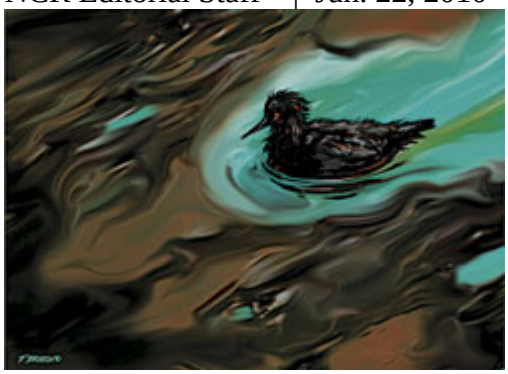
NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (http://ncronline.org)

As disaster widens, so does outreach and caring

NCR Editorial Staff | Jun. 22, 2010



(T. Brintino)

After Hurricane Katrina struck Louisiana in 2005, many rushed to help after seeing scenes of bodies floating in floodwaters and people stranded on rooftops. Now pictures of oil-covered pelicans and idled fishers suddenly without incomes have sparked another outpouring.

The gusher of helping that accompanied storms and now a spill on the Gulf Coast is worth noting.

More than 15,000 people from across the country have already signed up on BP?s official Web site to help with cleanup.

There are reports of people leaving full-time jobs to come down and help with the wildlife rescue.

Some 10,000 volunteers have registered with the Coalition to Restore Coastal Louisiana, said director Steven Peyronnin. Hundreds of them have been sent to clear beaches of debris before oil hits, he said.

In Florida, about one-third of the 7,683 people who offered to help have actually worked, mostly in pre-oil beach cleanup, said Wendy Spencer, chief executive officer of the Governor?s Commission on Volunteerism.

In Alabama, 5,000 people signed up for the first week of a training program designed by Mobile Baykeeper and the Alabama Coastal Foundation.

Students have committed their summer vacations for humanitarian work. Across denominations, religious organizations have volunteers ready to travel, or still in place from working on hurricane recovery.

There are wonderful stories to be told about the volunteer spirit on the Gulf Coast since 2005.

One example is Louisianan Dorothy Johnson, who has had two houses built for her by the Mennonite Disaster Service -- the first was after Hurricane Camille in 1969. When Hurricane Katrina destroyed that house, the Mennonites built another one for her.

Arthur ?Billy? Morgan said, ?The Mennonites gave me a new life and a new outlook to life. Katrina, she split

my house into three pieces, left a foot or more of foul-smelling, funky mud. But,? he added, ?the great thing about Katrina is the people that I would never have met.

?Friendships, friendships, friendships -- that?s what volunteers have created far and wide.?

Margaret Dubuisson, spokesperson for Catholic Charities of the New Orleans archdiocese, said: ?After Katrina, we needed huge numbers of people for cleanup and rebuilding. As of June 15 this year, we have had 23,776 volunteers perform 680,636 hours of service since Katrina. Most of that was gutting houses, rebuilding houses, painting, landscaping, etc.?

That work continues now as the Catholic Charities organizations in southern Louisiana, after an initial response that included setting up relief centers in urban and rural parishes and sending out caseworkers door-to-door in economically hard-hit locales, continue to deal with the different landscape of this disaster.

Louisiana Catholic organizations as first responders in the BP spill disaster have been praised by state officials.

Tom Costanza, executive director of the office of Justice and Peace for the New Orleans archdiocese, said: ?This is an economic and an environmental disaster. Catholic social teaching is central to looking at the environment, care of God?s creation and God?s people, so everything that we are doing relative to the response of Catholic Charities is through the lens of Catholic social teaching, which puts the option for the poor and the dignity of the human person front and center.

?Those principals guided us in our initial response relative to where we locate services -- in the most poor and most vulnerable communities.?

As the calamity widens so does the outreach and caring. The ?kindness of strangers? will make a difference. Experience tells us that it is what BP board chairman Carl-Henric Svanberg called the ?small people? -- office workers, students, truck drivers, carpenters, deacons and parish workers -- who make recoveries happen.

NCR reporting on the oil disaster in the Gulf of Mexico

- As disaster widens, so does outreach and caring [2], an NCR Editorial (June 22)
- An 'undefined' future for the Gulf [3], by Dennis Coday (June 22)
- A brake on the ongoing destruction [4], by Rich Heffern (June 22)
- Louisiana's 'Erin Brokovich' faces her toughest challenge [5], clean up technology has not kept up with exploration and drilling technology (June 10)
- No clue how to deal with this enormous spill [6], 'A pitiful comment on the lack of preparedness of the oil industry' (June 9)
- Drawn-out disaster frays nerves [7], ?We don?t know what will survive, what will bounce back? (June 8)
- Oil spill protesting New Orleans style [8], BP exec says company 'committed' to restoring Gulf Coast (June 7)
- Gulf oil spill [9], With the future uncertain, Catholic Charities steps up to help region?s needy (June 4)

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