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KATRINA 2005-15: God's work during, after the storm

by Marilyn Stewart/Louisiana Baptist Message, posted Monday, August 31, 2015 (3 years ago)

EDITOR'S NOTE: This story is from an Aug. 27 Baptist Message anniversary edition marking the 10-year point since Hurricane Katrina's landfall on Aug. 29, 2005.

NEW ORLEANS (BP) -- From the belly of a Coast Guard helicopter, Aviation Maintenance Technician 3rd Class Allan Campbell snapped photos of Edgewater Baptist Church days after levee breaks from Hurricane Katrina left 80 percent of New Orleans under water. The church steeple dangled on its side, its tip pointed downward into deep water.

For Campbell, the devastation was personal. Two months earlier, he had walked his bride down the aisle on their wedding day and out through doors now submerged in water.

"My heart seemed to stop," said David Platt, International Mission Board president but Edgewater staff evangelist at the time, on seeing Campbell's photos.

"This was the place where I gathered together with the people in New Orleans I loved the most. The people I laughed and cried with. The people I worshipped with and served alongside," Platt said. "I knew that we would likely never gather together there again in the same way."

Hurricane Katrina crossed the tip of Louisiana early Monday, Aug. 29, 2005, pushing water over the tops of homes in lower Plaquemines Parish, then overwhelming the Mississippi River Gulf Outlet in New Orleans to flood the city's east side. To the north, Slidell took the brunt of Hurricane Katrina's storm surge as water was lifted out of Lake Pontchartrain and pushed into homes.

A timeline published by the Times-Picayune of New Orleans showed that levee walls broke at various points across the city throughout Monday morning as the storm lumbered by.

The Industrial Canal break, next to the Lower Ninth Ward, released torrents of rushing water that pushed homes off foundations and tossed cars around.

Water rose through the night in New Orleans and on Tuesday morning the nation woke to learn of the storm's second punch that helped put Hurricane Katrina on the record books as one of the deadliest and costliest storms in history.

Bobby Welch, the Southern Baptist Convention's president at the time, toured the area the following day.

"This is a disaster of biblical proportion, and it demands a biblical response -- now," Welch said in an S.O.S. call to Southern Baptists as reported by Baptist Press. "How can I be more explicit? This situation is dire...."



Fred Luter, aboard a helicopter after Hurricane Katrina, cries as he sees the flood-ravaged Franklin Avenue Baptist Church in New Orleans where he was pastor.
Baptist Press file photo

Joe McKeever, then-director of missions for the Baptist Association of Greater New Orleans -- renamed later the New Orleans Baptist Association -- began his first blog after the storm with the ominous words: "They've been telling us the big one was coming. Finally, they were right."

Relief & redemption begin

Southern Baptist Disaster Relief units rolled in the day after the storm, moving in tandem with the Red Cross and The Salvation Army in what would be an unprecedented effort that would earn Southern Baptists a commendation by the White House six months later.

After authorities gave clearance to re-enter the city, McKeever surveyed the damage, driving past miles of closed businesses, schools and banks.

At Edgewater Baptist, he stopped and prayed. "It's not just a house here or a business there. It's the whole thing," McKeever said he prayed. "And Lord, I don't know what to do about it."

God's answer was clear.

"This is not about you. This is about Me," McKeever said God told him. "I can't tell you how comforting that was."

For three years prior to the storm, Edgewater members had prayed: God, give us this city and do it in such a way that only You get the credit.

The congregation changed the prayer to "give us the nations," not knowing that the eyes of the world would soon be fixed on New Orleans.

"The more we processed through the implications of Katrina, the more we realized that God was working behind the scenes in all of this in ways that we never could have imagined," Platt said. "He was doing a work in our city that would send us out across that city and around the world in the days to come."

Devastated by loss, a young pastor emailed McKeever a month after the storm expressing his dismay.

