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The Impact of Religion and Faith-Based Organizations on the Lives of Low Income Families

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Tangible and Spiritual Relief After The Storm: The Religious Communities Response to Katrina

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Introduction

- Following Katrina, residents of New Orleans (one of the poorest large American cities) & the southern Gulf Coast were redistributed across the country
 - Approximately 15,000 evacuated to Baton Rouge
 - In response, area churches began to fill auditoriums, halls, dining areas, and sanctuaries with physically, mentally, and spiritually exhausted individuals
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Statement of the Problem

- Religious organizations frequently respond to local (and more recently national) natural disasters
- The first true responders following Hurricane Katrina were area churches
- Not much is known about what physical and tangible services are provided by churches after disaster
- Almost nothing is know about the spiritual messages religious institutions provide after disaster



Review of the Literature

- Churches rapidly adapt to changes in their environment and can meet unmet needs due to less bureaucratic red tape (Smith, 1977)
- Liberal church theology, community involvement, benevolence giving, and a more social role of church associated with greater disaster response (Smith, 1978)
- Disaster victims prefer private and informal assistance over public / formal assistance (Aderibigbe, Bloch & Pandurangi, 2003) and religion is an important component of positive affect and coping following disaster (Smith et al., 2000)



Literature (cont.)

- Churches well suited to provide resources & services due to Christian values of “brotherhood, altruism, self-sacrifice, help those in need” (Smith, 1977)
- Churches provide not only emergency services but extended and long-term recovery activities (Smith, 1978)
- Majority of effective disaster responses not organized by individual churches working alone, but by organized and combined efforts (Smith, 1977)



Methods

- A cross sectional survey research design was used in this study.
- In the first wave of data collection, surveys were mailed to a random sample of churches in the Baton Rouge Metropolitan area.
- Due to the low response rate, the Louisiana State University Public Policy Research laboratory was enlisted to contact all of the churches in the Baton Rouge Metropolitan area to administer the surveys by telephone.



Methods (cont)

- A 26-item survey questionnaire was developed to determine church characteristics and measure the types of services that were provided to hurricane evacuees.
- The questionnaire consisted of open and closed ended questions.



Data Analysis

- Descriptive statistics were analyzed and reported to answer questions about participant characteristics.
- Frequency distributions were computed for the different types of services that were provided by the participants.
- Qualitative responses were examined for content and themes were identified.



Results

- 157 (26%) churches completed the survey
- Congregations ranged in size from 0 – 8000 (Mean = 578) members
- 20 denominations included:
 - African Methodist Episcopal (AME) (1)
 - Baptist (50),
 - Church of Christ (4)
 - Church of God (1)
 - Assemblies of God (2)
 - Catholic (14)
 - Church of Latter-Day Saints (2)
 - Baha'i Faith (1)
 - Episcopal (5)
 - Interdenominational (2)
 - Jehovah's Witness (2)
 - Christian Science (1)
 - Full Gospel (6)
 - Pentecostal (4)
 - Lutheran (2)
 - Methodist (14)
 - Presbyterian (6)
 - Unitarian (1)
 - Non-Denominational (29)
 - Seventh-Day Adventist (1)
 - Additionally, 8 churches identified as "Other", and 1 identified as "Don't Know"



Churches Providing Services after the Hurricane (n=136)

Service	# of Churches Providing Service
Shelter/Housing	22 (14%)
Food	115 (73.2%)
Counseling	63 (40.1%)
Financial	109 (69.4%)
Childcare	29 (18.5%)
Clothing	84 (53.5%)
Transportation	38 (24.2%)



Results (cont)

- 74% reported that they attempted to connect evacuees with outside resources.
- 40% reported that they sponsored a family.
 - The number of sponsored families ranged between 1 and 500.
- 43% reported that they attempted to reconnect evacuees with other family.



Financial Support

- 37% reported that they provided assistance out of the church budget.
- 67% reported that they received private donations for hurricane victim assistance.
- 69% received congregation donations.
- 6% reported that they held fund raisers.
- 1 reported receiving a federal grant.



Helpful Church Resources

- Are there resources that made the process easier?
 - Church donations, Financial assistance
 - Computer databases, Internet
 - Long distance services, Phone calls, Faxes
 - Transportation
 - FEMA, Government assistance
 - Visiting volunteers, Local volunteers
 - TV, Video relay to help reconnect families



What Resources Did You Need?

- Are there resources that you didn't have that would have made the process easier?
 - Housing, Bigger Building
 - Red Cross/FEMA
 - Community Plan, More volunteers
 - Money, Clothing, Food, Food stamps
 - Medical attention, Medication
 - Showers & Washing facilities
 - Water and generators
 - Pet supplies (kennels, cages, etc.)



