I Saw God at Work in the Midst of a Mighty Storm

An Essay By
Joyce Mason Winburn
An Activist Ministry Means Taking Action

By Dr. David Emmanuel Goatley, Executive Secretary and Treasurer, and Dr. Keith A. Troy, President
Lott Carey Foreign Mission Convention

It’s better to light a candle than curse the darkness,” an ancient proverb says. A network coordinated by Lott Carey—a premier global Christian missions agency of African American heritage—has done just that. We responded to the devastation of hurricanes Katrina and Rita by launching programs and services “to help people rise again.” For more than a year, our Resurrection Centers, staffed by hurricane survivors to serve and support hurricane survivors, have been helping people rise again. Many have failed but we have remained faithful. We hope this magazine inspires you to help us continue this critical work in the Gulf Coast.

Here’s How You Can Help . . .

• Send donations on a regular basis. Write “Gulf Coast Relief” on your contribution.
• Organize church and community fundraising projects to support the Centers.
• Contact local businesses for financial and other donations.
• Donate canned goods and other nonperishable food items, toiletries, diapers, wipes and clothing for infants, children and adults.

Joyce Mason Winburn is a lifelong member of First Baptist Church, Eminence, Kentucky where she has served in music ministry and Christian education. Following the visit to the Gulf Coast summarized in this magazine, she spearheaded missions support projects bringing thousands of dollars in cash, goods, and services to survivors of hurricanes Katrina and Rita.

Ms. Winburn is a career educator who recently retired from public schools after a 35 year career teaching English, Spanish, Speech and Drama. In addition to receiving the National Milken Educator Award in 1995, she has been recognized as “Teacher of the Year” seven times and was Director of a Regional Service Center for the Kentucky Department of Education providing educational assistance to 169 schools in Northern Kentucky for nearly a decade. A graduate of Morehead State University and University of Louisville, she also holds a Secondary Principal Certification for the state of Kentucky.

“I hope my recollections will touch your heart. I have never seen such devastation ... I have never before seen such faith.”
Hurricanes Katrina and Rita, two unforgettable natural disasters, struck the Gulf Coast leaving hundreds of thousands of Americans destitute, homeless, jobless and in some instances thousands of miles from the only homes and communities they had ever known.

Today, we still can’t erase those horrible images of the wreckage and destruction: People packed like cattle in the Super Dome and the New Orleans Convention Center; people seeking shelter on bridges and overpasses; people standing before television cameras pleading for food, water and rescue.

Although the horrific winds have long subsided, Katrina’s ravages are still evident. Some areas of the city look as if the storm hit yesterday. Entire neighborhoods have been decimated. Homes and business are either uninhabitable or they’ve been completely destroyed. Only foundations and concrete steps remain where homes once stood. Many of the remaining dwellings are encrusted in mold. Heaps of garbage filled with furniture and clothing, dishes and rotting drywall, even fabulous antiques – are still piled up on the street.

For many displaced residents, housing is virtually non-existent or too expensive. Rent in the city has jumped 39 percent and home prices in the suburbs have spiked. Thousands of residents are living in FEMA trailers or they’ve left the city proper and are calling a new place home. Many families are still paying mortgages for homes that no longer exist and still receiving utility bills for properties they can’t inhabit.

And then, there’s the mental anguish. Many residents are suffering from posttraumatic shock syndrome. They may look and act as if they’re still functioning. But their degree of loss has taken an emotional toll that results in memory lapses, apathy and an inability to cope with the past and embrace the future.

One year later, news from the Gulf Coast no longer dominates the world and na-
HELPING PEOPLE RISE AGAIN

I traveled to the Gulf Coast several months after the Hurricanes and got a first-hand look at all the mind-boggling loss and the devastation. But those aren’t the only images that have stayed on my mind. In the midst of all the death and devastation, in the midst of all the pain and anguish, I saw many signs of caring, sharing, generosity and hope.

Just as the hurricanes have had a dramatic impact on the landscape of the Gulf Coast, the Resurrection Resource Centers established by Lott Carey and other African American church conventions, have had a similar impact on the lives of the survivors they’ve been able to assist.

During the last year, the paid and volunteer staffers at these centers have toiled relentlessly to provide not only food, clothing and personal supplies but also pastoral support and counseling. I saw social workers helping evacuees find employment and housing as well as the local, state, and federal resources available to them.

I saw mental health professionals offering hurricane survivors the recuperative services they needed. I listened to counselors in charge of running an after school program for children provide much more than homework assistance. These counselors also offered these young people a chance to engage in “survivor talk”, dialogue that ultimately helped them cope with the harrowing events of August-September 2005 and move into the future with hope, confidence and reassurance.

