

# VESTRY PAPERS



EPISCOPAL  
CHURCH FOUNDATION  
**Learn. Lead. Give.**

To inform, inspire and affirm Episcopal vestries in their work

## And the Church Still Stands!

by Edward O'Connor

*But now thus says the Lord, he who created you, O Jacob...do not fear...when you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you...for I am the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior. (Isaiah 43:1 ff.)*

It was an early Sunday morning on September 4, 2005, the first Sunday after Hurricane Katrina devastated the Mississippi Gulf Coast, New Orleans, parts of Alabama and Florida. And there, at a local park pavilion, the remnant of St. Peter's by-the-Sea Episcopal Church in Gulfport, Mississippi, gathered — huddled together for a makeshift service.

With conventional communication out, word of mouth was the only semi-reliable way available to call our people to worship. Many had lost everything from the record storm surge. People who should have come

empty handed arrived bearing precious and holy gifts — a fold out picnic table with our tattered and torn frontal salvaged from the church site, paper towels, an odd wine glass and plate, silver candle holders and the like — so that we could celebrate the Holy Eucharist.

A palpable sense of shock, fear, confusion, anxiety, anguish and utter disbelief inundated every reasonable thought. In just six short days, we'd seen and endured things previously unimaginable. Senseless murder, car jacking, theft and looting. Houses gutted, businesses burning, beaches reduced to sandbox fodder, signs twisted and gnarled in treacherous winds; dead bodies gathered from the sea in makeshift morgues; gas and food lines, like some sort of semi-organized ant colony, winding around street corners and decimated buildings.

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*God's people know about disasters, for tragedies of all sorts have been part of the Judeo-Christian tradition for thousands of years. Responding to them, however, calls for a mix of twenty-first century expertise and faith that springs from the ages. What is the role of vestries in this process? Learn from those who have learned the hard way: Katrina.*

## Less than a Mile Away

by John Massarini

*Ed's note: If your parish has the good fortune to be left standing after a disaster, how can it best reach out to those less fortunate? Christ Church, Slidell, Louisiana, came within one mile of being flooded by Katrina but was left largely intact. We asked parishioner John Massarini to describe what he and others learned.*

Christ Church, Slidell, was a congregation of 150 families living six to nine miles north of Lake Ponchartrain, on the border with Mississippi. In the aftermath of Katrina, the southern half of Slidell was literally washed away. The flooding stopped less than one mile south of Christ Church.

Adjacent towns — Waveland, Pass Christian, Long Beach and Pearlington — along with four Episcopal churches located on the

Mississippi Gulf Coast (Highway 90) simply ceased to exist.

Half of the congregation of Christ Church Slidell was "elsewhere," unable to get home from wherever they had evacuated. Many of those able to return to the area were unsure of where, or how to start. Some had lost their homes. Some still had homes, but quickly learned they had no jobs. More than half of the vestry was "away."

A core group of Christ Church parishioners, led by (then) Deacon-elect Milt Gibson, made things happen. Gibson organized relief supplies from across the United States, turning what had been an empty church into a fully functioning relief center.

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**This Issue:  
Disasters**



# And the Church Still Stands!

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But it was the Sabbath and God's people gathered to worship and praise the One in whom all things ultimately make sense and in whom all things are redeemably possible. And it was the prophet's message of divine trust and confident hope that helped us see and know God's mighty presence in that dark and destitute time.

As I read from Isaiah 43, written for a people in exile, I realized that we too were an exiled people of sorts and in the midst of despair. As we wondered aloud if God's judgment had passed upon us, the one thing that the wind and flood could not blow or wash away was our incarnate hope in the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. For they are our people and on that morning, they called out to us with a message that from brokenness, suffering and pain comes perseverance, hope and survival. In the months since, we've continued to heed their call.

## **Where are we now?**

As a community of faith, we've learned that God is present at all times and all places. We have rediscovered that from weakness comes strength, from poverty comes wealth, and from suffering comes assurance and power. And most of us have learned this through the power of community. For in walking this path of recovery and restoration, we've realized that holding hands is not just an outward sign of love's first blush. It is a reciprocal invitation of fidelity, accountability and respect.

With every bottled water and canned good distributed, as we've torn down, sifted through and hauled away, with every tear, shout, lament, and laugh, we've held hands with a deep, abiding awareness of God's presence and guidance. And while no sane person would ever wish the largest natural disaster in the history of this country to strike their home and land, because of it we are on a new, God graced path and in a state of becoming.

