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Katrina six years on: We are still counting

Jocelyn A. Sideco | Aug. 29, 2011

It has been 72 months since Hurricane Katrina made landfall in a city called Slidell, located about 20 miles east of New Orleans. When I started counting the hours, days and months as they passed, I realized that every moment since has brought an opportunity for God's grace to shine through the destruction and darkness.

New Orleans changed me. When Hurricane Katrina struck on Aug. 29, 2005, I was working as a college campus minister in Milwaukee. Within months, I was in New Orleans, working full time to help rebuild the community. Never did I anticipate that God would lead me directly into the chaos of brokenness and uncertainty.

When I started counting the months, it began to hit home with people. "Can you imagine not being able to live in your neighborhood for six months?" I would ask visiting volunteers. To this day, the reality of being displaced still haunts me. How unsettling it would be to pack up the family for a two-day trip and consequently be forced to make a new life elsewhere: new schools, new churches, new homes, new jobs. But all the while you are counting and hoping that the next hour, the next day, the next week, the next month, you can return to home and business as usual.

Seventy-two months is a long time. It's enough time to rebuild a severely damaged infrastructure. It's enough time to support a Super Bowl-winning football team. It's enough time to create systems of care that can identify those most needy. It's enough time to know that the city will and has come back from such a tragedy.

Seventy-two months has been a long time to hope and pray.

And so I wonder: When the tragedies of yesterday fade from headline news, who continues to hope, pray and work for and with those left to pick up the pieces and make something anew? It has been 19 months since the people of Haiti experienced their earthquake, and still people are living in tents. It has been 18 months since Chile's major quake and five months since Japan's earthquake and tsunami.

New Orleans taught me that people really do mean well. From neighbors developing better evacuation plans with others or volunteers coming from around the world to roll up their sleeves, people really do want to make a difference in the lives of those around them. New Orleans also reminded me that there are multiple strategies to rebuilding: building what was lost and maintaining the previous standard, uncovering the elements of what was lost and building to a newer, inspired standard, and discovering refreshed ways to solve problems and create a community anew.

With our church broken by the consequences of theological, ethical and situational differences in opinion, we, too, find ourselves in a developing tragedy that has left many abandoned and hurt.

Many of us have counted the days, the years, the generations until we can experience a new and whole experience of God and community here on earth.

The latest revision to the Roman Missal provides an example of where our church makes decisions that affect

our experience of community. For instance, the new translation changes the Nicene Creed from "We believe" to "I believe." Although there are great arguments for how this change uncovers what was been lost by the earlier translation and reintegrates that dimension into today's church, the consequences of this change to my generation may prove to be more hurtful than it's worth.

Our generation is independent, self-sufficient, adventurous, helpful, and always looking for ways to live life to its fullest. The countercultural element of faith and belief expressed in a community is precisely the word "we." Amid the individual routines of Facebook, Twitter and other forms of social media, this generation needs to be provoked to experience a "we" not just an "I."

The challenge is in sustaining an ethic that cares for others all the time.

The challenge is to offer a real experience of connection, relationship and community to a generation fragmented by individualized experiences and softened by both instant gratification and instant sympathy.

Let us continue to count the days of our building the kin-dom of God by how the Spirit continues to guide our progress toward communities of wholeness, compassion and trust.

As we take a moment to remember the tragedy of Hurricane Katrina and the beauty that arose from the tragedy, let us call to mind and heart the realities of peoples across the nations, and their diversity in lifestyle, language and customs.

I don't think it is coincidence that the dedication of the Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. monument in Washington, D.C., and the threat of Hurricane Irene came on the sixth anniversary of Katrina. Six years ago Americans showed the world just how tragedy and strife can change us ? change us and our communities for the better.

[Jocelyn A. Sideco is a founding member of Contemplatives in Action, an urban ministry and retreat experience that began as a response to the needs in post-Katrina New Orleans and now continues as an online ministry offering spirituality resources for those working for justice throughout the world. Visit www.contemplativesinaction.org for more information.]

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