

AN ASSOCIATIONAL PERSPECTIVE ON DISASTER RELIEF

DR. JOE MCKEEVER
DIRECTOR OF MISSIONS
BAPTIST ASSOCIATION OF GREATER NEW ORLEANS

One morning, early in the winter of 2006, I was driving up Elysian Fields Avenue toward our associational offices and the tears were flowing. All around was deadness and devastation. Hardly a soul could be seen anywhere and there was no traffic on the street. I said out loud, “Lord, I’m not just crying about that Walgreen’s or this Burger King. It’s not just that house or the one over there. It’s the whole thing. And I don’t know what to do about it.”

At that moment, the Lord spoke to my heart: “This is not about you. It’s about Me.”

I cannot tell you how liberating that was. Over these many months since Hurricane Katrina devastated our part of the world, I’ve found myself putting arms around our over-stressed pastors and reminding them of that fact. As 2 Corinthians 3:5 puts it, “We are not adequate to think anything of ourselves; but our adequacy is of God.”

In 2004, after 42 years in the ministry and the last 14 as pastor of the First Baptist Church of Kenner, I became director of missions for the 145 Southern Baptist churches of greater New Orleans, a region stretching from lower Plaquemines Parish upriver through St. Bernard, Orleans, Jefferson, and St. Charles Parishes all the way to LaPlace in St. John the Baptist. No one was more surprised than I at this change in my divine assignment, particularly since I was 64 years old. The associational committee asked me to commit for five years in this position.

During the first 12 months, there were times when I questioned the Lord about this call. “The job is a good one,” I would say, “and the pay is fine. I love the churches and the pastors, but I don’t know why you did this. I can give you the names of a dozen younger men who could do as good or better than I in this position.” This time, no word of assurance came from the Lord.

The answer arrived on August 29, 2005. On that Monday, when Hurricane Katrina slammed into our part of the world and the levees began breaking, flooding most of this city, my family and I were holed up in a hotel in Birmingham, Alabama. As we watched the tragedy unfold on television, we tried reaching pastors and friends via our cell phones, which worked spasmodically if at all. The only thing dependable was the internet. Our associational website had not been completed, so we used the one my son Marty had set up in my name.

On Thursday, September 1, I posted a message on www.joemckeever.com about the hurricane. We had no way of knowing that God would use this method of getting our message out to His people literally everywhere.

Thursday, September 1, 2005

They've been telling us the big one was coming. Finally, they were right. Here's what we know:

- *Our pastors and church members are scattered from one end of this country to the other. My associate, Freddie Arnold, spent hours this morning trying to locate pastors... (and) found no one. Bear in mind that all our cell phones have to go through the towers and centers that took the full brunt of Katrina, and you will understand why communication is nearly impossible even for those of us out of harm's way.*
- *Our associational office is across the street from the University of New Orleans and right on the banks of Lake Pontchartrain—and doubtless... under water Freddie set the computer hard drives on chairs before leaving the offices Saturday. No one has any idea what we will find when we are finally able to re-enter.*
- *It is a bizarre feeling to be in anguish over what's happening back at home, to be crying out to God on the behalf of those left behind, and knowing there is not one blessed thing you can do more. It's the very definition of helplessness.*

At the end of that article, 21 individuals left comments. Some were colleagues from previous places we had served, many were family or friends worried about us, and some were strangers who had stumbled onto the website.

Weeks later, when we were able to enter our offices on Lakeshore Drive, we were delighted to find them high and dry. We had taken almost no hurricane damage and no flooding whatsoever. However, power was not restored for months. Our first day back in the associational offices was January 16. Phone service was restored on April 3. In the meantime, we lived on our cell phones and did all of our Internet work from our homes.

On, September 2, our article spoke of New Orleans being loved in a thousand ways.

Friday, September 2, 2005

The rescuers and national guardsmen and law enforcement officials are giving her tough love. The medical staffs in our city and through the South are showering her people with another type of tough love. In the Astrodome and small towns all over the Southland, citizens are locating displaced New Orleanians in their local motels and ministering to them with tenderness and generosity. In Jasper, Alabama, a large family from St. Bernard Parish, just below New Orleans, was found in the Jameson Inn and made front page news in today's Daily Mountain Eagle. Local citizens gave them food and a job and a hundred other kindnesses. Personally, I have sat at my sister's computer here in rural Nauvoo, Alabama, for the last 4 hours receiving and responding to notes from people all over the nation (and a couple from Africa) saying they are praying for us.

At the time, I had no idea of the scope of the hospitality of the entire nation being extended toward our people. After we returned home, the Times-Picayune ran a color-coded map of the United States showing every county that took in one or more citizens of this area following Katrina. There were very few sections untouched by our residents. Nothing like this and on this scale had ever happened in American history.

