

Summary Report from the Gulf Coast Relief Funding Panel

Initial Conference Call

September 6, 2005

Present: Rev. Meg Riley, Eunice Benton, Rev. Steve J. Crump, Atema Eclai, Rev. Anne Odin Heller, Rev. Jacqueline Luck, Dr. Rebecca Cureau

This initial meeting of the Gulf Coast Relief Funding Panel was primarily an assessment of needs and a sharing of reports from Panel members on the state of affairs from their and other various perspectives:

Rev. Steve Crump, minister in Baton Rouge, reminds the group that our UU ministry is sorely needed. He related a story of a woman with whom he spoke, who had been counseled that "God wanted her to lose everything" so that she would repent for her sins. He also spoke about helicopters running 24/7, over his church, headed into the affected areas, and noted that his congregation has been able to house many people streaming in who are seeking housing and help. As an example, he noted that the Sikh community called to see if they might use the church's kitchen to prepare simple meals of lentils and rice to feed the hungry, and this offer was extended. Thousands of displaced pets are staying in a huge corral of their own, and UU congregants are taking turns caring for them.

Rev. Jacqueline Luck, minister of two UU congregations in Jackson and Ellisville Mississippi, spoke of how the congregation in Jackson is housing a 70-year-old man. Many people in Jackson do not want to leave the Houston Astrodome, she said, where they have found dry clothes and good food and opportunities to find their loved ones. Luck said that she is personally housing a journalist who cannot find a hotel in the area.

Rev. Anne Odin Heller, Interim District Executive of the UUA Southwest District, spoke of the District's attempts to assist hundreds of people as they left their homes and traveled to Houston, Dallas, and other locales. She said that the district is trying to locate every single person from the affected congregations, and has posted a call-in phone number on the front page of their web site. She updated the group on the congregations most directly affected, and how they are coping (see www.swuud.org for further information).

Eunice Benton, District Executive of the UUA MidSouth District, shared the stories of hundreds of Unitarian Universalists stepping forward to help out, as she updated the panel on the congregations in her district. She emphasized that the needs are different, but no less compelling, on the Mississippi side of the Gulf (www.uua.org/msd).

Atema Eclai from the UU Service Committee recounted her trip along with Kathleen Kennedy Townsend to view affected areas, and examine places where dislocated citizens will try to make a temporary home on Cape Cod in Massachusetts. She brings her experience from Rwanda and her work on the Asian Tsunami relief effort to our work on this panel, and it is sobering to consider the similarities of the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina to both of these experiences from overseas. She indicated that the UUSC is planning to organize a work camp on Cape Cod,

training participants in anti-oppression skills as they do this work (see www.uusc.org/info/workcamps.html for further information on work camps).

Rev. Meg Riley said, "Like many of you, my heart has been broken and my blood brought to a boil from watching this catastrophe of nature and governance from a distance. I am grateful to be able to be of some help, even if it is from safely behind a desk and computer." Riley indicated that the panel will meet face to face on September 20-21 in Baton Rouge, and "we will begin to grapple with the complex and enormous needs which must be filled in the wake of Katrina." She indicated that the UUA-UUSC Gulf Coast Relief Fund is designed to "both to address the needs of the most marginalized people as they rebuild their lives and livelihoods, and to support UU congregations and their ministries at this critical juncture." She said, "We plan to meet with representatives from our congregations and from community groups as we try to think strategically and put our principles into action."