Advice for Other Churches

- What advice would you give others who are first responders?
 - Communication and collaboration
 - Be calm and patient
 - Develop a resource list
 - Be flexible
 - Develop an action plan
 - Assign tasks to specific people
 - Good leadership is key
 - Screen people (triage) and listen to their needs
 - Use bible principles



Churches Providing Services at the Time of the Survey (January – July, 2006)

Service	# of Churches Providing Service
Shelter/Housing	76 (48.4%)
Food	121 (77.1%)
Counseling	72 (45.9%)
Financial	92 (58.6%)
Childcare	28 (17.8%)
Clothing	103 (65.6%)
Transportation	61 (38.9%)



Church Narratives of Relief Efforts

- “The night before landfall of Katrina, we sent crews out to the off-ramps and parking lots to get people into our shelter. The first group of approximately 125-150 were people who evacuated and needed a place to ride out the storm. Within 3 days all of them were gone. Then we opened up for the folks that came out of the flood. We housed them for a little over a week. We feed them by picking up Red Cross meals. About 150-200, maybe 250 over time. We helped them find family, friends, apartments. We placed them on buses, planes, rented cars – whatever was needed. We also opened up a clothes closet with donations from all over the U.S.A. We made the decision that we were not able to maintain families long-term so for a half-dozen families, we helped them relocate to a couple of Christian shelters who were establishing long-term shelters. Two weeks after they left we were approached to open as a Red Cross Staff Shelter which we did for 2 months.”

Baptist Church, Baton Rouge



Narratives (cont.)

- “In response to Hurricane Rita, we actually delivered emergency water and ice to the entire town of Lake Arthur in cooperation with the Chief of Police whom we met passing through looking for our church properties. This unplanned action was simply a chance meeting with townspeople who were awaiting FEMA promised relief which had not come in two days!

Church of God, Baton Rouge



Narratives (cont.)

- We were involved in providing housing to many pastors of local churches through donated trailers and RVs which came from around the country. In addition, our campground in Covington was housing for Federal agencies and SWAT teams which were assigned to New Orleans. We provided hot meals to approximately 500 families daily in Covington, Gulfport and New Orleans. We remain active today in the rebuilding of homes, churches and facilities in St. Bernard and Orleans parishes. We have counseling and action teams in Chalmette 24/7 from around the country.

Church of God, Baton Rouge



Narratives (cont.)

- There was an unrestrained compassion focused on the Gulf Coast and in large part the work of relief has been spearheaded by average lay people in our churches and communities who reached out to their neighbors.”

Church of God, Baton Rouge



Narratives (cont.)

- “We opened the shelter the day after the storm struck the Gulf Coast. We organized our plan, worked our plan, and we knew we had the wisdom of God because it went so smoothly. We provided over 60,000 hot meals, supported several other shelters in our area. We staged truckloads of provisions to New Orleans, Gulfport, Ocean Springs, Waveland, and surrounding areas. We were supported by many other churches mostly on the West Coast. There were so many testimonies, and things that came out of our experience – it would be difficult to put into words by one letter. We thank God for His wisdom and provision in our time of great need – we never went without in any area!!!”

Full Gospel, Baton Rouge



Discussion

- Baton Rouge area churches provided significant assistance to evacuees
- Churches fed, clothed, provided emergency financial assistance, reconnected families, and continue to provide services
- Important resources included access to computer databases and internet access
- Churches paid for services with congregation donations and through private sources
- There was very little state or federal monies to support church efforts



Discussion (cont.)

- Most difficult aspect of evacuee care was finding adequate shelter and housing
- Churches recommend coordination, preparedness, triage strategies, and leadership for future church disaster responders



Sermon Themes

- Consistent messages in sermons crossed denominational lines
- Restoration, rebuilding, “raising up” and repairing the foundations of not only homes but lives
- Welcome evacuees as Jesus welcomed the stranger



Advice from Churches

- Think ahead and plan for disasters
 - Future building plans (include large open spaces with access to adequate wash facilities and kitchens)
 - Pre-stage immediate response items (flashlights, cots, air mattresses, water, food for minimum of 1 day) on-site
 - Clergy need to be trained in disaster management
 - Communicate and coordinate within and among religious denominations
 - Develop lists of names and telephone numbers for resources within and between congregations
 - Do not overextend or exhaust resources
- Computer resources including access and training of disaster responders (including ecumenical relief organizations) will be important in future disasters



Policy Recommendations

- Federal government invested in faith-based programs but none for disaster-related faith-based initiatives. With costs of catastrophic disasters on the rise, federal government should consider funding faith-based disaster initiatives
- Public policy supporting proactive building and structural plans could be initiated by the federal government and / or FEMA to offset church costs



Social Work Implications

- Clergy need training in disaster management including signs and symptoms of serious mental health problems so they can refer survivors to appropriate professionals
- Social workers interested in disaster work need to be trained to work effectively and skillfully with religious institutions as these institutions are among the first-responders following disaster



Limitations of the Study

- Low response rate (26%)
- Self-selection
- Congregation sizes



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