

Summary Report from the Gulf Coast Relief Funding Panel Meeting

September 19-21, 2005
Baton Rouge, LA

Notes and reflection by Meg Riley, Chair

Introduction

What follows is narrative reconstructed after this meeting occurred, with memory jogs from a few notes and feedback provided from my colleagues on the GCRF Panel. The fact is that we were listening to such compelling information that it was difficult for the group to take minutes. For most of our time together, we were in learning mode. If you want to 'cut to the chase' about our decisions, please see the final section of these notes in the [Wednesday afternoon section](#).

-- Meg Riley

Sept. 19 – Monday

"Each person from the affected area described how her/his life was impacted by Katrina. All who were present expressed gratitude for being together, working together, having the opportunity to serve our movement in this way."

The Rev. Anne Odin Heller (Interim District Executive, Southwest District) and I met at the Baton Rouge airport and drove to the Baton Rouge church. On the way, we saw what would become Baton Rouge as I know it—horrendous traffic (since Baton Rouge has practically doubled in size post-Katrina) and huge tents next to mostly Baptist churches, under which hundreds of hurricane evacuees ate, sorted through tables of clothing, and sat. We met up with the other [Gulf Coast Relief Fund panel members](#) at the Unitarian Church of Baton Rouge, excited to put faces with names. Most unfortunately, (panel members) Eunice Benton and the Rev. Jacqueline Luck were tied up in Mississippi with bad car troubles, and alerted us that it would be several more hours before they could arrive.

The rest of the committee and assorted other folks we had invited went out to dinner to talk. The panel members (The Rev. Steve Crump, minister of the UU Church of Baton Rouge, the Rev. Anne Odin Heller, Baton Rouge congregation member Rebecca Cureau, Ph.D., UU Service Committee Program Director Atema Eclai, and I), accompanied by the ministers from the three area congregations (the Rev. Jim VanderWeele – Community Church of New Orleans, the Rev. Marta Chase Valentin – First Unitarian Universalist Church of New Orleans, and the Rev. David Ord – North Shore Unitarian Universalist Society, Lacombe, LA) were present, as well as Penny Ramsdell, President of the Baton Rouge Congregation; Alison Valentin Chase, spouse of Marta Valentin; Marilee Baccich (an interfaith minister, New Orleans native, and recent graduate of Starr King School for the Ministry); and the Rev. Craig Hirshberg, both of whom are providing supplemental ministry assistance to the Baton Rouge Congregation. (Hirshberg, with a background working at FEMA, was in Baton Rouge under the auspices of the UU Trauma

Response Ministry; Baccich, with generations who had lived in New Orleans, simply "knew she had to be there.")

Grateful to have our own private room at the restaurant, we took the time to go around and have everyone speak. It was particularly moving to hear David Ord and Jim VanderWeele, who were steeped in grievous losses in their own communities, speak forcefully for the need for the Grant Panel to fund long term community initiatives which will help the most marginalized. Marta Valentin and Alison Chase had not yet seen the devastation which awaited them in New Orleans at both home and church, and spoke in anticipation of doing so the next day. We were pleased to welcome Eunice and Jacqueline to the gathering in time for all of us to eat together.

Each person from the affected area described how her/his life was impacted by Katrina. Jacqueline and Eunice described the miles and miles of utter devastation they witnessed in Mississippi. The Baton Rouge folks described how the hurricane had affected their city as it doubled in size with people from New Orleans. Jim VanderWeele and Marta Valentin described what it felt like to be out of their homes and congregations. David Ord described the work being done to repair his congregation in Lacombe.

Jacqueline reported on her experience spending the two weeks after Katrina working as chaplain in the shelter in Jackson. This was reported on the Mid-South District web page, and Jacqueline had expressed concern that the shelter was closed so quickly. The UU Church of Jackson is providing shelter for three people who are living in the RE building which is a house. Since then the UU Trauma Response Ministry Team has sent Annette Marquis to work out of the home provided to Jacqueline by Our Home Unitarian Universalist Church in Ellisville, MS. Annette was working with evacuees in the Hatiesburg shelter until it was closed and people were placed in trailer parks around the state. [Her experiences](#) are on the UUA website. Jacqueline reported that she's been involved, along with parishioners, in collecting household items for folks relocated to these trailers. The Reverend Martha Munson has also been sent to Mississippi by the Trauma team also, and has been ministering to the Gulfport/Longbeach congregation. There is an effort now underway to locate the areas where displaced people are being placed in MS, so there can be continued support of them.