Through my visits to these Centers, I saw God at work in the midst of a mighty storm.

These Resurrection centers, initially established to provide food, clothing and in many instances, lodging for Gulf Coast hurricane survivors, opted to take on a much broader humanitarian role when faced with the ever increasing needs of the evacuees along with the delayed government aid response. A mission network that includes Lott Carey Foreign Mission Convention, the National Baptist Convention of America, the National Missionary Baptist Convention, Baptist World Aid, the Louisiana Home and Foreign Mission Baptist State Convention and the African American Catholic Congregation established these centers.

They continue to serve Hurricane survivors in Baton Rouge, New Orleans, Lafayette, Lake Charles and D’Iberville, Miss. The center in Shreveport, which is further inland than the other sites, was closed this past summer.

Here’s an amazing fact: The majority of Resurrection Resource Center staffers are themselves hurricane evacuees. Lott Carey and its partners have employed more than 50 evacuees, providing them the opportunity to not only serve tens of thousands of other survivors but also to earn money to meet their own needs. Despite the fact that they lost their homes and possessions as well as contact with family members and friends that have been relocated throughout the USA, these “evacuee” employees have been highly effective. They understand the challenges and frustrations of the Resurrection Center clients who like themselves, are also struggling to rise again.

Restoration Center, Lafayette, La.

This facility provides services to evacuees from New Orleans and is located in the African American Catholic Congregation Imani Temple #49 Cathedral pastored by Bishop Diana T. Williams. During the first 60 days following Hurricane Katrina, the center distributed tons of food, water and clothing, provided hot showers and clean clothes, and cooked hot meals. Bishop Marie Washum, the pastoral care
counselor here, opened her home to 15 evacuees for more than a month and used her own personal finances to care for them. Many more used her home to eat, bathe, launder clothes and move on. The center collaborated with the Salvation Army and The Oprah Winfrey Fund to screen evacuees for vouchers to purchase furniture/household goods once housing was secured. Bishop Washum conducted the interviews, verified housing status and distributed the vouchers. Today, that fund has been depleted.

Every volunteer here had a heavy workload. A distribution coordinator oversaw the collection, organization, and distribution of clothing, food, and other supplies. The social services and mental health counselors conducted intakes, referred evacuees to appropriate agencies for help, located affordable housing, identified mental health issues and set up long term treatment for those who needed it. As with many disasters, crime, substance abuse, domestic violence and suicide were on the rise and had to be addressed.

Here in Lafayette, I met Mr. Hubert Dobard, a warm and gracious 81 year old retired postal worker called “PawPaw” by everyone at the center. On one pleasant, sunny day, I sat under large tree and let “PawPaw” tell me his story. This New Orleans native was first evacuated to St. Gabriel outside Baton Rouge, then to Houston and finally on to Lafayette. As the patriarch of a large family, PawPaw, 81, was luckier than most. Most of what he lost was replaced by his homeowner and auto insurance. He and other family members collectively pooled their resources and have been able to purchase a home and a car. He currently lives with his daughter.

After Katrina, Lafayette doubled its population. There are still long waiting lists for housing. Before the hurricane, a one-bedroom apartment here cost from $250 to $300 a month. Today, incomes have not increased. But those same apartments are going for $400 to $500 a month. Many people, particularly senior citizens, are forced to choose between buying medicine and buying food.

As a result of longstanding abuse by insurance companies serving this area, many homeowners were underinsured and had policies that did not cover the replacement value – the cost of rebuilding or renovating their homes. In many instances, mortgage companies are getting most of the checks and the money that makes it into the hands of the policyholders is not enough for them to rebuild their extensively damaged homes. To combat this injustice, the Resurrection Centers is spearheading an effort to provide pro bono legal help for these homeowners who can’t afford attorneys.
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This Resurrection center initially focused on providing food, clothing, mental health and pastoral care counseling. Today, it provides nutritional counseling, dieting classes and parenting classes. “So many of our people were in poor nutritional condition,” said Jones. “They have cancer, diabetes. We’ve partnered with Southern University’s Agricultural Department to inform evacuees about appropriate things to cook while living in trailers and hotels.”

The depth of illiteracy and the lack of job skills, especially among African American males, make unemployment a major challenge. Job training is a priority and the center is working 15 individuals who are being trained as certified nursing assistants through a program at a local community college. Once they finish this program, they’ll be encouraged to get additional training to become a licensed practical nurse or registered nurse.

Through funds dispersed by the Lott Carey network, these trainees will receive money for tuition, books, supplies and babysitting services.

