

A Nehemiah Response to Hurricane Katrina



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Monday, August 29, 2005 was the longest and most frightening day I have ever experienced. It was the day Hurricane Katrina blew in along the Gulf Coast of Louisiana, Mississippi, and Alabama. Officially, Katrina hit land in Mississippi at 7:00 a.m. However, we were without electricity at our house by 5:30 a.m. For eight hours, Mississippi coastal residents braced against the 100-180 mile per hour winds and a 25 foot storm surge. My wife, Pam, and I rode the storm out in our home nine miles north of the Mississippi Gulf Coast. Though we had wind damage to deal with, when the storm was over, we were grateful to be safe and to still have a house to live in.

At the time of Katrina, Pam and I had only lived in Mississippi for 18 months. I had just begun to pastor at Gulfhaven Mennonite Church in Gulfport. Being new to the area, we were learning the culture and having the time of our lives. From the very beginning we had a special connection with the people at Gulfhaven. However, when I candidated for the pastor position, they did not tell me about hurricanes!

Responding to the nation's worst natural disaster has been a daunting

challenge. Looking back, I am amazed that we have come so far, even though there are still challenges to face. With each step of the recovery, I have learned in a deeper way to "trust in the Lord with all (my) heart and lean not on (my) own understanding ..." (Proverbs 3:5-6). I have learned that the main choice that we face in a crisis is: will we blame God for it or will we see Him in it?

The recovery process has been a Lewis and Clark adventure of sorts. What I mean is that we found ourselves on a path that neither we nor the congregation had ever traveled-where solutions to needs are still being discovered as we move forward.

We do not have a map for this path, which is part of what makes a crisis difficult, but we do have the Word of God, particularly the book of Nehemiah. In Nehemiah, we found an example to follow and principles to guide our decision making. Out of those principles we developed what we call our "Nehemiah Response." I only have enough space here to describe two principles or lessons, but I am also working on a book which will describe our Nehemiah Response in more detail.

One valuable lesson we learned from Nehemiah is that action is not necessarily the best first response. When Nehemiah heard of the destruction in Jerusalem, he pondered and prayed. His first response was to seek God and to see the problem from His perspective. Staying in step with God and joining Him was and continues to be imperative in our recovery process.

Our first challenge after Katrina was to connect with the 106 member families at Gulfhaven. This took 11 days. Communication was difficult.

Thankfully there were no casualties in our congregation, because most of the folks along the coastline had evacuated and the ones who remained escaped the dwellings that were destroyed. People in our congregation who lived near water reported between 3 and 27 feet of water in their homes. As a result of the water and/or wind, everyone had repairs to make.

The first group of volunteers arrived to help with clean-up and relief the Monday after Katrina hit, which meant that we did not have to face our problems alone. This was the second valuable lesson we learned from Nehemiah. In the third chapter of Nehemiah, we read the phrase "next to him" multiple times. Folks came alongside us to help and share in our sorrow and pain, just as others did for Nehemiah. Although receiving help was humbling, we desperately needed it, and we learned the blessing of receiving from others whom God led to help us. Are you having a "Katrina experience" of your own where you desperately need the help of other people? If so, are you allowing anyone to help you?

So many wonderful people partnered with us during that difficult time and we are eternally grateful. Over 1100 volunteers lived and worked out of Gulfhaven for 14 months. They helped with 200 clean-up jobs and rebuilt 80 homes. Each project is a remarkable story of watching God at work through those who came alongside us in our hard time. Each story is about rebirth, new beginnings, and hope for the future.

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