



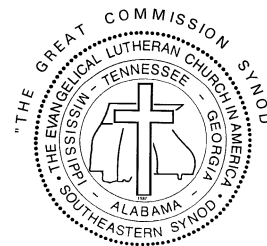
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### HURRICANE KATRINA'S CONTINUING TRAGEDY: THE NEW HOMELESS

by

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August 29th, 2005, Hurricane Katrina struck the Gulf Coast states of Florida, Alabama, Mississippi and Louisiana with such force it destroyed whole communities. Thousands became instantly homeless, with hundreds left with little or no money they could use to recover. These displaced citizens found shelter through the American Red Cross, local churches, and eventually FEMA.

Today, these same hurricane survivors are once again among the homeless on the Gulf Coast and they are in pain. Pain from the cold nights on frail bodies in tents and cars, pain from feeling abandoned in the wait for the long promised FEMA trailers or insurance payments, pain from the pressures of the mounting financial burden of once manageable debts of pre-Katrina life and the impending loss of what little they have left with where to turn, pain of no longer having health insurance and ways to pay for their medications, pain from feeling forgotten and no longer seen. Feeling like yesterday's news, tossed aside like unwanted trash.

How can this be? This is The United States of America where we take care of our neighbors. Or is it? Think about Luke 10, the story of the Good Samaritan. Are we seeing our neighbor lying in the ditch and passing on the other side? Do we see our neighbor at all? Volunteers from all over the country and all faiths are coming to the Gulf Coast to help; they are finding the unwanted lying in the ditch, sleeping in the woods, many without coats or blankets to keep warm as the night grows ever colder. These volunteers do not pass by their neighbor--they bring blankets, coats, small tents, whatever they can to help as much as possible.

We invite you to read and listen to the words of people who are living out their faith in what they do as well as what they believe. Listen to the pain in their words, the sorrow, and despair they feel. These volunteers refuse to ignore the cries of the discarded; they suffer in the heart with them. They bring to those they serve God's compassionate love and hope.

God be with you,  
Morgan Gordy, Bob Tribble and Elaine Schwartz

**Listen!**

**“For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me. I was naked and you clothed me. I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me.” Matthew 25: 35-37**

Hunger, thirst, strangers in their community, lack of clothing, sickness and existing in prisons of depression, desperation and hopelessness--Welcome to the world of the new homeless along the Mississippi Gulf Coast. These words describe this new community and it is one in which the universal church of God must be called to serve as His messengers of hope. This is a disaster which encompasses not only the destruction of homes, cars and properties but also a disaster of human proportions. There are no adequate words to describe this human disaster that is confronting the church universal. Journal entries from Cassie, a volunteer to the Mississippi Gulf Coast helps to illustrate the plight of the new homeless.

*“Sunday, October 23, 2005*

*At sunrise, we loaded a pick-up truck with blankets and food – headed into a destroyed section of town. Homes crushed, leaning, piled upon cars -- Oh, the smell. We stopped on an empty street. Someone appears on the street barefooted, sleeveless shirts running toward the truck, shivering in the cold. Then, another child and adult appeared followed by another and another and another all emerging from the rubble and destruction! Soon, the truck was surrounded by cold, thin bodies with outstretched arms, begging for blankets, coats, sweats, socks, etc.”*

*“Tuesday, October 25, 2005*

*A 75 year old woman who had lost everything and was living in a tent. As she found a coat, she fell into my arms, sobbing, “I know that I’m in God’s house.” A 54 year old father, 17 year old son, 20 year old daughter and 4 year old granddaughter lost their home. The family is living in an old beat-up Suburban SUV since the hurricane because there was no room in the shelters.”*

*“Wednesday, October 26, 2005*

*(I felt helpless today--no resources!) People begging for tents--no resources. People given 24 hour notice to leave the Red Cross Shelter--nowhere to go--living on the streets. A gentleman and his wife were beaten and robbed. Lost all of their ID card, etc.--were not allowed back into shelter. Living on the street. Telephone call from a family that was being evicted from apartment. No shelter to go to--requesting tent. Red Cross Shelter closing. Man living a Porta-Potty, now his home. (No man should have to live and sleep in a Porta-Potty!) Discovering tent cities springing up on empty lots--no food or blankets--no shelters.”*