## **What have we learned?**

Before Hurricane Katrina, St. Peter's by-the-Sea was a growing and thriving community with an average attendance of 160 each Sunday. But, as in many pastoral-sized parishes, there was a reliance upon the clergy to "handle" much of the day-to-day

operating procedures. Katrina taught us the importance of lay participation and cooperation in the church's ministry.

As a result of a previous near-miss (Hurricane Ivan in 2004) our vestry had approved and implemented a two-fold hurricane plan that enabled us to pastorally track our people and then identify the essentials of what needed to be taken away and who was to do what.

The vestry produced an emergency contact sheet asking for relevant phone numbers (cell and other) as well as likely evacuation addresses so that, after a hurricane, they might be able to locate and confirm our parishioners' safety and well being. This information proved critical in the days following Katrina as we were able to, within seventy-two hours, locate virtually all of our people. It was the available vestry and clergy, through phone trees, e-mail updates and home visits, that accomplished this work.

And this process became a teaching moment for us to understand that the vestry is not a board of directors or elite senior management group, but a team of committed Christians, working and praying together and who have been given the authority to plan, prioritize and implement the unique vision of this particular portion of the Body of Christ.

Any preparations must be prioritized and realistic within the context of each worshipping community. But the goal, regardless of size, is to appropriately spread the responsibility of preserving and maintaining the church, so that in the aftermath of a storm or natural disaster, the faithful may be proactive in outreach and mission, instead of just reactive. And the ultimate lesson is the importance of being prepared with a plan so that in the aftermath of the chaos and recovery, every child of God in Christ may stand together with a sense of hope to proclaim, "The church is still standing!"

*The Rev. Edward F. O'Connor is rector of St. Peter's by-the-Sea Episcopal Church in Gulfport, Mississippi. To see the full text of this article, go to [www.EpiscopalFoundation.org](http://www.EpiscopalFoundation.org)*

*If your parish were to suffer a natural disaster, what would it most likely be? Being adjacent to lakes or rivers can cause flooding, which may not be covered by your insurance policy. Or if there is a drought in your area, you may want to think about fires. Take a moment to consider your surroundings and then take precautions.*



# THE BIG PICTURE

## Disaster Preparation in the 21st Century



*Terrorist attacks. Natural disasters. The threat of bird flu. Whether real or potential, disasters instill chaos, fear and human suffering. But the church counts on one thing that other institutions may or may not have: faith. Through our buildings or through one-on-one interaction, God's people reach out with faith, a centuries-old commitment to serve those who suffer, and a trust about which Julian of Norwich wrote: "And all will be well, and all will be well." With that said, here are some ways to prepare for disaster:*

### Teach about Faith

- ☑ Take the opportunity now to talk (in sermons, in parish meetings) about how tragedies are in fact part of "normal life," and that in withstanding disasters it is faith, not fear, that prevails.
- ☑ Use church school and youth group teaching opportunities to talk with children and teenagers about faith response to disaster throughout life.
- ☑ Find ways to help those who are suffering, be it local or distant.

### Keep Track of your Congregation

- ☑ Secure your congregation's names, addresses, e-mails, and cell phone numbers offsite.
- ☑ Develop a partner congregation in another part of the country.
- ☑ Exchange lists annually, keeping them confidential. Make sure vestry members know the name and number of this congregation.
- ☑ Who will be your parish contacts in case of emergency? The rector and wardens? How will you reach them?

### Take Stock of the Building

- ☑ Prepare emergency supplies in coordination with other local churches.
- ☑ Keep your buildings, especially during construction, fully insured.
- ☑ Have pictures of all contents inside stored digitally and offsite for insurance purposes.
- ☑ Make sure your insurance company or diocese performs periodic risk assessments.
- ☑ Make sure that first-aid supplies are clearly labeled.
- ☑ Know what you will take with you if there is time.

### Back up the Files

- ☑ Back up computer data regularly (at least weekly) and store offsite.
- ☑ Have the parish registers copied and saved elsewhere, (including the diocesan offices and local history sites if appropriate).
- ☑ Keep offsite records of all burials, including sites reserved or sold.
- ☑ Make copies and store securely: articles of incorporation, by-laws, key files, computer passwords, insurance records and contacts, parish directories and emergency numbers.