"My friend, you are about to see something you will be talking about the rest of your life," McKeever wrote in reply. "God is about to do a work that will change your ministry forever and you will always be grateful you were there to see it happen."



Trucks from the Louisiana National Guard bring people rescued from the rising floodwater to the Louisiana Superdome after Hurricane Katrina's levee breaks in late August 2005.
Photo courtesy of the Louisiana National Guard

'We had nothing'

With a safety harness strapped to his waist, Fred Luter saw his church, Franklin Avenue Baptist, for the first time as it sat in 7 feet of water. With Luter in the helicopter that day were Welch and David Hankins, executive director of the Louisiana Baptist Convention.

"At that moment, I thought, 'This is it, everything is over.'"

With more than 7,000 members, Franklin Avenue was the largest Southern Baptist church in the city.

In the heart of New Orleans, military personnel wielding M16s met pastor

David Crosby as he stepped out of a helicopter onto the parking lot at First Baptist Church, then went before Crosby as they searched every room of the building. As many as 30 people had sought refuge inside as water rose up the front steps and then stopped. The church had been an island in a putrid sea.

To the west, just over the Orleans Parish line into Metairie, Dennis Watson, pastor of the 2,500-member Celebration Church, came in by police escort two days after the storm but could go no farther than the Causeway Avenue and Airline Boulevard interchange where boats were launching off the Causeway Avenue ramp.

And in the east, First Baptist in Chalmette and St. Bernard Baptist churches took on more than water as a nearby oil refinery a million gallons of oil into the mix.

"The immediate effect of Katrina was that everybody was in a mess. Everybody. The world does not understand that," Crosby said. "150,000 houses; 100 square miles. There's no place to put your foot down; no neighbors to call on; no stores; no barber shop."

After surveying damaged church sites, McKeever blogged, "I spent all day Thursday with three good friends and it was one of the worst days of my life."

Waylon Bailey, pastor of First Baptist Church in Covington, told of a single mom with young children who came to the church asking for food just hours after the storm.

"We had nothing," Bailey said. "Our janitor came out with two jars of peanut butter. He was living in the church trying to care for the 200 people living there. That's all he had and he gave it to her. We all broke down and cried."

By Wednesday, the Covington church's parking lot was covered with Southern Baptist Disaster Relief units. In New Orleans, SBDR units were deployed to Williams Boulevard Baptist and First Baptist in Kenner and soon at Calvary Baptist and Westwego Baptist churches to the south.

Across Louisiana, SBDR units also served evacuees and emergency workers at Baton Rouge, Alexandria, Lafayette, Bogalusa, Hammond and Prairieville. By Oct. 5, Southern Baptist volunteers had served a record 6 million meals in the Hurricane Katrina-affected Gulf Coast.

Open hearts

As Southern Baptists opened their hearts, special funds set up to help victims swelled. Gifts from Cooperative Program-funded entities came in almost immediately, with \$2.5 million from the International Mission Board; \$10 million in low-interest loans to churches from the North American Mission Board; \$6 million from LifeWay Christian Resources; the guaranteed continuation of benefits and retirement plan protection by Guidestone Financial Resources; and gifts to pastors from the Louisiana Baptist Convention.

A continuous stream of volunteers poured into the city to care for stunned residents trickling back in to face deserted neighborhoods and loss that was layers deep: home, church, job, stores, schools, friends and family connections.

Luter became a circuit-rider serving three campuses as First Baptist Church in Houston and Istrouma Baptist Church in Baton Rouge welcomed in Franklin Avenue members and, at home, First Baptist New Orleans.

"Going through Hurricane Katrina, I couldn't see it as God's will, though it obviously was," Luter said. "There are no mistakes with God."

Buzzing with activity as a distribution center for supplies and a point for ministry, First Baptist's campus remained unlocked for four months to accommodate workers, Crosby said. As many as 100 volunteers slept nightly in the fellowship hall.

"Something about those days just changed the way we thought," Crosby said. "We tried to plan but realized ... that we couldn't plan anything because things changed daily. We ended up living day by day, hand to mouth."

