

Testimony Of
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The Interfaith Alliance
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Committee on Health, Education, Labor and Pensions
Of the
United States Senate
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Chairman Enzi, Ranking Member Kennedy, Senators and staff of the Committee, thank you for allowing The Interfaith Alliance this opportunity to share with you our experiences with regards to the role of faith based organizations in the wake of Hurricane Katrina.

A mixture of anger, compassion, appreciation, and anxiety has motivated my daily actions in the wake of Hurricane Katrina. As the pastor of a church in Monroe, Louisiana, I have been privileged to work alongside members of my congregation and other members of our community in a variety of relief efforts involving spiritual, logistical, and financial issues. The personal and religious compassion that I have witnessed have, at times, been overwhelming. Such has not been the case, as you know, with governmental responses to screaming needs.

In response to the compassion of the religious community -- and the failures of our government -- on October 21, 2005, The Interfaith Alliance led an unprecedented interfaith delegation of religious leaders to Baton Rouge. This delegation met with Katrina evacuees and the many religious leaders and community, local and state agencies providing relief efforts to all those adversely affected.

We felt it of the utmost importance that this delegation spend its day listening to the evacuees and their caregivers. We needed to hear their heroic stories. We needed them to tell us what their needs were, be it spiritual, emotional, financial or all of the above. This delegation was less about who we are and what we do for a living, but rather more about our fellow brothers and sisters in need and our abilities to make a positive difference.

Upon our return to Washington, The Interfaith Alliance compiled a written and video report of our trip. The report we wrote was not the report we anticipated. Because our organizational focus is on the protection of people's religious and civil liberties, our lens with which to see Baton Rouge was focused in this direction. But what we saw and heard were the personal stories of the people from this region -- personal stories laced with important insights into the gross tardiness of governmental officials, the stark failure of government agencies, the repulsive ugliness of a rampant racism that knows no socio-economic boundaries and which, if left unresolved, in the long run, will prove more destructive than the onslaught of a cluster of Category 5 hurricanes. These stories also abound with references to heroic efforts on the part of people of faith, compassion, and goodwill who have demonstrated a level of generosity without which the region today would be devoid of most of the most helpful efforts of the past several months.

This report is a collection of what The Interfaith Alliance saw, felt, heard, touched, and thought during its visit to Baton Rouge, 56 days after Hurricane Katrina ravaged the Gulf Coast region.

While thousands of people's lives were impacted in the area, this report only deals with the current situation in Baton Rouge.

If there is one visual that best describes in our minds what Baton Rouge "looks" like spiritually and emotionally, it would be one big mess. And without the selfless acts of community groups, local elected officials and especially the religious community, it is impossible to describe where the city and its new population of almost 500,000 would be today.

THE CAUSE

The government clearly failed in its preparation and response to the devastating effects of Hurricane Katrina. In doing so, the weakest and poorest among us have suffered greatly.

THE EFFECTS ~ WHAT WE SAW AND HEARD

The Interfaith Alliance respects and praises the important role that religious groups have played in providing assistance to those in need. They responded – as they should – both compassionately and charitably to people in need and expected no government money for support. Why? Because this is what they do.

When the religious community reacted to the hurt inflicted not only by the Hurricane, but by the government, did they realize the full impact on themselves? Did they realize that they would cut their daycare programs and after school-programs just to make physical space for a food bank and clothing distribution center? Did they realize they would not be able to pay their light bill because they were too concerned with helping elderly evacuees pay for their diabetes medication? Did they realize they could be caring for and possibly housing evacuees for up to three years? Did houses of worship, which had never even been in the business of running a shelter, realize they would open up for business and take in 50 residents?

In the months, days, hours and minutes following Hurricane Katrina, numerous and diverse religious communities rose to the occasion and offered help, ranging from serving up meals to tired rescue workers to offering solace to the elderly man who had just lost his wife to the raging waters of a levee break. But did they, or could they understand just how much undue responsibility they were assuming in acting on their compassion? Did they realize this would be a commitment of up to three years? Would it have mattered?

From what we saw and heard, the local religious community of Baton Rouge is stretched beyond its breaking point, both financially and spiritually. Houses of worship and religious organizations are trained to minister to the sick, hungry and poor. But they are not trained, nor should they be, FEMA's replacement. Because many government leaders reacted so poorly, the religious community -- among many other community groups – has been left holding an empty bag with no relief in sight.