*And finally — vestries, clergy — take CPR and first-aid training. A heart attack on a Sunday morning is more likely than a terrorist attack.*

## Thank you...

We are grateful to the many individuals, including our writers, who helped with this issue: Jim Lemler and Jerry Hames from the Episcopal Church Center; John Webster from the Church Insurance Group; Cynthia Cannon from the Consortium of Endowed Episcopal Parishes; Robert Radtke and Janette O'Neill from Episcopal Relief and Development; Tom Ehrich from *On a Journey* publications; Lauren Autonberry from the Diocese of Mississippi and Ann Ball from the Diocese of Louisiana.



*At all times, remember to hire contractors who are credible, licensed and carry insurance. If your friendly but uninsured neighborhood welder starts a fire and the church burns down, you could be in worse trouble than when he started the job. And if you have anyone sleeping in the building overnight, install carbon monoxide detectors.*

# Less than a Mile Away

*continued from page 1*

Eighteen-wheel truckloads of goods were brought in from Episcopal churches in New York State, unloaded and sorted with the assistance of volunteers from St. Luke's Church, Baton Rouge, led by the Rev. Joe Rhodes.

Several congregations representing multiple denominations from South Alabama brought in, set up and ran an assembly line of cleaning supplies and personal hygiene products directly on Seventh Street in front of the church.

In the early days after the storm, the relief center functioned even though there was no area phone service and large trees had to be removed from the front of the church. Using runners was the only way to communicate. Cell phones sometimes worked and sometimes not (cell towers having being destroyed). The local library had Internet service available and set up additional computers, with expanded hours of operation.

No one at Christ Church had cell phone numbers for its parishioners (only home telephone numbers), and e-mail addresses were available only from those who had

requested Sunday bulletins via e-mail. You cannot call someone at home when his or her home is washed away!

"Waiting for FEMA and the Red Cross" became a common phrase. In that time, Christ Church became a relief center — a "go to" place for information and supplies. The center was open seven days a week for twelve hours a day; hundreds of people were helped for over three months.

## What's normal now?

"Normal" now means that half of the congregation has yet to return.

"Normal" means that the City of Slidell, which had roughly 45,000 people before Katrina, now has three times that many people living in the area.

"Normal" means that there are no apartments or homes to rent, or to buy, and people who had jobs in healthcare or in retail sales are now employed gutting houses or removing debris from city streets.

"Normal" is hearing from neighbors who are relocating to Kansas City or Wisconsin.

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*To support parishes as they raise funds for mission and ministry, the Episcopal Church Foundation offers help with capital campaigns, planned giving, annual giving and investment management services. Call Natalie Guthrie, ECF Giving Services operations manager, at 800-697-2858 to learn more.*

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## Packing On Short Notice

*And the Israelites baked unleavened cakes of the dough which they had brought out of Egypt, for it was not leavened, because they were thrust out of Egypt and could not tarry, neither had they prepared for themselves any provisions. (Exodus 12:39)*

Should that day come when you need to pack items on short notice, what would you take from your parish? Here is what Edward O'Connor, (see page one) recommends:

- ✚ Bible
- ✚ Church service record book
- ✚ Church or parish records — all volumes
- ✚ Crucial staff CPUs and backup disks
- ✚ Relevant office documents and supplies — church letterhead, folding/stapling devices, phone book, pens, pencils, church address and bank deposit stamp, calculator, etc.
- ✚ Relevant files — clergy files, secretary/administrator's files
- ✚ Financial records — especially insurance policies, monthly bills/asset statements, leases, any onsite checkbooks, etc.
- ✚ Vestry information — minutes on paper and disk, by-laws, annual reports
- ✚ Stewardship files/pledge cards
- ✚ Communion set — chalice, paten, corporal, purificators, cruets, missal, etc.
- ✚ Home Communion set
- ✚ Vestments — minimally current season and upcoming season
- ✚ Library — essential books for ministry such as commentaries, manuals, etc.
- ✚ Any archive materials that are important to the church.

*Next Issue:  
General Convention  
and beyond...*

# Less than a Mile Away

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## What we learned

- ✚ Communication, food, housing and money are the most important items in the early days.
- ✚ Relief supplies should include blankets, food, water and medical supplies.
- ✚ Bathing and personal hygiene (hot showers) are welcome by all, including first responders.
- ✚ "Relief supplies" does NOT mean cleaning out a closet and sending old clothes. These items take up valuable volunteer time and space to sort and store and the immediate need is not for clothes.
- ✚ Churches are faster to respond than government agencies at any level.