In response to Lafayette’s housing crisis, plans are currently underway to develop a construction skills training program spearheaded by Dr. Christopher Williams, City Councilman and CEO of the Lafayette Technical Institute. Workers trained through this multimillion-dollar project will build 25 homes for Resurrection Center families. The Johnson brothers, Frank and Terry, hurricane evacuees who own a construction company and property in the area, will also be involved in this venture to build affordable housing units for homeless evacuees. The program will not only supply housing, but also teach homeowners how to maintain their properties.

This Resurrection Center has also developed a coalition of individual leaders from the 12 trailer parks where Katrina survivors are housed. Once a week, center staff meets with these residents to discuss what they’re needs and issues are. The center also encourages these trailer park residents to attend city council meetings and town hall assemblies to make their needs known.

Continued mental health counseling is critical. People who have gone through this kind of disaster may remain in shock for up to a year, Jones said.

“Ask them how they are doing and they’ll say ‘Blessed and highly favored.’ But they’ll let you know in subtle ways that they’re having problems processing all the shock and upheaval,” said Jones. “What we’re finding is that many people who have gone through this kind of disaster have problems putting together a long term recovery plan.

“They’ve been hit with so much bad information and misinformation. Instead of moving forward, some of them stay stuck.”

F.H. Dunn Resurrection Center, Lake Charles, La.

This Center, housed in the Greater St. Mary’s Missionary Baptist Church, is the coordinating hub for the Lott Carey Network Resurrection Centers in Louisiana and Mississippi. It provides social service, pastoral and mental health counseling and a relief center that supplies food, clothing and toiletries.

Pastor Samuel C. Tolbert, Jr. who brings more than a quarter century pastoral experience, denominational leadership and a dozen years as a
Cynthia Jones knows how valuable the Resurrection Center is. She and her family lived at Greater St. Mary’s for almost five months. 

“[They] helped us with housing, clothing, food and fellowship. But my story is mild,” said Jones. “Considering where we were—and where we are now—all I can do is raise my hands and say thank you to God.”

Jones is grateful that through her experience, she can help other evacuees. “When they come in destroyed and all broken up, it’s easier to talk to them when you’ve walked in their shoes, when you’ve been in the same shape.”

Greater Mount Olive Baptist Church
Baton Rouge, La.

Although Baton Rouge suffered the least damage from the hurricane, the center provides assistance to evacuees from New Orleans. Like the other centers, it distributes clothing, food and other supplies, operates an after school program, and offers counseling.

Across the street from the center is Mt. Olive Gardens, a FEMA trailer park where the majority of evacuees reside. The GMO Resurrection Center assembles and delivers Welcome baskets for families moving into the park, and the Food Bank delivers frozen foods.

Trailer Park Coordinator Paulette Hamilton said there are 25 children, including newborns and teens, live in the facility. There are 107 travel trailers, including eight for the disabled. The laundry facilities are free.
They know they’d better come in here with some books or homework. This is not the type of place they come to play computer games online. We give them study time and then if they need additional help, we counsel them one-on-one.
—Bernard Williamson, after-school specialist

During a recent “Moving On,” seminar sponsored by the Mt. Olive’s management, park residents discussed hopes of returning to New Orleans, transportation needs, depression and motivation. Survivors also received info on childcare, GED, adult education and job training programs.

E.H. Potter Resurrection Center
D’Iberville, Miss.

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E.H. Potter Resurrection Center
D’Iberville, Miss.

This facility, which served about 169 clients from Biloxi and D’Iberville, is housed in the Tabernacle Baptist Church, pastored by Dr. Kenneth Davis. The staff includes a licensed mental health counselor and an after school coordinator, who also drives a bus and does janitorial chores.

The center partners with a convalescent home, which has taken in several of the elderly evacuees who were dropped off and abandoned by their families. The Rev. Roy Thurman, the pastoral care counselor, conducts weekly Bible classes, prays with residents and provides one-on-one counseling.

The center’s mental health clients largely come from FEMA trailer parks suffering from a wide range of problems—post-traumatic stress syndrome, drug and alcohol abuse, domestic violence and stress.

Shirley Thurman, a mental health counselor, works with 32 clients in-house and others who need long-term therapy. About 20 children are enrolled in the after-school program.

A lack of transportation prevents deeper outreach. Students receive tutoring and participate in survivor talk and rap sessions. But the focus is on study, says Bernard Williamson, an after school specialist.

“They know they’d better come in here with some books or homework,” he said. “This is not the type of place they come to play computer games online. We give them study time and then if they need additional help, we counsel them one-on-one.”

F.H. Dunn Resurrection Center
New Orleans, La.

