index.cfm>

National Association of County and City Health Officials

<http://www.nimh.nih.gov/healthinformation/ptsdmenu.cfm>

National Institute of Mental Health, National Institutes of Health
Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder

Non-government

<http://www.redcross.org/services/disaster>

American Red Cross Disaster Services

<http://www.apa.org/topics/topicdisasters.html>

American Psychological Association

<http://www.socialworkers.org/pressroom/events/911/disasters.asp>

National Association of Social Workers

<http://www.nacsw.org/Katrina.html>

North American Association of Christians in Social Work

<http://www.nasponline.org/NEAT/unsettlingtimes.html>

National Association of School Psychologists

Parent and Teacher Education

<http://www.fema.gov/kids/teacher.htm#resources>

Federal Emergency Management Agency

Children

<http://www.fema.gov/kids/dizarea.htm>

Federal Emergency Management Agency

Higher Education

<http://www2.sph.unc.edu/nccphp/training/>

North Carolina Center for Public Health Preparedness

Internet-based trainings on public health preparedness, focusing on such topics as surveillance, agents of bioterrorism, and emerging and re-emerging disease agents.

**adapted from resource list found in the CD-Rom:

“Disaster Preparedness for Public Health Social Workers, Part I: Natural Disasters,” developed and produced by The Public Health Social Work Leadership Training Program and the Behavioral Healthcare Resource Program, Jordan Institute for Families, School of Social Work, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill.

Christian Denominations’ Disaster Response

<http://www.umc.org> (United Methodist Church)

<http://pcusa.org> (Presbyterian Church (USA))

<http://www.ucc.org/disaster> (United Church of Christ)

<http://www.ldr.org/index.html> (Lutheran Disaster Relief)

<http://www.nationalministries.org/katrina> (American Baptist Convention)

<http://www.churchworldservice.org/news/katrina/> (Church World Service)

<http://www.catholiccharitiesusa.org/news/HurricaneRelief05.cfm> (Catholic Charities)

<http://www.mds.mennonite.net/Projects> (Mennonite Disaster Service)

Additional Resources

Video Productions

Pioneer Productions (Producer). (2005). *Hurricane Katrina: The Storm that Drowned a City* [Digital Video Disc]. Boston: WGBH Video.

Towers Productions, Inc. for National Geographic Channel (Producer). (2005). *Inside Hurricane Katrina* [Digital Video Disc]. Washington: National Geographic Society.

CD-ROM

“Disaster Preparedness for Public Health Social Workers, Part I: Natural Disasters,” developed and produced by The Public Health Social Work Leadership Training Program and the Behavioral Healthcare Resource Program, Jordan Institute for Families, School of Social Work, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill.

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