## Tips for disaster planning

- ✚ Keep on hand enough supplies to respond: water, cots, food, baby food, diapers, first-aid supplies (including aspirin or ibuprofen) and blankets.
- ✚ Keep money on hand. Big Box store purchase cards are practical, too, as these can be used anywhere in the country. Cards could be given to those in need or used by first responders to get supplies closer to the site, rather than transporting goods over long distances.
- ✚ A network of churches, each one having a cache of disaster supplies, can respond as a group to the disaster area, instead of one church trying to deal with the situation alone. Think interdenominational, please.

- ✚ Keep cell phone numbers and e-mail addresses stored outside of the church building itself, such as in Yahoo or AOL, so that the information can be accessed from another location.
- ✚ Share information as to what resources you have. Build a communication network with other churches. Test it periodically.
- ✚ Surviving a hurricane can be as simple as a lateral move of fifty miles on either side of the storm's landfall; a network of churches could provide a "go to" point for those leaving the immediate area.
- ✚ Any church hall can serve for two to three days as a place to sleep, eat and wash up. The emergency supplies at that church would already be on hand for those being housed.

Now entering its 100th year in Slidell in 2006, Christ Church is weathering this latest crisis. The actions of the congregation and the many wonderful volunteers from across the country has helped our church and the community to survive, while waiting in hope for our neighbors and friends to come home.

*A former secretary of the vestry for Christ Church, Slidell, Mississippi, John Massarini, RHIT, was born and raised in the Big Easy and is a healthcare middle manager in New Orleans area hospitals. Although people continue to come home, Christ Church's population is only half of what it was before Katrina.*



*Breaking news as Vestry Papers went to press: Episcopal Relief and Development (ERD), in coordination with many partners, will expand its services to help dioceses work with parishes on disaster preparation and recovery. Look for more news to come.*

## Hot Off the Press

*Vestry Papers* is delighted to announce the publication of **Doing Holy Business: The Best of Vestry Papers**. A compilation of fifty articles by wardens, clergy, scholars, theologians and business leaders, this 160-page book explores the following areas and more:

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# Editor's Note



When we first started this issue, things felt disparate, scattered, and chaotic — much like a disaster itself. We wanted to cover both disaster recovery and preparation, and there just wasn't much information on the latter.

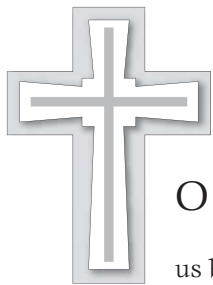
But then the tide turned, so to speak. Diocesan communicators and bishops suggested writers whose churches had been in the path of destruction and those people soon came forth with more information than we could print. Pictures were sent of huge waves that made us cringe. We, like much of America, were stunned at the amount of pain suffered by certain towns and churches.

We were also reminded that the work of the church does not stop with the destruction of buildings; if anything, it speeds up. The church is about the Body of Christ, and brick and mortar structures have never fully defined it.

Following the suffering caused by Katrina, plans have sprung to help the church be more disaster-ready. As we went to press, Episcopal Relief and Development, in coordination with a range of national partners, announced a new national focus on disaster preparation. And individual churches, clergy and bishops have more information to share with others as the wider church plans for potential disasters.

Remember the best planning, of course, is still the planning of the heart. As Lyndon Harris puts it: "Don't forget to pray, to read Scripture, and to practice spiritual discipline, especially when you feel that you 'don't have time.' These practices not only help keep you healthy and safe, but they also prepare you to be a 'non-anxious' presence for those in your care. You cannot care for others if you do not care for yourself."

*Lindsay Hardin Freeman*



O God, our times are in your hand. In the midst of uncertainty, lead us by your never-failing grace as we seek to be agents of healing and hope. Walk with us through difficult times; watch over us in danger; and give to us a spirit of love and compassion for those who suffer and mourn. And finally remind us that you have promised never to leave us, so that even in the valley of the shadow of death your love may be felt, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

— *Lyndon Harris*

*The Rev. Lyndon F. Harris was priest in charge of relief ministries at Ground Zero offered through Saint Paul's Chapel after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. He is currently co-chairing The Garden of Forgiveness at Ground Zero initiative with Dr. Frederic Luskin.*