All who were present expressed gratitude for being together, working together, having the opportunity to serve our movement in this way. We concluded the evening early so that we could go to our home hospitality (as no hotel rooms in Baton Rouge were available).

Sept. 20 – Tuesday

"From our time with David Ord and his congregation, as well as Jim and Russell, the word 'Diaspora,' which has been used relentlessly in the press, ceased to be verbiage and began to be an ache, a homesickness, a longing for something that would never return."

A morning field trip to survey damage

We reconvened at the Baton Rouge church at 9 AM, ready to learn and to reflect. David Ord had requested that we pay a visit to Slidell, LA, to see the damage there (we could not enter New Orleans without a special pass) and also to visit his congregation.

We began the morning with an ancient wall map of Louisiana, which Steve Crump had procured. Steve explained sadly that many islands and coastlines no longer existed from when this map was made, probably in the 1950's. He cited a book, "Bayou Farewell" by Mike Tidwell, which beautifully describes this coastal loss—the size of a football field every day. We acknowledged the importance of environmental considerations as well as human ones as we moved towards funding decisions.

Atema Eclai described to us how dealing with trauma might affect us, and encouraged us to keep our eyes open for signs that we were ourselves becoming traumatized. Everyone was deeply appreciative of this conversation. Atema also shared the news that the UU Service Committee is in the process of adding a permanent, full time position to deal with disasters, rather than continuing to treat them episodically. This new staff person's first assignment will be to get involved with Katrina relief.

We boarded a minivan generously loaned to us by a member of the Baton Rouge congregation and headed east. We were apprehensive but happy to be with one another, and conversations about funding, devastation, trauma and congregational needs moved in waves from the front seat to the back and to the front again. We arrived in Lacombe, the area of the [North Shore congregation](#), and while we recognized that the damage to the church building was, in light of what others had suffered, minimal, those who knew the land mourned the loss of the trees that had surrounded the property. Indeed, men with chainsaws – who turned out to be UUs from Knoxville, Tennessee who had been recruited by [The Mountain](#), labored over the fallen timbers in the blazing sun, which baked this day into the high 90's. "

Inside the parsonage, which is directly behind the church, we learned that trees had fallen on all four sides of the building, but had only taken down a small piece of the roof. David Ord and a few of his board members explained to us that the roof is covered by insurance. The biggest loss this congregation will face is the fact that probably 30-40% of their small band will not return to the area, as they are already finding jobs and housing elsewhere. In a 79-member congregation, this is an urgent situation. The board is already addressing it, and presented a report to us about their plans.

I began to realize that, just as disasters bring up the fault lines in society (ignoring the poor, racial disparities, etc.) they also bring them up in individuals and in communities. Vulnerabilities are highlighted. Thus, in a small congregation, the need to develop leadership capacity becomes urgently critical.

We drove on, heading further east to Slidell. Where before there had been cheerful assurances to one another that 'it's not too bad,' those words began to die on our lips. It was bad. For Rebecca Cureau, whose sister had lived in Slidell, the devastation was more personal. She scrambled to get her bearings, as every marker she'd ever known—gas station, guardhouse, restaurant—was now a pile of rubble. Silence descended on the van as we headed north again. We told one

another in thin voices that we were glad we'd seen it for ourselves. Eunice and Jacqueline reiterated that this devastation was similar to what they'd seen in Mississippi (indeed the Mississippi coast, which was quite close to Slidell, was still completely closed to anyone but rescue workers).

As we drove west on the return trip, traffic became horrendous. The freeway was clogged with trucks bearing trailers for temporary houses, trucks of rescue workers, vanloads of Baptist youth groups, and stressed-out individuals with back seats full of belongings. When we returned to the Baton Rouge church after a lunch break, we met with two guests we had invited in to brief us about New Orleans and Louisiana from the perspective of the wider community.

