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Words from Wes

September 6, 2005

Katrina

Last week, my wife Karin and I watched on TV as the desolation unfolded in New Orleans and the Gulf Coast. We sat helpless with millions, while the world's most technologically powerful nation could not provide food, water, and rescue to fellow citizens, whose faces of desperation filled our screen and haunted our conscience.

Commentators described hurricane Katrina as a "natural disaster," or at times as an "act of God," like language used in some insurance policies describing events beyond human control. It means no one is liable--except, of course, God. And that's what troubles me. How can a God of love, Creator of all that is, be responsible for such terrible, destructive disasters?

But as I listened, reflected, and prayed during the week, another question emerged. Just how "natural" was this disaster? Consider this, for instance. When Katrina left the Florida coast, it was classified as a "tropical storm"--not even a hurricane. It picked up tremendous power as it passed through the Gulf of Mexico, in part, experts think, because the waters of the Gulf were two degrees warmer than normal. So by the time it reached New Orleans, it was a Category 4 hurricane.

Many years ago, I led a group studying global warming and the responsibility of the churches for preserving the environment. Even then, (1990) a clear, global scientific consensus warned that global warming due to human causes--especially the accelerated use of fossil fuels--was causing disruptive climate changes. And I clearly remember listening to scientists say that one effect could be that storms such as hurricanes would increase in their intensity and destructive effects because of warmer waters and changing sea levels. So a part of Katrina's fury was not completely "natural."

And there's more. New Orleans was built between the Mississippi River and the Gulf of Mexico, with much of the city below sea level. Its vulnerability to flooding from hurricanes was partly protected by the wetlands between the city and the Gulf. These act like a "speed bump," absorbing and lowering some of a hurricane's force. But they've been disappearing, making way for shopping malls, condos, and roads, so twenty-five square miles are lost each year--an area the size of Manhattan Island. And the city has kept moving closer to the Gulf.

Moreover, the levees and dams constructed to protect the city and "control" the Mississippi deprive the wetlands from the sediments and nutrients that naturally would replenish its life. There's a lot "unnatural" about this "act of God."

And then, consider the victims. Those who have suffered the most are the poorest, and most of them are African American. Within New Orleans, 27% of the residents lived below the poverty line, and many of those simply had no cars, no money, and no way to leave. That also isn't "natural." The poverty rate, and the gap between rich and poor, continues to increase in this nation, and that is a national disgrace. More to our point, that's a sin, condemned by literally hundreds of verses of Scripture. Those most vulnerable to Katrina have been kept on



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society's margins by persistent economic injustice and racism.

I celebrate the tides of compassion flowing in the wake of Katrina. Organizations such as Church World Service and the Salvation Army bear the compassion of Christ to the desolate, homeless, and hopeless. And I still don't fully understand why, in the providence of a loving and all-powerful God of creation, things like hurricanes and earthquakes happen.

But I do know this. When I see the devastating effects of Katrina, I don't simply regard these as an inexplicable "act of God." I also focus on the sins of humanity. We've disobeyed God's clear biblical instructions to preserve the integrity of God's good creation, and to overcome the scourge of poverty. In the aftermath of Katrina, we desperately need not only compassion, but also repentance.

How is the RCA responding?

This is what Karin asked me the other day--why we didn't see or hear anything in the local newspapers and media about what the Reformed Church in America was doing in response to Katrina, and how can RCA members help those efforts. Those are good questions.

A large part of the reason is that for years, we have not worked alone in responding to disasters, but have done so through Church World Service (CWS). This organization pulls together the resources and commitments of several denominations in providing relief and development assistance as part of our Christian ministry. Our particular role in this comes through [Reformed Church World Service](#), and many of our congregations, and some individuals, give generously. Betty Voskuil coordinates this work, and Betty also currently serves as Chair of the Board for Church World Service, a real honor for the RCA.

Church World Service does excellent work. Most important, they are committed to working for the long term in response to disasters. As you can see from the RCA website, CWS is actively engaged in its response to Katrina, working closely with the Federal Emergency Management Administration (FEMA). The work CWS does, supported by the RCA and many other denominations, is solid, compassionate, effective, and long-lasting.

But it doesn't get the headlines--in part because it's there providing long term assistance rather than immediate, high profile services done by excellent organizations like the Salvation Army. And because it works as the agency serving several denominations, CWS hasn't put the energy into establishing a highly publicized image, the way most para-church organizations must do in order to help with contributions.

Through Betty Voskuil's office we've communicated directly with all RCA congregations and received numerous responses. We will continue to work with Reformed Church World Service and RCA congregations to raise financial resources and supplies for those affected by the hurricane. Further, the RCA website will list partner agencies and denominations that provide volunteer opportunities for RCA members at the appropriate time. So be assured that while the RCA may not be in the headlines, we are, through Church World Service, in the front lines of the response to Katrina.

Sincerely,
Wes Granberg-Michaelson

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