This reflects only a small segment of the vast numbers of homeless who are emerging in this community. The shelters are in the midst of closing, some on very short notice to the clients. When no accommodations can be found, the people are put out onto the streets to find their own shelter! The weather has changed dramatically from warmth to cold nights and mornings. This shift in weather requires warm clothing and inside shelter from the elements. It is these same people who will remain unsheltered because there are no shelters, no apartments to rent, their extended families are consumed with their own survival and community services are limited. FEMA trailers continue to be slow in coming and in the meantime, this community is confronted with a homeless catastrophe that could easily escalate into rage and violence. These homeless individuals are struggling on a day-to-day basis with the reality of basic survival--food, shelter and necessities of living.

The church is called to respond. Judy Bultman, director of the Lutheran Episcopal Disaster Response at Bethel Lutheran Church in Biloxi, MS writes:

*"Yesterday I cried out in my prayers, "God, I just can't do this!" That prayer was immediately followed by God's voice softly saying to me, "Judy, you must do this!"....and I cried. I just feel so helpless and hopeless in this situation"*

*"Let me explain: Since Katrina, people have been living in whatever was left of their houses since the storm. Some of these homes are off their foundation, but the owners have continued to live in them because they have nowhere else to go. At least they had a roof over their heads and some semblance of walls around them. Some homes are entirely gone except for their porches and people have set up tents on their porches. Some don't even have porches and have found tents and are living in them."*

*"A friend of mine told me that she felt lucky and guilty at the same time because their bedroom is still standing; she, her husband and daughter have been living in that one room since the storm. But, she has a sister whose house was directly across the street and was demolished. Her sister has been pleading for her and her family to stay in that one room. There are probably thousands of families like this living in "what is left", simply because there is nowhere to rent, buy, or move...especially for the poor. Not only do they not have a home, their automobiles have been destroyed and they have no way to get anywhere to get relief."*

*"We have taken our ministry to these victims into the streets where the people are living. Slowly people began coming, and before we knew it our truck was surrounded by shoeless adults and children shivering in the cold, reaching up, begging for our quilts and meager food supplies. We emptied the truck in a matter of moments and then began to take orders for much needed items like shoes, jackets, more quilts, and always detergent, detergent, detergent!"*

*"Everywhere we went that day, we found that people were being put out of what was left of their homes. We had heard in the news that the Red Cross Shelters were shutting down on the following Monday. These people have nowhere to go, no place to live. We cannot get enough quilts, tents, blankets, Coleman stoves and lanterns, basic camping gear but, actually survival items for these victims...."*

As the Rev Julie Ann Summers, volunteer caregiver and Pastor at St Paul and St John Lutheran Churches in Ironwood, Mi writes of the living situation of the New Homeless:

*"This isn't a weekend camp out. This is life for who knows how long. No running water, no electricity, and no showers. If they have a car, they can't just pick up and go to work, because the place they work no longer exists. If they can't work, they can't buy gas, if they were renters they have to wait months for the opportunity to rent a new place--literally a new place, the old places are gone or uninhabitable. Speaking of uninhabitable--many of the new homeless are living in the front yards, or on the front porches of their uninhabitable homes--perhaps sleeping on a rescued recliner, or inflatable mattress..."*

At this time there is only one Red Cross shelter open on the Mississippi Gulf Coast. There are tent cities set up to house some of the families that have been discharged from the emergency housing provided by cruise ships and shelters. Disaster relief workers have been told that the tent cities are temporary housing measures until FEMA trailers come in. Many, many are still waiting. Until then many of the Gulf Coast residents are living without basic necessities, many in

tents on the driveways of their former homes--literally amongst the rubble. Prior to Hurricane Katrina, 33% of the families lived in rental units along the Gulf Coast. With many of these housing units damaged or destroyed, they, too, are a significant part of the new homeless. Thousands are currently housed in hotels, and will need shelter in January--These are THE NEW HOMELESS.