In New Orleans itself, rescues were still going on. Buses finally were arriving at the Superdome and the Convention Center to transport our people to safety and security. Large

halls and sports arenas around the country were being opened and provisioned to receive our people. Lives were being uprooted and families being changed forever.

I found it hard to watch the news on television. Later, I was to learn that this was not an isolated phenomenon. Displaced residents were handling the stress and the worry of what was happening to their home, their neighborhood, and their city, in different ways. The worship leader at one of our Metairie churches died of a heart attack on Friday following the storm in the South Mississippi town where they had evacuated. His wife said he was so worried about their home. “Had he just held out until Monday,” she said, “we were able to get into the city for a few hours on Labor Day and he would have seen our home come through the storm just fine.” Stress is a killer, and it was killing our people just as surely as the floodwaters were choking out lives inside the city.

Saturday, September 3, 2005

I learned yesterday that a disaster relief group from Arkansas has been in Kenner feeding hundreds of meals a day since last Tuesday! No sooner had the wind passed into central Mississippi than these good folks pulled into the city and set up operations. They are being housed in and restricted to the Kenner city jail. They prepare the meals, then, police drive the containers to two shelters in the city where the ‘refugees’ are being held. For security reasons, the Arkansans are not being allowed to venture into the city, which is locked down.

At this point, I made arrangements with the Louisiana Baptist Foundation to set up an account so friends and churches could contribute to our ministers and our congregations. We publicized the address on our website and in time, hundreds of thousands of dollars were given. We set up a committee of three pastors—an Anglo, a Hispanic, and an African-American—to take all requests for assistance and make the decisions. A year later, this team was still in operation.

A side note: One of the most foolish things I did during those days was to announce that Freddie Arnold and I would be making decisions about who received financial aid from this fund. “That will keep it simple,” I said. A young pastor in our association called me off to the side one day and urged me to reconsider. “No matter what you do,” he said, “some people are going to be unhappy. Better you let others make those decisions.” As the amount of money mounted up and we saw how huge a job this was going to be, I saw the wisdom in his counsel. Many times since, as these three pastors struggled with the various requests for aid from churches and ministers, I have given thanks for the excellent advice from a young minister.

Wednesday, September 7, 2005

How many churches in our area of Louisiana were hurt? We have no idea. So many regions are still off limits due to the high water, blocked roads, and unsafe conditions. Once we’re able to return, job one will be finding out which churches still exist and which were erased from the map.

Margaret and I drove home on Saturday, September 24, after exactly 4 weeks of evacuation. The next week, Freddie Arnold and I began driving the streets and backroads of these parishes looking for our churches. It would be several days before the streets into Plaquemines and St. Bernard Parishes were opened.

When I sat down to write a letter to the churches, out of 145 congregations pre-Katrina, we counted 35 that were still meeting. We were to discover that some churches, like Delacroix Hope and Alluvial City and Reggio in St. Bernard had disappeared from the earth. Others, like the First Baptist Church of Arabi and Elysian Fields Avenue and all five Baptist churches of Plaquemines Parish, were forever ruined and would have to be destroyed. Most of the others that had major flooding would have to be gutted to the studs and completely rebuilt.

By December of 2006, nearly 16 months after Katrina, we count 87 Southern Baptist churches up and running. Some, like Edgewater and Poydras, are meeting in their renovated fellowship halls, and some, like Franklin Avenue, are meeting in other churches' sanctuaries. Two new churches joined our association. Good News and New Vision Baptist churches voted to become part of our group and their pastors have become familiar faces at our various meetings. The pastor of one of those churches brought a laugh from our ministers when he confessed, "Actually, we would have joined your association several years ago, but we were waiting on a particular deacon to go to Heaven."

Saturday, September 10, 2005

They're now saying they may have overestimated the number of dead in New Orleans. It beats me how they ever came up with figures of 20,000 or even 40,000 in the first place.... I pray that on reentering New Orleans, we will have surprisingly few funerals to conduct.

This prayer was answered. The total numbers of the dead eventually surpassed one thousand, but most were found over the ensuing weeks and even months. A year after the hurricane, dead bodies were still being pulled out of houses, particularly in the most heavily flooded portions of the city such as the Lower 9th Ward. As I write this, in early December, 2006, another body has been found.

A young pastor of a church in east New Orleans that was fairly well destroyed e-mailed, "What will we ever do? I don't know what to do now?" I wrote back, "My friend, you are about to see something you will be talking about the rest of your life. God is about to do a work that will change your ministry forever, and you will always be grateful you were here to see it happen."

"God has directed the attention of the world to New Orleans, and the attention of all Southern Baptists to the churches of New Orleans. Soon, you will have... churches lining up to adopt your church. They will be sending in teams to help you. If your church has to be bull-dozed and rebuilt from scratch, you'll have lots of friends to help."

