

Rudy Rasmus

In Over Our Heads?

Seek the peace . . . of the city to which I have carried you.

Jeremiah 29:7 (NIV)

From the first hours after Hurricane Katrina hit land, we witnessed something unbelievable. We watched 150,000 people arrive in our city in a span of forty-eight hours. It took a week before we could get our minds around what had happened.

Loved ones are separated, elderly relatives who refused to leave their homes are missing, and survivors are numb. The evacuees are in a daze of disbelief. Even some service providers were so overwhelmed that they simply walked away from it all—in the middle of the crisis.

We already had 20,000 homeless people on the streets every night in Houston. Try as we might, we were doing a poor job of meeting people's needs. But in a flash we found over 100,000 more desperate folks on our doorstep. To say we were "overwhelmed" is an understatement!

Evacuees who had family networks to turn to or financial resources were able to gain access to shelter and basic necessities fairly quickly. But that left 40,000 people in Houston's makeshift shelters. When the buses loaded up in Louisiana, there were many people who got on who were already homeless, people who got on those buses who were already mentally challenged, people who were at that moment, probably the night of the storm, substance abusers. We found ourselves looking at the challenge of not only meeting the needs of existing homeless people in Houston but also facing the hurts and hopes of a huge new influx of homeless men and women.

St. John's United Methodist Church was already administering \$1 million annually in services for people in need. So looking at the impact of the Katrina evacuees, we knew we were in over our heads.

As I write, the shelters are emptying, but here's what goes unspoken: the people in the Astrodome, Reliant Stadium, and the George Brown Convention Center were given \$2,000 in cash and help with two-months rent. Now they are distributed around the city, but there will be yet another wave of misery in sixty to ninety days when that money runs out. That's when we're going to be faced with a new crisis not only in Houston but also in Dallas, San

Antonio, Baton Rouge, and the other cities that received large numbers of people.

I've warned my congregation. We need to remember that once the glare of national media shifts away and begins to focus on the next crisis in the world, we will still be confronted with a challenge of helping a large number of hurting people.

The driving force for getting folks out of those centers was in part economic as the city faced the prospect of lost revenue. The deadline for having all evacuees cleared was the day before the next

big game in the Reliant's complex. Was that a coincidence? I don't think so, and it provides a hint of how competing claims on local services and finances are likely to impact the Katrina victims in the months ahead.

Now that the rush of water and evacuees is receding, it's clear what St. John's must do. Our work has three phases:

The first phase, from which we're starting to emerge is

triage, getting people situated. Some of that work will be still going on for another six months or even a year.

The second phase is support for the ongoing resettlement process. This involves ministry that is unique to the church. We're talking about fellowship and the ministry of presence. We must provide a place that won't move or change locations from one Sunday to the next. And once folks get in a new apartment or location, they're going to need mental health services. The impact of post-traumatic stress won't be known for months. We'll be seeing the effects of this for quite a while, especially in children.

The Sunday after the hurricane and floods, we had about 150 evacuees who are no longer strangers but neighbors worshipping with us. What captured me was the look in their eyes. They had seen and experienced something that they could not believe, and it showed. That entire afternoon I couldn't get the image of their stares out of my mind. These people had lives! They were going to work the next day; they had lived in places with strong family ties and a shared history. Their newly acquired look of disbelief and dislocation still haunts me.

The third phase is to continue a major initiative we had

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announced two months before the hurricane. We had long recognized the need for a shelter for the chronically homeless in the downtown area, and were already planning a 100-unit facility to accommodate up to 300 people a night. This is a major and crucial undertaking.

St. John's is a mission-driven church. We are in the midst of people who are desperate for life's essentials. The congregation has responded with love and generous servant ministry. Yet like every faith community we are confronted by the question: "What will be our response as individuals and corporately in the midst of a crisis moment?"

I've talked with pastors who, in the turmoil and fear of the evacuation from places hit by Katrina's fury, found the courage to take others with them to a safer place. Their witness is powerful. And their example puts me face-to-face with the question, "What would I do?" In that moment of panic would I grab my wife, Juanita, and our daughters and head for the hills? Would I stop and think about the people in my congregation who have no transportation? Would I attempt to make a place for

the people who sleep on the street behind our church?

One New Orleans pastor, Joe Connelly, left town with 20 people and has since been able to find an additional 80 folks from his church in the Dallas area. Their worshiping community takes on a post-exilic character because the tabernacle was moved through the wilderness to a new location.

Pastors like Joe have stepped through the chaos and dislocation and said, "OK, we may not be where we were, but wherever we are God still is." That's the beauty of what the church can teach and embody in a post-traumatic time.

We've prayed a lot as a church, but in the midst of this unfolding story we've been praying even more! Our dependency on God today is unlike our dependency on God has been for thirteen years of difficult and joyful ministry at St. John's. We're at a time when gimmicks and slogans have nothing to do with life in the Kingdom. We're seeing lines drawn, not between black and white, but between those who have resources and those who have absolutely nothing. What I fear right now is that the church might miss this moment

in history where the opportunity to be disciples of Jesus is like never before.

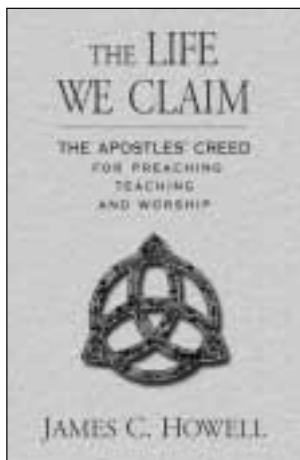
The meaning of "in over our heads" has changed for us as the waters of Katrina are pumped back out to the gulf. We are becoming a people of fervent prayer and joyful obedience as never before. For us to live, serve, and worship with a false sense of security would be to miss the point. We experience a new awareness of vulnerability as a gift and invitation. We've seen how lives and prospects can change in an instant. Calling us to care for our brothers and sisters who are desperate victims of systems of neglect is actually the best thing God ever did for us. □



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The Apostles' Creed for Preaching, Teaching, & Worship



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