In the year before the storm, First Baptist's relocation from Uptown to mid-city came with a fresh commitment to serve its community. Baptist Crossroads, a housing initiative to help break the cycle of poverty, was set in place weeks prior to the storm.

"We kicked off [Baptist Crossroads] in June; Hurricane Katrina kicked us in the gut in August," Crosby said. "For miles around, nobody lived here. For months, we had no babies in the nursery. No youth in the youth group. Zero."

For others, the storm meant sudden death. Dozens of churches in the association closed their doors.

Kenneth Foy, pastor of New Life Ministry Baptist Church, a healthy, African American congregation of more than 100 prior to Katrina, became a casualty of the storm with every member relocated.

"We could not overcome Katrina," Foy said.

Delacroix Baptist Church at Delacroix Island had averaged 25 in attendance. After the storm, only "a few of the pilings were left," McKeever said.

'Rise up, man of God'

For Dennis Watson, the low point of the storm came in the early hours after the levee breaks. With cellphone towers down, Watson had received no word from staff, church members and friends.

"I've been through a lot of tragedy in my life -- my father died when I was young, my brother-in-law was killed in a tragic accident -- but that day was the darkest day of my life," Watson said. "It seemed like everything I had prayed for, dreamed for, hoped for and worked for was gone in a single day."

The clock read 6:33 a.m. when the first call came through on his cellphone two days later. The call from a pastor-friend in Johannesburg, South Africa, jolted him out of depression, Watson said. For eight hours, the friend had prayed for Watson, his church and the city.

"He said to me, 'Dennis, my son, I know that you are devastated. Rise up, O man of God, for what you perceive to be a day of devastation is actually the destiny God has called you to,'" Watson recounted.

"Then he told me, 'The Lord has revealed to me that while this is indeed a great tragedy, out of this tragedy will come the greatest opportunity your nation will ever have to experience spiritual transformation. Rise up, man of God,'" Watson said.

Celebration Church soon realized that God had been at work all along, Watson said. Two weeks before the storm, the church had purchased property across town and assumed another church's debt to prevent the site from becoming a Muslim mosque.

"We didn't need the indebtedness. We didn't need the campus," Watson said. "We just felt like the Lord wanted us to take it over to save the reputation of that church and ministry."

The newly acquired property was quickly recoverable and served as a worship center and headquarters as Celebration Church ministered to a hurting community.

The parking lot of the flooded main campus became a relief center, distributing 1,500 tractor-trailer loads of supplies and serving 5,000 meals daily. An additional 1,000 people received other supplies daily, Watson said.

Before the storm, the congregation had prayed for greater opportunities to minister in the community. "With 6,000 people a day coming to our campus, I'd say that prayer was answered," Watson said.

Mobilizing for ministry

At First Baptist, 200 air scrubbers and dehumidifiers were hooked to a 400kw generator on loan from an Illinois farmer who had loaded it on a trailer and driven to New Orleans. Though floodwater had not entered the building, First Baptist's bill topped \$3.5 million as wind and mold damage took its toll.

Surrounded by need, the church set up a home recovery ministry, eventually deploying 21,000 volunteers to gut flooded homes and build new ones through Baptist Crossroads, surpassing the original goal of 40 to provide 91 homes.

"Nobody can overstate the contribution that Southern Baptist relief teams made at the height of this disaster," Crosby said. "They were here from the very beginning. They were just tremendous in every way."

At Edgewater Baptist, four blocks from the London Avenue canal break, heavy damage and a fear that the neighborhood would not rebound kept the facility untouched for weeks.

Philip Robertson, then-president of the Louisiana Baptist Convention, received a phone call from a friend, Dan Spencer of Thomasville Baptist Church in Thomasville, Ga., asking for his help in finding a church to adopt. The result was a partnership with Edgewater that helped fund rebuilding and evangelism efforts and paid the pastor's salary for two years.

