

PACIFIC CURRENTS

The need for righteousness in emergency planning and response

By Mary Susan Gast

Three years ago, when Hurricane Kenna slammed the Pacific Coast of Mexico, none of us who were living in the little town of Rincon de Guayabitos had much warning.

Partly that was because Kenna, while building into a level 5 storm, kept changing directions. First it ran toward Cabo San Lucas and scared away the world leaders gathered there for an economic summit; then it veered northeast and executed the tropical gale's rendition of a turn-around jumpshot with Mazatlan as the backboard, before racing off on a southwesterly romp to the open sea. There the burly storm stopped, regrouped, reversed and finally hurled itself onto the shore.

We didn't have much warning. Just after 10 p.m. when it was certain that Kenna was barreling toward us, a scratchy loudspeaker mounted on a flatbed truck told people to go to higher ground. My husband and I had no transportation and no idea of where to go. Our friends Jose and Victoria phoned their friend Cristina who lived in the hills above town. Cristina invited us all to come stay with her.

At 11 p.m. Roger was in a phone booth leaving a message for our daughter that the hurricane was coming and we were evacuating, and we would be fine. At 11:15 we were standing in the

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misty rain with Jose and Victoria and their children and their dog, delighted to see headlights coming up the street. Jose stopped his neighbor's

truck, spoke with the neighbor, and came back to report that the neighbor would return for us after he had delivered his spouse and children to the home of some cousins and take us to Cristina's house.

We waited. Half an hour later the neighbor returned, and we went up into the hills.

During that drive through the silent and deserted town, I gave thanks for these friends of a month's duration who would not have thought of leaving us on our own. I gave thanks for the grace and timing and community connection that afforded us a place to stay and the means to get there.

And I was certain that the level of emergency planning and response in the United States was such that hurricane evacuation in this country would never take

place so haphazardly. My thanks were well-founded. My certainty was not.

Hurricane Katrina gave us five days' warning. The evacuation orders were issued. People left town. We saw the cars thick on freeways where all lanes were designated northbound. Full planes flew out before the airports closed.

With five days' warning, I assumed that there would be buses and trucks going through the cities and towns where people are well-acquainted with the force of hurricanes, picking up those who were reluctant to leave their homes, who were too sick to leave on their own, who had no transportation of their own, who had no homes and had not heard that they must go.

I assumed that, with five days' warning, there would be time to implement a well-coordinated plan, phoning cities 100 miles inland to say, "We have evacuees. How many can you shelter?"

With five days' warning, I assumed that the shelters would be stocked with food and water, beds, blankets and medical supplies sufficient to meet the needs of those displaced by storm.

I assumed too much, without even raising the question of levees sufficiently strong to protect a city built below sea level at the convergence of the Mississippi River and the Gulf of Mexico.

Major hurricanes bring devastation, destruction, disruption of

life and livelihood whenever they strike human habitation. But with Katrina the human suffering was amplified by the hollow space which coordination and oversight should have occupied.

There was no overview, no administrative hub. No plan for the basics of communication within the disaster zone. No awareness, for days, of 20,000 people stranded in the New Orleans Convention Center.

No other way to for a desperate mother to find medical help for her sick baby other than to hand the infant through the window of an overcrowded bus as it pulled away. No way out for people slogging through water neck-deep and laden with sewage and chemical contaminants.

Our English words "administration" and "ministry" share a common Latin root, which means "service." Administrators and ministers are called to serve.

In our Judeo-Christian tradition, that service is birthed in compassion, and comes forth as righteousness — the ability and the desire to make things right for people; to help the needy survive today, and to give them hope for the future.

The county sheriff in Mississippi who was interviewed just after the hurricane had struck, displayed righteousness. He seemed both calm and shaken, as he said, "I know we will have evacuees coming in, and we need to care of

them, and we will take care of them — I just don't know how."

We heard righteousness through the words of the mayor of Houston and the governor of Michigan welcoming and embracing the evacuees coming to them; in the actions of city officials in San Jose and San Francisco who prepared for the arrival of persons displaced by the hurricane, in disregard of warnings that these cities might not be reimbursed for expenses if they failed to get prior approval from FEMA; from the creative imaginations of those who anticipated children's need for the comfort of teddy bears and those who spread the tarmac with new rubber sandals for evacuees as they de-planed.

When the murky floodwaters make it clear that age, poverty and race were fatally linked to one's chances for survival in New Orleans, must we not cry out for the righteousness that is an everflowing stream?