The New Orleans skyline is still impressive as you cross Lake Ponchartrain but that image is soon lost. Roofs with blue tops, boarded up businesses and homes dominate the scene. The landscape is more barren: lots of toppled trees and parched earth. The devastation seems all encompassing.

Due to the social and economic composition of New Orleans, 20 percent of those displaced by Hurricane Katrina were poor and 30 percent had incomes well below the poverty line. Estimates say 44 percent of the storm victims were African American, about 310,000; 88,000 were elderly and 183,000 were children. State officials estimate 85,000 low wage jobs were lost.

The F.H. Dunn Resurrection Center in New Orleans is located at the New Hope Baptist Church, where the Rev. John Raphael, Jr., is pastor. My first day there, I surveyed the neighborhoods of the Lower 9 (Ninth Ward)—New Orleans East, Gentilly, Mirabeau, Lakeview, and the canal—with the Rev. Mitchell Stevens, the center’s head coordinator.
More than a year later these same areas show little or no progress. The Lower Ninth Ward, four miles long and four miles wide, is a racially diverse but nonetheless poor neighborhood. Most residents there owned their own homes. But when the water there rose as high as 12 feet, houses were lifted from their foundations, moved, and then collapsed.

Compared to last year, there’s been little progress in New Orleans East has educated, upper income families, and Gentilly is one of the oldest neighborhoods in New Orleans. A few houses under repair have FEMA trailers sitting nearby: the homeowners say they’ll live in them until their homes are renovated. Like the other centers, this site provides clothing, food and personal items. Most of the food served here was provided through a partnership with Second Harvest. And the counseling needs are critical.

During my first visit to the New Orleans Center, a young woman, an officer with the New Orleans Sheriff’s Department, came to complete an assistance application. Her family was scattered. She had moved to Texas but could not get a job transfer and had to return to New Orleans. The young woman was in so much emotional distress the staff immediately formed a circle around her and began to pray.

Elsewhere in the center, clients were being screened by the pastoral care counselor and children were completing homework and artwork in a small classroom with the after school coordinator. In a conference room furnished with two sofas, a desk and chair, and a computer station, 12 survivors were engaged in “survivor talk.” Throughout the remainder of the afternoon, stories unfolded amid tears, words of encouragement, and prayers because there is no shortage of gut-wrenching stories of survival and faith.

For example, Mary Winfield, who has lived in New Orleans for 54 years, has 13 children, 28 grandchildren and 32 great-grandchildren. The Sunday before Hurricane Katrina, she and her partially paralyzed husband went to a hotel where her son was employed. They were on the 25th floor. When Katrina struck, they had to walk down 22 floors to the third floor because a power outage disabled the elevators. There were no lights except in the stairwell. Winfield slept on the floor while her husband slept in his wheelchair. Food ran out on Thursday but they didn’t evacuate to Baton Rouge until Saturday. When they returned to New Orleans, they found the roof of their house caved in and everything they owned was lost.

New Orleans’ suicide rate has increased. The pastoral care counselor here has met with more than over 1,000 survivors, about 12 a day. The mental health counselor sees three to five clients each day and spends a great of time providing grief counseling. Because the majority of clients need more long term and intense assistance, referrals to other agencies are common.

Hundreds of survivors are still in desperate need of housing. But it is virtually non-existent or too expensive. During Hurricanes Katrina and Rita, 331,070 housing units were damaged, according to authorities. About 51 percent of all rental unit damage from Hurricanes occurred in Louisiana. And until nearly 190,000 displaced New Orleans residents can return.
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home, many feel this city is missing its soul. Despite this dismal backdrop, there are tremendous signs of hope.

B.F. Martin, a 94-year-old minister from Monroe, La., used the Resurrection Center here to donate $500 to 75 families in need. He used personal funds. Another local business asked the Center to pass out gift cards of $1,000 each to the 50 evacuee families.

Since opening their doors, the Gulf Coast Resurrection centers have served a total of 10,875 families. A total of 1,184 families have received mental health counseling, 3,623 have received social service interventions, 1,723 have participated in the after school program and 3,557 have requested and received pastoral counseling.

The Resurrection Centers have established themselves as trustworthy agencies and donations have poured in. “One of the agencies here donated 29 brand new, 25 cubic foot side-by-side refrigerators,” says Lake Charles Cynthia Jones.

The Bottom Line: They Need Our Help

The Centers need additional financial support to continue providing comprehensive assistance to hurricane survivors. “As survivors continue to come in for stance, our frustration grows,” said Rev. Tolbert adds. “Staff members often use their personal funds to help those in need.”