An afternoon of learning about communities in Diaspora

Jyaphia Chrystos-Rogers, an anti-oppression trainer with the UUA, had been a New Orleans activist and a member of the UU congregation of New Orleans for a long time. Jyaphia helped to connect us to Jim Hayes, an organizer with the [People's Institute for Survival and Beyond](#) (an organization that has had a long relationship with the UUA), and [Russell Henderson](#), whom Jyaphia had described as 'the good guy lobbyist of Louisiana,' working for every progressive organization and community imaginable.

Russell described the world as "pre-K" and "post-K", the K standing of course for Katrina. We had a ranging conversation with them. Following are a few bits of wisdom I jotted down:

- "It is important for the religious community to provide hope to those who are in distress. People are in agony."
- "Just to struggle with the scoundrels is a full time job. While we are crying, grieving, falling apart 30 times a day, they are systematically moving forward with new development which benefits them."
- "There is no leadership in New Orleans and Louisiana. Even if you hated what Giuliani did after 9/11, you have to say he was a strong leader. There is no such person in Louisiana."
- "People are gone and they ain't comin' back. The demographics of Louisiana are going to shift radically post-K. Someone called me and said, 'I was makin' \$6 an hour in New Orleans ; I'm making \$10 an hour here in Houston, why would I come back?' Someone else said, 'My kid is in a school with new books for the first time in his life, why would I come back'? They ain't comin' back."
- Chillingly, "This is not the big one."
- Of the Army Corps of Engineers: "If there is a bad guy..."
- Of the Red Cross: "They'll help us get located in 49 states of the union. The only one they won't is Louisiana. I have called and demanded to speak with supervisors of supervisors, and been told 12 different things. The one that made me angriest: 'If we opened in Louisiana, mobs would break out and people would be killed.'"
- There will be an absentee ballot drive by the party politics folks, and it's going to be a HUGE challenge. Louisiana may shift party affiliation, especially with the exodus of African Americans.

They cited Tremé (pronounced but not spelled "Tremay") as a particular place to do affordable housing. They dreamed of creating villages, as opposed to high-rises. (Note: Tremé is the oldest African American neighborhood in the city. It is filled with mostly homeowners; 22% of the population are renters.)

It was powerful to talk about all the folks who are leaving. A recurring story was this one: "Y'know, my son lives in San Francisco. I love it there. I'm 57 years old; I have no house and no job now; I've been doing this kind of advocacy all my life... Part of me is saying, 'I could have a good life in San Francisco...'" From our time with David Ord and his congregation, as well as Jim and Russell, the word 'Diaspora,' which has been used relentlessly in the press, ceased to be verbiage and began to be an ache, a homesickness, a longing for something that would never return. We were all grateful to Jim and Russell for the information they offered and the powerful images they provided of a people wracked by disaster.

An Evening of Reflection

Following dinner, we screened the PBS show "NOW" which interviewed survivors about services they had received and mostly NOT received.

During and after the show, we shared our reflections. Eunice shared her fears that, because Jim and Russell had described the corporate interests in New Orleans pulling out and not coming back, tourism would become the only financial force guiding its economics. Her worst fear, she said, was that the precious culture of this region would become commodified, sanitized, processed and sold back as a consumer good rather than the national treasure that it is. We discussed housing and groups we might want to contact as partners. With this, we recessed for the evening.

Wednesday – Sept. 21

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Meeting with the Leaders of the New Orleans Congregations

Our agenda for the day was to meet with the two New Orleans congregations in the morning, and to make decisions and plot our next steps in the afternoon.

The Rev. Marta Valentin (minister, [First Unitarian Universalist Church of New Orleans](#)) and her spouse Alison Chase joined us to share their journey to New Orleans the day before. It had been far worse than they feared. The church was covered with mold and slime; this had 'eaten' the pews, organ, the newly-dedicated dais. They had spoken with a contractor who estimated that 900 gallons of water was soaked into the concrete floor in the church basement; off the cuff he

believed it would cost about \$150,000 to siphon that water out, and this would be necessary BEFORE any remodeling could be done.