I speak only about what I have seen, felt, heard, touched, and thought.

I hear the complaints of a man imprisoned by stereotypes – a gentleman in the first of the trailer cities to go online in Baton Rouge, a man who is crippled in efforts to find employment because

of the outrageous assumption that anyone living in one of these – what the people of Louisiana are calling “FEMA ghettos” – must be impoverished, lazy, and incapable of meaningful work.

I feel the nausea evoked by public officials in New Orleans speaking with disdain about the people of color whom they need to help and expressing in whispers their wish that they simply could eliminate these people from the scene.

In the trailer village in Baker, LA, wading in dust as deep as snow after a major winter storm, I heard people talk of their difficulties with breathing and seeing.

I am haunted by the outburst of a young woman reflecting on the question “What do you need?” “What do I need?” she asked rhetorically. “What do I need? How about my toe nail clippers? How about my curling iron? Do you know what it is like to have nothing – nothing and no way to get anything?”

I saw mayors stretched to their limits in efforts to help the new citizens of their cities who bring to their new homes only hurt, needs, and a desire for a new life. And, I hear these mayors speak of no financial help from FEMA.

I listen and watch basic state institutions in Louisiana making plans to close because of a lack of funding in the wake of the federal government’s refusal to provide adequate assistance for a state to function as a state.

I watch with gratitude and amazement scores of religious communities that continue to provide shelters and programs for evacuees with little idea of where the money will come from to pay the costs involved and, because they have not been on the photo-ops tours of public officials, they are receiving no aid from even the Red Cross.

But, let’s get this straight. Religious leaders and their congregations provide help in a time of crisis because that is what we do. We do not wait on the President or a Governor to call us to action. The compulsion comes from our convictions. The hurt is our call to service.

Personally, I am offended as well as astounded by people, who under the guise of religion, now request federal financial hand-outs – a request inspired by a president who has promised money to houses of worship that cannot be delivered – to cover the costs of budget deficits that were on their books long before there was even a tidal wave that started swirling its way into a hurricane.

I am weary of listening to government officials patronizing religious people with comments about the importance of our work in this disaster. It is time for these officials to get busy doing their work – providing for the public welfare, which is a moral responsibility of government.

I am worried as I watch the manipulation of catastrophic hurt in the interest of advancing legislative initiatives for which the government has not been able to secure public affirmation or congressional approval in normal times. The policies at the center of my concern may provide a pittance of money immediately, but, ultimately, these policies will result in a diminished guarantee of civil rights and a compromise of religious liberty. We can do better!

Were it not for the initiative and generosity of many social agencies and religious groups, the Gulf Coast region would be in even more terrible trouble than is presently the case. But let us not blame the government. We are the government. Let us blame those whom we have employed to do the essential work of government that is not being done. Let us demand that they do better or get out of the way and allow someone else a chance to lead by helping people in need.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Religions in this nation recognize that the federal government can be of immense help in relieving the suffering that they address every day and encourage government officials to act to make this relief a reality. These recommendations lend themselves to the government acting in a way the American people expect them to:

- We need tax incentives for charitable giving and tax relief for the poor in our land who are carrying a part of the burden created by tax relief for the wealthy.
- We need a commitment to public education and funding for public education that assure every student quality preparation for exiting poverty through the doorway of meaningful employment.
- We need an interest in welfare that does not adjust the welfare rolls to cut funding but provides people with the training and support they need to outgrow the welfare rolls.
- Real compassion should be evident in every line item in the federal budget, not just at those places intended to promote the government's funding of religion.
- We need a partnership between religious institutions, the federal government and private philanthropy that draws upon their collective resources and protects the integrity of all.

WHAT DOES "BETTER COORDINATION" MEAN?

Because so much attention has been given to the tremendous role that faith based groups played during this crisis, a lot of talk has been around making permanent, the President's White House Office of Community and Faith Based Initiatives. The Faith Based Initiative is an example of manipulation, not coordination.

Neither in a time of crisis nor in normal times do we need a faith-based office in the White House. We have faith-based offices all over this nation and they are where they belong – in synagogues and gurdwaras, in mosques and churches, in temples and store-front ministry centers.

Religion should not be dictated from the White House or legislated from the halls of Congress; this is not where religion works. Religion thrives on freedom, not on imposition. Even the most

avid evangelists know that religion can never be pushed down a person's throat. The result is not authentic religion.

