



Grace After the Storm

By Bruce Nolan

On Sundays, when morning light fills the vaulted space of the former First United Methodist Church on Canal Street in New Orleans, drummer Vel McCall sometimes lays down an up-tempo, hip-swaying gospel beat for what used to be that sober Protestant standard, “Blessed Assurance.” The choir is thoroughly mixed, black and white. So is the rest of the congregation, which also includes some Hispanics—and occasionally, members are pleased to say, a handful of people whose scruffiness suggests homelessness, or something close to it.

All are quite welcome in the First Grace United Methodist Church, the new racially diverse congregation created in the marriage of predominantly white First United Methodist Church and predominantly

black Grace United Methodist Church.

Before Hurricane Katrina hit in August 2005, they worshipped one mile—and a universe—apart. Now “this church looks like the city,” said Jennie Hammatt-Milchenko, 23, a choir member and AmeriCorps volunteer who helps run a women’s shelter at First Grace.

First Grace is rare, but not alone. Hurricane Katrina wrecked so many churches in and around New Orleans that, in the more than two years since, circumstance has forced a few historically black and historically white congregations in several denominations to merge—or, more typically, worship jointly while they work out their futures.

But at one level, the Rev. Shawn Anglim, First Grace’s first pastor, cautions it is too simplistic to see its creation as a purely pragmatic shotgun wedding,

with disparate congregations forced into each others' arms by cruel circumstance. "This didn't have to happen, and it's easy to underappreciate," Anglim said. "Grace could've decided to merge with another black congregation. They could have said no to this. But because they've stayed faithful, they've heard a new voice, in a new language."

Louisiana Bishop William Hutchinson responded to Katrina with a regional recovery plan that organized crippled congregations into clusters that would work out their futures, with financial and other help from the Louisiana Annual Conference. Anglim, an Ohio native who had spent the past six years in campus ministry at Louisiana State University, came to New Orleans and joined three other clergy assigned to eight damaged United Methodist churches. Soon, he began concentrating on First and Grace. A year after the storm they were meeting separately in damaged buildings and neither had a full-time pastor.

Anglim said he emerged from a personal retreat in Spring 2007 ready to pose

leaders in both congregations a sharp question: "Don't you think we can do more for this city as one body of Christ rather than as two bodies of Christ separated by one—long—mile?"

So, they decided to worship together at First Methodist—but with each retaining its identity. But crucially, they decided also to break bread together at so-called Dollar Dinners on Wednesday nights at the church. Associate Pastor LeKisha Reed said those dinners were designed primarily to open First's doors to Katrina volunteers, to Mid-City neighbors and even substantial numbers of homeless and working poor who needed a meal.

During the mid-week meals, white and black Methodists began to introduce themselves to each other, to hear each others' stories and become acquainted. The joint services and Wednesday night gatherings continued for weeks. Links began to appear. And there was a series of structured conversations between the congregations.

It was after one of those, sometime in August, that Gwen Anderson, of Grace,

and Tommy Gilbert, of First, rose and popped the question. "It had become obvious to everyone it was time to merge," Gilbert said. The two recovering congregations made it official in October.

No one knows what the future will look like at First Grace, except that it will be different. Reed and others say the novelty of the situation seems to be wearing off. With the passage of time, members are becoming less self-conscious and more oriented toward working out their common future as a body of worship.

In September, Anglim said he preached his first and only sermon on race, pegged to the unhappy travails then unfolding in Jena, Mississippi. "I said, 'This is about our faith. It's not about doing something novel.' If we want our children to act out a different history, we're going to have to give them a different history to act out." □

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