

Called to New Orleans
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Have you ever declined an invitation then had second thoughts?

Deleted an email and went, “Oops!”?

In April, I received a group email inviting members of CCNY to volunteer their services helping Community Church-Unitarian Universalist, New Orleans (CCUU-NOLA). Scanning the message, I immediately told myself, “I’m too busy” and deleted the email permanently.

Then I had second thoughts.

I requested another copy of the email, reread the message, and carefully reviewed the invitation to help. What I read was a call for the gifts, talents, leadership expertise, and organizational development skills that I possess. My professional background working with leaders as Managing Director of my own company, Leadership Training Room, as well as serving as a leader at CCNY in various capacities during my nineteen years of membership were a good match for what CCUU-NOLA needed.

“Maybe I wasn’t too busy after all,” I realized and answered their call for a volunteer.

Working with the CCUU-NOLA’s Post-Katrina Planning Committee, I developed a program entitled, “Inside the Walls: Visions & Plans for CCUU” made up of four workshops: “Envisioning our Future,” “Improving Your Leadership Skills,” “Identifying Gifts & Talents,” and “Mapping the Critical Map.” I felt set for my trip, if a little wary of my reactions to the devastation.

My arrival in New Orleans on June 9, 2006, wasn’t smooth. My luggage couldn’t be found. I got lost going to the bed & breakfast where I was staying. The temperature hit record numbers. And the humidity was almost unbearable – especially since some places I was taken later had lost their electricity and with it their air conditioning.

My inconvenience, however, was nothing to what I saw residents were still experiencing. That afternoon during a tour of the city getting to know Ann Duffy, Chair of the Board of the Trustees, and John Davenport, a member of the Board and the pilot on our trip, I saw for myself what life was like in the devastation nine months after Hurricane Katrina.

We stopped at the walls of CCUU-NOLA’s flooded out church in Lakeview. It was dark inside and I was told the structure was built without windows. Strange, I thought. Later I learned that Metairie, the nearby town, is the home of David Duke, former Louisiana State Representative and former leader of the Ku Klux Klan. Safety could be a reason for a windowless building.

Ann and John pointed out the house near the church where their minister, Rev. James VanderWeele, used to live. We drove by homes of those members of the congregation who didn’t lose their houses like Rev. Jim but had storm damage that ranged from minor to major. Membership in the congregation was down to less than fifty, about thirty were active, and all the children had left with their parents.

That evening after a delightful potluck supper, I found myself getting blue. The presenter before me was reviewing the different feelings associated with post-traumatic stress – disillusionment, despair, and depression. People’s heads were nodding in agreement, acknowledging the feelings they had and were still experiencing.

“How am I to engage this dedicated group of almost thirty to be enthused about planning a future?” I asked myself. There was a future that wasn’t even certain because the 2006 hurricane season had just begun and with it uncertainty if another Katrina was on her way.

And how was I to start the program? How could I make the personal connection from me – someone who had an ‘intact’ life – to this group who had lost the city and so many in the community they loved?

I got them laughing. And I started that by laughing at myself and my ‘loss’ that day. I apologized for my wrinkled look since my luggage with the clothes I had planned to change into was then in Denver, Colorado and it was well past the time when my deodorant was effective.

I got them laughing at each other, inviting members to do role plays of greeting visitors at the place they envisioned they would be in 2009. Two men were the first volunteers and the fact that they are the technology geeks in the group used to sitting in front of computers and not acting in front of an audience increased the belly laughs.

I got them agreeing with one another. I asked if church was a business and they all agreed. They all agreed that they wanted very much to keep Rev. Jim as their minister. They all agreed to separate from their current arrangement of sharing services with First Church of New Orleans so that they could be on their own again by early September. They all agreed to take on more work than they already had because it had to be done and they loved their church and the community they had built.

This workshop – and in fact all four of them – went extremely well but not without some thoughtful moments. During one session there was an intense stressed filled hour or more when one member was ready to quit his responsibilities. I let the group stay with the process to ease the tension that permeated the room so we could untangle strained relationships. Feedback afterwards was that I did the right thing; in fact, long-delayed projects got placed in motion the next day and were completed in less than one week.

Each workshop brought new dimensions of pain for the group, the losses of the children from the religious education program came up over and over again, the lack of labor even if they had the money to buy resources, the lack of time in their already full work and volunteer schedules – schedules that included rebuilding their own homes.

Yet, we continued to work, deep emotional work of agreeing that they would take on the responsibility to lead others in the days ahead. To uncover gifts of members who were now ready to give to help rebuild the church and their community. And, instead of dwelling on looking back or focusing on the uncertainties ahead, they would plan for a bright future.

Rev. Jim and members of the CCUU-NOLA were generous with their praise for my efforts. In fact, I received one of the greatest compliments I’ve ever received when I heard, “What you did was come down here and you kicked our butts. We were disillusioned. We didn’t know what to do. You got us moving. Your work is allowing us to do our ministry.”

It didn’t take much on my part to ‘kick butt’ because the leadership and members of CCUU-NOLA were ready to go forward – and they have. On September 10, CCUU-NOLA held its own Sunday service in temporary quarters and has started the process to rebuild their church. The congregation approved the purchase of the home next to their church in part for a religious education center. The members, while working on their own lives, continue to contribute their gifts and talents to help the church realize its potential as a liberal religious congregation.

“What if I hadn’t answered the call to volunteer my time helping CCUU-NOLA?” I have no second thoughts about what I did. In fact, I cringe at thinking I deleted their email and almost missed what continues to be a wonderfully enriching experience.

In early December, I will be presenting more workshops for CCUU-NOLA. It's the least I can do for the invitation they sent to be called to use my gifts in helping New Orleans and the gulf region rebuild. My hope is others will read this carefully, contemplate how they can be of assistance, and answer their own call.

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