The term "coordination" in and of itself is a legal term that connotes expectations as well as entanglement. Governmental leaders must communicate their programs and priorities with religious groups and other non-profit organizations in order to enhance the work of all. The religious community accepts the appreciation expressed by President Bush for the hard work in the aftermath of Katrina, but the greatest show of thanks would be for the federal government to now step up and do its job. Regular communications and mutual awareness is absolutely necessary. But at the end of the day, only the federal government can provide assistance to current and future evacuees on the scale and size of a problem as large as Hurricane Katrina.

Katrina has taught us many lessons in the past six months. For The Interfaith Alliance, the lesson most amplified is that the government must act like the government and respond helpfully to the weakest and poorest among us. And the religious community will continue to act like the religious community in responding compassionately and charitably to people in need.

A REPORT FROM THE FIELD ~ GAUTIER, MS

As The Interfaith Alliance's delegation departed Baton Rouge 56 days after Katrina came ashore, a promise was made by the delegation that we would find ways in which to share the stories and experiences of those we met. Rabbi David Gelfand, a member of the delegation, shared his experiences with local religious leaders in East Hampton, NY. In return, one of the Rabbi's colleagues went to Mississippi to offer his help and reported back to his congregation his experiences. We share this with the Members of this Committee because it is important to always keep in front of us what is most important:

Eleven of us from the East Hampton Church returned last night from a week's stay in Gautier (pronounced Go-ché), Mississippi. We were part of the Presbyterian Disaster Assistance team which has been on the ground since September, helping people put their lives and homes back together. It was a remarkable experience for all of us on this team.

With a wide variety of skills (or in my case non skills) we were assigned varying ranges of tasks, from cooking, to office management, to roofing. Together, we shingled and insulated one home for a woman with disabilities who has been living in Memphis since the storm, and mucked out (taking the debris, wallboard, rugs - everything - out of the house); repaired poorly constructed boards, insulated and wall boarded another home. In the meantime, we erected the camp tent, did camp clean up duties, and purchased supplies for the work teams that would follow us. (There were three others in camp when we left yesterday.) We had a great sense of accomplishment as we saw tasks being completed.

But our work is such a small imprint on an overwhelming canvas. The devastation is beyond description and beyond belief. As we drove toward the coast from the Airport in Jackson, we began to point out trees that had fallen, neon signs that had been blown

away in Hattiesburg, some 60 miles away. Throughout the week we would see little pockets of the damage; homes with blue tarped roofs, FEMA trailers on the front yards, and debris piled in near the curb. But as we left yesterday, we drove along Highway 90 along the coast in Biloxi and Gulfport, and we began to see the enormous task that lies ahead. Blocks and blocks are still waiting for the rubble to be removed. There are areas that look like they have been bombed, Businesses are gone – there is the foundation, but nothing else. These are most likely mom and pop variety of stores that populate beach communities, and there is little chance that they will come back. There is construction being done on the casinos in Biloxi – one is already open for business – and some of the larger hotels and homes, but everything else is piecemeal. There is no economy outside of the service industries – the fast food chains are up and running and feeding the construction workers – and Lowes, Home Depot and Wall Mart were running at full-speed. Workers are hard to find for these establishments, they advertise \$7.00 an hour wages, but there is no place for people to live.

The Presbyterian Disaster Assistance will be on site for two to three years. Groups are strongly encouraged to plan work camps and mission trips; there is so much work to do. We are thankful for the nearly \$5,000 that was raised in the East Hampton Community for this trip. We will be offering a report in worship on March 12, and at other opportunities as they develop.

One final word of encouragement. On Sunday we worshiped at the Gautier Presbyterian Church, a small church with about 70 members. The church sustained some damage as did many of its members. But we were all struck by the powerful spirit of hope that was present in worship that morning. There were several visiting groups to join the congregation in worship. Every seat was taken (and they were new, of course, since the old pews were found floating in a couple feet of water when the doors were opened after the storm.) They sang with enthusiasm along with the new piano, hymnal and bibles. In the service there was a service of ordination and installation of one elder, and when the call came out for all elders to come forward, there were people representing churches from South Carolina, Pennsylvania, Michigan, Virginia, Ohio, New York and other states, forming again, an unbreakable bond of the Body of Christ.”

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