### **What should be done?**

First, emergency response must be reactivated for alleviation of the housing shortage. Family disaster assistance offices capable of sheltering for a long term basis need to be available, with processes in place for transportation and case work. The pipeline for FEMA trailers needs to be unblocked and streamlined, and creative ideas for other housing options needs to be explored. People need to know where they can go for help, especially those living in tents or vehicles who are waiting for trailers or for the development and rebuilding of housing units. Centers for housing and shelter should be areas for resources, casework and care. There is a great need for a coordinated, integrated approach to address the basic needs of the new homeless and the new poor. Assurance is needed and swift action on plans for rebuilding of public housing, subsidized housing units, and affordable housing for the many that are now seeking housing without available rental units and have limited or no income.

Second, a plan is needed for health care and financial assistance for the survivors of Katrina who now find themselves without income and health insurance. A reported fourteen thousand casino workers who were covered by their employers will see their coverage end this month. It is necessary to put in place a health coverage plan that will provide for health care coverage to assure availability of health care and prevent total financial destruction to families that are not covered and cannot afford COBRA. Food distribution programs that have been provided by interfaith organizations anticipate a dramatic increase in need as the mortgage and loans that were deferred now come due December 1, 2005. The disaster food stamp program must be extended into all the counties on South Mississippi and financial assistance offered for those who still wait for insurance payments to come through so that they may begin to rebuild their lives. For the unemployed and financially devastated, utilities assistance programs must be put into place.

Third, a mechanism to eliminate misinformation is needed. Dated or incorrect information keeps survivors fearful about their ability to recover and inhibits their ability to access resources to aid them in recovery. The availability of regular updates with transparent plans for rebuilding, the identification and mechanism for accessing resources, as well as identified contacts to verify information is needed. Information must be available and disseminated in a consistent manner, preferably by Family Disaster Assistance offices, as well as through interfaith disaster organizations. The faith community is responding to this disaster with hands and hearts and dollars. The church is present to the suffering of the people. The interfaith disaster response organization needs to have a place at all levels within the planning process and commission to be a voice for those who are struggling and a resource for rebuilding. At this time that place does not exist.

Fourth, support is necessary for the interfaith communities disaster response efforts through resources to house massive volunteer groups and their supplies that bring to the coast the resources to rebuild and regenerate hope among the hurricane survivors. These workers and supplies stretch the FEMA and insurance dollars to help rebuild homes. Public buildings and land need to be opened for use housing large volunteer groups. Working relationships with interfaith groups should be increased to support and further their contribution to the rebuilding and recovery efforts.

Fifth, Katrina, the worst disaster in the recorded history of the United States, requires new

thinking, thinking out of the normal box of response and recovery. No longer can predetermined dates be set for exiting phases of the response. Needs of the survivors have to set the timetable for these exit dates, for this disaster and future disasters as well. A community-based assessment procedure needs to be put in place that incorporates the interfaith, private, and governmental voices of that community to evaluate the scope of human need, the availability and effectiveness of resources, and change or develop programs to address those needs.

The Rev Dr Ronald B Warren, Bishop of the ELCA-Southeastern Synod says, “After numerous visits to the Gulf Coast following Hurricane Katrina, I have concluded that old methods and policies of federal and state planning and responses are not adequate. A new vision based on the reality of a projected 5-8 year recovery and rebuilding necessitates a new coalition and partnership including state and federal governments, businesses, nonprofit agencies, churches and ecumenical and interfaith partnerships. Working together, the new homeless will be no more and together we will one day celebrate a new homecoming.”

The Southeastern Synod of the ELCA is committed to maintaining an ongoing presence on the Mississippi Gulf Coast as disaster recovery continues. Ecumenical partners are invited to join with the Southeastern Synod in this effort. For more information, visit the ELCA-Southeastern Synod website at [www.elca-ses.org](http://www.elca-ses.org) or contact Elaine Schwartz, Director of Communication Resources for the Southeastern Synod at [eschwartz@elca-ses.org](mailto:eschwartz@elca-ses.org) or 404-589-1977, ext 235.

**And the King will answer them,  
'Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least  
of these my brothers, you did it to me.' Matthew 25:40**