By early September, Southern Baptists' disaster relief groups were all over this area, running feeding units and assisting in a hundred ways. High-level denominational leaders were establishing a system for our churches to be adopted by healthy churches throughout the SBC. Our people might have been evacuated and most of our churches shut down, but God's people across America were already at work, planning ways to help us.

At this point, my primary function seemed to be as a connector between our churches and pastors and the SBC congregations across the country that were signing on to sponsor them. For a while, I was using two cell phones to handle all the calls. Every time I

turned my computer on, 40 or 50 new messages were waiting from people wanting to come and help rebuild this city or send supplies or connect with a missing church leader.

Wednesday, September 14, 2005

Understand that New Orleans is going to be different. Understand that this (work) is going to be hard and dirty and you will be uncomfortable. Today in Hammond I was told of two chain saw crews that arrived from another state, but turned around and went home when they discovered we had no air-conditioned accommodations for them to stay in.

Understand that in bringing a team to help us rebuild, at first you will need to send a scouting party in to look over the situation and talk to local leaders to see what your group will be doing. Then go back and select the workers you decide would be right and assemble the materials and tools you will need. The Florida Baptist Convention is asking their people who come to plan to be completely self-sufficient.

As a connector, I found myself repeating the same explanations and giving the same answers over and over, so I developed a rather lengthy article and posted it on the website to brief potential workers on what to expect down here. We had quickly discovered that some churches had their own programs which they wanted to install in our churches, and that their mission trips seemed to be more about meeting their needs than ones down here.

Understand that if your church decides to adopt one of our churches, you will not be able to come in and put in some program you found to your liking back home. This is a local church with members and deacons and pastors, and we ask visiting teams to respect that. They will establish their own directions as the Lord shows them, and sponsors will want to come in and help them fulfill it.

David Hankins, Louisiana Baptists' executive-director, gave his personal commitment that every pastor who was on duty prior to the hurricane would have his financial needs met for the next 12 months. It would be up to Freddie Arnold and me to connect our pastors with these resources.

Tomorrow (actually Wednesday, September 14), I'll be meeting with a group of New Orleans Baptist pastors here in Jackson, Mississippi, at the First Baptist Church. We've sent the word out in every direction, but have no idea whether we will have a handful or a dozen or twenty or more.

Twenty showed up. That was the first surprise. They had driven from Oklahoma, north Alabama, Louisiana, and south Mississippi to get there. The second surprise was how deeply everyone was moved. They were hugging and crying and praying and sharing. We met at 10 o'clock and they were still there, talking and visiting, three hours later. At that point, I realized we were on to something. Our pastors were going to be needing each other.

Prior to Katrina, our monthly pastors' meetings might draw 20 or 25 ministers, most of whom did not know each other. And the next month, even with the same number, it would be an entirely different group. But this had changed forever.

The following Wednesday, we moved the meeting to the First Baptist Church of LaPlace. Pastor Bobby Burt offered to provide lunch. When Hurricane Rita took aim at

Louisiana, we tried to cancel this meeting, but Freddie Arnold went anyway, just in case some did not get the word. Twenty showed up.

For the next 8 months, we met each week at the LaPlace Church, from 9 am to noon, followed by lunch. Attendance varied from 30 to 95. The program was completely spontaneous, depending on who showed up, who had information to share, who needed comforting. A visiting director of missions from Arkansas told us, “When they said we would be attending a 3 hour pastors’ conference, I groaned. But you could not have told me it would be so positive and uplifting.”

Denominational leaders attended our weekly meetings as well as “scouts” from churches and associations checking out the area before bringing their teams in. Some arrived with gifts such as a hundred backpacks filled with toiletries, writing material, and other necessities. Some brought gifts of money or books. The pastors quickly learned that to miss this weekly gathering might mean losing out on some tangible encouragement!

After LaPlace, we met for 3 months at Oak Park in Algiers, then 3 months at Good Shepherd (Spanish) in Metairie, at the New Orleans Chinese Church in Kenner for two weeks, and then at the Baptist Center on Lakeshore for the duration.

At this point (December 2006), our weekly meeting continues, although we have shortened it to two hours. I keep remembering what a leader from the North American Mission Board said. “I was a pastor in South Florida when Hurricane Andrew went through and destroyed so much of our area. We did not have a regular meeting of our pastors--it was every man for himself--and within a year, most of them had moved away.”

I cannot begin to count the number of times people have applied the Esther text to my situation: “You have come to the Kingdom for such a time as this” (4:14). Far from being a prideful statement, that realization is overwhelmingly humbling. The Father’s purpose required a pastor in this position, one who already knew the pastors and churches and the city.