Marta and Alison had moved to New Orleans on August 15 so that Marta could begin a new ministry at First UU. They were not yet centered in the community or the congregation, and the loss of both the church and everything in their new home was a gaping wound as we met with them. We strategized about how to get support for this minister and her family, the congregation, and the building. (Since our meeting, Dr. Wayne Clark, a UUA staff member who helps UU congregations with issues related to buildings, has met by phone with the First UU board.)

We met next with the Rev. Jim VanderWeele and two members of the board of [Community Church of New Orleans](#). Jim, who had several weeks to adjust to the loss of his home and church, was planning for his congregation's needs. Like the other two churches, this congregation faces a loss of over 1/3 of their membership. Community Church wants to move ahead with renting space for offices and meetings, somewhere in the high ground of New Orleans. They are having many phone and email conversations about how to move forward, and believe that a new building will take five years to plan and engineer. As Jim pointed out, they can't start rebuilding where they were, with no knowledge of how New Orleans in general is going to be rebuilt. There are many things they simply cannot know yet, but they are moving forward with structures and processes to be ready as they are able to move.

We reiterated to all three ministers the commitment of the Funding Panel that the salaries of all church staff will be paid for at least six months, with a review at that point to consider if this aid should continue for a year. We also were impressed, while meeting with the leaders of all three congregations, that so many UU congregations had [offered to assist them](#) in a huge variety of ways.

Deliberations and Discernment

In the afternoon, we spent time discussing what we know and don't know about next steps. What we don't know far exceeds what we do. To date, we have granted \$100,000 in [grassroots discretionary grants](#) – \$25,000 each to the three New Orleans congregations, and \$25,000 for the Mississippi congregations to share. We've made a general commitment to support salaries of staff and consultants in congregations (this will amount to something like \$150,000 if we continue all year). While we had conversations about affordable housing, disaffected communities, environmental issues, and the dynamics behind the word Diaspora, we did not feel it was yet time to begin disbursing money. We could see that many congregations were hard at work meeting immediate needs for people in the community, and that FEMA was finally kicking in with support for some (though not very well).

After sharing for a while about what we DO know, we created [a statement of the values](#) which would guide our decision making processes.

We passed a statement which read, "We affirm compensation for full and part time staff in the New Orleans congregations (as they are determined by the boards of those congregations) through February 28, 2006, with a commitment to review their circumstances at that time."

We considered an excellent proposal from the Rev. Rosemary Bray McNatt, who has been doing exemplary work with the UU Trauma Response Ministry, bringing in support for colleagues who desire it; sustaining clergy and religious educators so that they can do the work of tending to the congregations; and, as they are ready, helping these folks to debrief and plan for life post-disaster. We decided that, while we are fully committed to this work being funded, we would postpone making a decision on it at this time. We knew that money from other sources could fill in immediate needs, even as we make long-term decisions. This postponement was in no way a negative comment on the proposal. Committee members simply felt that, with our two-pronged mission of funding both UU ministries and communities, and the wider needs of the most marginalized, we should make at least one non-UU grant before moving ahead with a third UU one.

We also agreed that we will be providing flowers for the Unitarian Church of Baton Rouge, expressing deep gratitude and appreciation for all of the support which the congregation extended to us.

Since the meeting, we have been reviewing materials from other groups about how they are providing funding in the local communities impacted by this disaster, so that we may see where there might be a unique niche to fill in places where needs are not being met. We look forward to the arrival of the new UU Service Committee staff person who will carry forward the disaster aid portfolio, and who, we hope, will be able to gain a great deal of wisdom on the ground about how to channel funds. And we commit ourselves to acting as swiftly as we are able to, with enough information to be sure we are making sound decisions.

Concluding Thoughts

We know that many people are impatient for us to 'spend the money, already.' It was the unanimous opinion of all members of the Fund Panel that to do so would be a mistake. We were struck by the absence of a center in the greater community (the lack of leadership described by Jim Hayes and Russell Henderson). Further discernment is necessary.

Meanwhile, as we move forward, we remain grateful at being called to do this work, and for all of the generous support UUs are pouring forth in ways too numerous to mention. We are thankful for the shared values which shape our work. And we remain deeply appreciative of this precious faith which gives us life each day.