We yearn for righteousness — righteousness at the core of our urban planning and disaster response operations, at the heart of our economic policies and energy expenditures, at the center of our justice system and our decisions about war and peace.

Righteousness which "rescues the needy when they cry out . . . restores life to the weak . . . and deems their blood too precious to be shed." [Psalms 72: 12-14]



The Gulf Coast 'Maafa': a Christian response to Katrina

Editor's note: "Maafa" is the Kiswahili word for "real calamity, catastrophe, tragedy or disaster." Rev. Toni Dunbar, former Associate Conference Minister for Golden Gate South, is Chaplain at the San Francisco Juvenile Probation Department, and an Associate Pastor of City of Refuge UCC, San Francisco. She sent a longer version of these thoughts to friends and colleagues on Sept. 1 after Hurricane Katrina.

"The city's evacuation plan worked, except for thousands who were too poor or disabled to find their own way out of the city before the storm." (New York Times)

I saw a heartbreaking photo of a gulf coast church ravage by the hurricane, with a roof and steeple, but hardly any walls or floor. This photo, plus the words of an old children's rhyme, bares out a prophetic warning for today: "Here is the church, here is the steeple. Open the door, but where are the people?"

My prayer is that the choir will sing out its song across the nation.

What is happening in the Gulf Coast is WRONG. What has happened in Iraq and Afghanistan is

WRONG. What is happening with the World Bank is WRONG. What is happening to nascent rights of the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender community is WRONG. What is happening to Social Security is WRONG. What is happening in the U.S. penal system is WRONG. What is happening in the upper echelons of corporate America versus what happens in America's inner-cities and rural areas is WRONG-WRONG-WRONG!

What is RIGHT happens in the chairs and pews of a thousand little churches each day, in a thousand little anonymous checks, a thousand extended hands and opened doors each hour.

What is right happens in a million homes, a million mothers and fathers teaching their children to share; in hundreds of businesses that donate even a minuscule portion of their proceeds to help stabilize the poor; and in the dozens of corporations that sow, however sparsely, back into the social and material ground they have overharvested.

The photo of the church I saw can be either a symbolic clarioun

call, or a symbolic indictment. It is we who have the power. Is it that the church is a survivor and sustainer? Or is it that the church is a vulnerable, empty wreckage?

Is it good to follow after Bush's energy and social policies, in exchange for a picture in the paper, a meeting at the White House, and a few dollars from the Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives? Or is it good to risk a friendly visit from the Department of Homeland Security because I/we/you said aloud that some of this administration's policies are WRONG?

It is good to offer prayers and healing services, and even better to offer prayers with a channel of blessing for the disenfranchised and dispossessed.

I thank God that my church, Refuge Ministries, Inc., exists to provide holistic ministry. I thank God that my denomination, the United Church of Christ, is fully committed to justice. I thank God



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that other churches and other denominations and other faiths and other communities consistently rise to the occasion. I thank God that many schools, colleges, universities, and seminaries are rising to the occasion, insisting upon education that is contemporary and contextual.

What would happen, though, if we would rise with ONE body? If we would extend with ONE hand? If we would insist with ONE voice that injustice anywhere is injustice everywhere?

Every generation has its commitment to social change — the more things change, the more they remain the same; there is nothing new under the sun, so says the Holy Bible — but every generation has had to ask the same question: "What if . . .?"

What if . . . we each find someone or some organization that shares our passion in this current crisis, and throw in together?

What if . . . from the ashes of the Gulf Coast there would arise a new determination to end the invisibility of the poor and to reshape an infrastructure that maintains and benefits from-an

underclass?

What if . . . we hold accountable those people and organizations who consider us expendable?

What if . . . we work TOGETHER, and yet still on many fronts?

And what if . . . we don't quit?

No woman or man can turn a hurricane. Every human-made dike, dome, pump, lock and levee is one day destined to fail, and the Gospel of St. John attributes these words to Jesus: "The poor you have with you always." (John 12.8). Someone will ask, "Well, what are YOU doing!?"

Well, I've sent money here and there, and I'm talking to you. I'm looking at and for places where I can help, as an individual. I'm looking for people and organizations that can link together for a greater common good, and digging for resources for a very long-term effort.

Bless you for hearing me thus far. Maafa. Maafa.

And thank you every one who has already opened coffers and doors, and who are making a way for our survivors. May we follow in your footsteps.