To answer the question, “What have you done during this crisis?” my quick response would be this: As a pastor to the pastors, I have often been able to connect them to outside sources of help and encouragement, have maintained our website to inform our transplanted residents as well as friends everywhere of the local situation, and have led the weekly gathering of pastors and friends. Obviously, as with any job, there are another hundred tasks of all kinds, but these were the major ones.

I fully accept that this is the reason the Father called me to this position in May of 2004. Katrina may have surprised us, but it didn’t slip up on Him. He knows what He is doing.

Soon after we returned from the evacuation, someone printed up hundreds of small stick-in-the-ground plastic signs with this scripture: “I know the plans I have for you, saith the Lord. Plans for your welfare and not for calamity, to give you a future and a hope.” (Jeremiah 29:11) The signs were posted at intersections all over the area. It was a message

New Orleans desperately needed and continues to draw hope from. Dr. Chuck Kelley has chosen that Scripture as the seminary's assurance in this ongoing crisis.

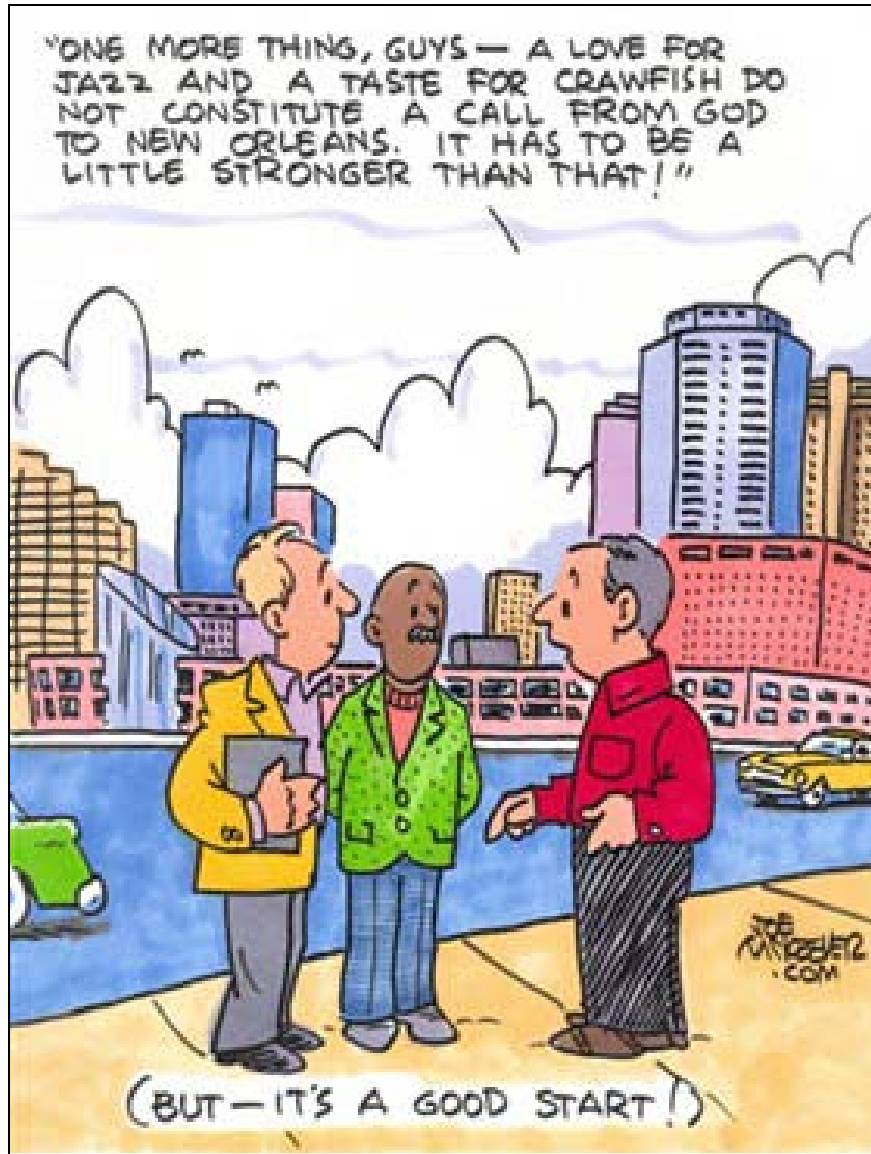
"The Lord knows." Nothing is more comforting.

"The Lord has plans." So liberating.

"The Lord's plans are good." So uplifting.

JOE MCKEEVER CARTOONS

DR. JOE MCKEEVER
DIRECTOR OF MISSIONS
BAPTIST ASSOCIATION OF GREATER NEW ORLEANS



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