Charles Ray, an deacon at Edgewater and New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary professor, said the three-way phone call from Robertson and Spencer was "like seeing daybreak" after a long night. "We realized we wouldn't have to face this alone," Ray said.

New doors for the Gospel were flung open

Louisiana native and former Edgewater member Randy Bond, then-director of the New London Collegiate Ministry in Connecticut, led teams of U.S. Coast Guard cadets and college students to gut homes for Edgewater's neighbors, most of whom were unbelievers.

Bond said his students came from a gospel-hardened area and had a minimal view of Christianity but were impressed in seeing Christians' response to those in need.

One student, a self-identified secular humanist who noticed that secularists were visibly absent from the recovery effort, told Bond, "'I've got to rethink my worldview,'" said Bond, a Mission Service Corps missionary with the North American Mission Board.

Repentance & unity

Soon after the storm, Watson invited pastors of all denominations to meet. One African American pastor addressed the group and said white pastors had never before cared about the African American pastors or churches -- frank words that sparked "a time of repentance," Watson recounted.

Out of that meeting grew a citywide pastors' coalition that led prayerwalks into the areas most damaged by the storm and neighborhoods most affected by crime.

Writing recently, Crosby noted that Bourbon Street and the "flesh markets" of the city were untouched by the flood, but that churches and thousands of homes of faithful believers were destroyed. "I have come to believe that God was purifying His church in the midst of this storm," he wrote. Washed out of the pews and into the street, Crosby wrote that Christians were experiencing a revival to "the central command of Jesus to love your neighbor."

God's long-term plan for the association came into focus as Duane McDaniel, pastor of Hawaii Kai Church of Honolulu led seven teams to rebuild homes of Franklin Avenue members so they could return to minister to their neighbors.

In 2009, McDaniel stepped into the position of New Orleans Baptist Association executive director and charted a new direction for the association. McDaniels' dream of a clinic to serve the underserved in the Lower Ninth Ward came to fruition last year, three years after his untimely death from a stroke at age 54.

McKeever said that long before the storm, he had considered the churches of the New Orleans association to be isolated and insulated from each other, but the storm changed everything.

"A lot of churches went out of business. Some needed to. Some were spending all of their resources just to keep up an old building," McKeever said. "The storm put a stop to that."

Camaraderie grew as the pastors met weekly at First Baptist Church in LaPlace, a fellowship that often lasted three hours, McKeever said.

As First Baptist New Orleans opened their facility to Franklin Avenue for worship and ministry, the two racially different congregations developed a lasting bond.

"Through disaster, God allowed a beautiful partnership to come together between a predominantly Anglo church and a predominantly African American church that produced relationships that still are strong to this day," Luter said.

For Watson, Southern Baptists' outpouring of help strengthened his bond with his fellow Baptists. Four months after the storm, Watson spoke at the state convention's evangelism conference.

"I've not always been a very good Baptist," Watson said he told the crowd. "But today, I'm proud to be a Southern Baptist."

Delacroix Baptist experienced an opening for the Gospel and an explosion of professions of faith. A church of another denomination donated its facility and the congregation grew again.

But for some, the road back was long and difficult. With all members scattered, Foy took a pastorate in Huron, Ohio, not returning to New Orleans for two years. The task of starting New Life Ministry Baptist Church over from scratch was too hard, Foy said.

But God's prompting made him both uncomfortable and refreshed, Foy said. His congregation's first Sunday "back" included only eight members, all of them family.

Today, Foy's church is thriving in New Orleans East in a newly refurbished facility. For the first time in its history, the congregation has classroom space for children's and youth ministries.

"We don't fully understand how we got here, but we do understand that God got us here," Foy said. "We're waiting to see what great things God is going to do next."

Marilyn Stewart is a writer in New Orleans. This article first appeared in the Baptist Message (www.baptistmessage.com), newsjournal of the Louisiana Baptist Convention, as one of 15 stories in an... [Expand Bio]

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