My trip to the Gulf Coast has left an indelible impression. I hope my recollections will touch your heart. I have never seen devastation of that magnitude. Never before have I seen such faith. Even with all of the uncertainty and stress of “where do I go from here,” many Hurricane survivors held fast to the truth.

During interviews, the evacuees repeatedly professed their faith in God and gave Him thanks for safe passage through the storm. Without knowing how or when, they affirm their commitment to the Lord and continue to believe He will make a way for them. It is clear our generosity with our time and money will play a huge part in the recovery.

Rebuilding the Gulf Coast will be a long-term recovery effort. It will take years to get this area running again. But the Resurrection Centers have been a powerful mechanism for renewal and change. The money received by these centers has been managed well. They are regarded as trusted agents and will continued to be used to disperse funds and supplies donated by other philanthropic groups.

The Centers not only need money. They need more skilled laborers and craftsmen to come to the area and help with the rebuilding effort. “They may be able to help us build a house, do sheetrock work or help us put a roof on a house,” Rev. Tolbert said, adding that because of Katrina and Rita, churches have a renewed sense of commitment to mission work worldwide.

“It’s like the Hurricanes blew us into our biblical responsibility to do more mission work,” says Tolbert, who also serves as president of the Louisiana Home and Foreign Mission. “This was an eye opener, a reminder for churches to stand up and take their rightful place in the community and the world. I see us spending more time in full time ministry than ever before. This sort of thing happens in countries like Haiti all the time. What it’s done is open our eyes to the plight of the world community.”

The Resurrection Center experience “has been an amazing thing,” says Rev. Tolbert. “I’ve seen an awful lot of good taking place here. The Gulf Coast is going to be a better area once we get ourselves up and going again. People will be stronger. People will be closer to the Lord. Our churches will be more mission-minded. And some people will have better living conditions. They’ll recognize that life wants to offer them something better. Before, some people were locked in at a certain level and they weren’t striving for any-
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Lott Carey Helps Reunite Mother and Son

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The day before Hurricane Katrina hit, Michael was on a day visit with his father, promised to return Michael back to his Mom after the Hurricane ended and it is not clear why he did not.

Delisha, a determined, five-time Special Olympics gold medalist, did not see her son again for seven months. After the Hurricane, she fled through the back of her storm-damaged building with her one-year-old son Kelly, while alligators circled out front. She went to the Convention Center and got on a bus that landed her in Memphis. With help from her grandmother, Delisha eventually made telephone contact with Leavings, who was in Texas at the time. She reportedly refused Leavings requests for Michael’s birth certificate and arranged to take a bus to New Orleans to retrieve her son, but Leavings was a no-show.

At that point, a church in Memphis put Leavings in touch with the Lott Carey network. The church contacted Johnson, who began working through the courts to assure the child’s return.

Lott Carey paid for the private investigator that traced Leavings to Orange, Texas, not far from the Louisiana border. After filing a custody petition in Memphis, Johnson, Delisha and another attorney traveled to Orange, only to find that Leavings and his family had left two weeks earlier. The Sheriff’s Department in Orange searched his old apartment and found information indicating they had relocated to Houston.

The entourage headed there. After getting assistance from the Houston police, they found the youngster in an apartment rented by Leavings’ sister. Leavings was not present when authorities went in and removed the child. “It was a really great moment,” Johnson said.

Without Lott Carey, “we wouldn’t have been able to do this,” Johnson said. The organization is still taking a personal interest in Smith’s family and has even arranged counseling for the youngster. Its Memphis-based volunteers are still on the job as well.

“Ms. Smith doesn’t have any family in Memphis,” Johnson said. “She’s very independent. But she knows if she needs something, all she has to do is call. We’re her new extended family.”

They may also see the church in a different way. "They'll remember that when other agencies fell short in their efforts to provide help and relief, the church was there for them," Tolbert said.
Lott Carey Network Reunites Mother & Child

By Carolyn White, Contributing Writer

Florence Johnson, a Memphis labor and employment lawyer, has always had a soft spot for the down and out, the mistreated and the downtrodden. As a volunteer attorney for the Lott Carey Foreign Mission Convention, which provided myriad basic services to hurricane survivors in New Orleans and Mississippi, Johnson took on one of the most challenging civil rights cases of her 16-year career: the right of a mother to reconnect with her child.

When the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children claimed that all children separated from their parents during the massive evacuations were back in parental care, Johnson knew differently. As a pro bono lawyer for the Lott Carey Resurrection Centers in Louisiana and Mississippi, Johnson was still helping Delisha Smith, a physically challenged 23-year-old from Kenner, La., recover her five-year-old son, Michael.

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