

May 20, 2008

## **Faith Groups Respond to Acts of God Early, Stay on the Scene Late**

Publisher: The Roundtable on Religion and Social Welfare Policy

By: Roundtable Correspondent, Claire Hughes

The key role religious groups play in getting immediate aid to disaster victims has again risen to the world's attention this month as a cyclone, earthquake and tornadoes tore apart lives in the United States and abroad.

And even as religious groups work feverishly to reach the victims of natural catastrophes in Myanmar, China and the U.S. South, renewed attention has been focused in the last week on their role in long-term redevelopment efforts following disaster, too - in particular, in the Gulf Coast, which was ravaged by hurricanes nearly three years ago.

While volunteers from international faith-based relief organizations like World Vision and Samaritan's Purse struggled to overcome government restrictions blocking relief efforts in Myanmar or to deliver temporary shelters to Chinese people suddenly rendered homeless by a May 12 quake, an interfaith group in the U.S. launched a loan fund to help nonprofits trying to rebuild the areas of New Orleans and southwestern Louisiana hardest hit by Hurricane Katrina in 2005.

And the White House Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives held an event Monday (May 19) to extol the efforts of faith-based and secular nonprofits working with government to rebuild communities after disaster strikes. The office plans to host a conference on disaster relief and preparedness in New Orleans on May 29-30, just before the official June 1 opening of hurricane season, which will include training and technical assistance for nonprofits engaged in rebuilding the area.

"The President's commitment to working in close partnership with nonprofit organizations has been unparalleled, and our department is more effective because of it," said Homeland Security Secretary Michael Chertoff at Monday's event in Washington, D.C. "Faith-based and community organizations can play a vital role in planning, preparedness and response efforts, and we'll continue to work closely with them."

Faith-based organizations have a long tradition of aiding victims of disaster. For instance, the Salvation Army, a Christian organization, became involved in relief services around 1900, following some devastating Gulf Coast hurricanes more than a century ago. (For more on faith-based organizations' involvement in disaster relief, [click here for a Roundtable resource page.](#))

The newest faith-based player in current Gulf Coast redevelopment efforts may be The Isaiah Funds. Touted as the first interfaith funds for long-term disaster recovery, the group announced its launch Thursday (May 15) with the announcement of an initial loan of \$500,000 to the Gulf Coast Housing Partnership. Gulf Coast Housing Partnership is partnering with faith-based organizations like the First Evangelist Baptist Church to create more affordable housing in New Orleans.

The group of Catholic, Jewish, Mennonite and Baptist organizations that created The Isaiah Funds came together in March 2006 as part of their work with the New York City-based Interfaith Center on Corporate Responsibility, according to Jeffrey Dekro, senior vice president of Jewish Funds for Justice. That's when 14 people from different denominations made an exploratory trip to New Orleans and southwestern Louisiana. They found there were rural communities that had only just been visited by Red Cross relief workers for the first time, more than six months after Hurricane Katrina struck. And low-income communities within New Orleans required funds to rebuild far beyond the totals being released by private insurance companies or the government.

Some of the groups decided to form The Isaiah Funds, with hopes of a launch on the two-year anniversary of Katrina, in August 2007. Their goal, Dekro said, was to assist in the third leg of disaster response, following relief and recovery - redevelopment. The religious groups that came together each had each been involved in work in the Gulf Coast. In addition to the Jewish Funds for Justice, they are the American Baptist Home Mission Society, CHRISTUS Health, Highland Good Steward Management, Jesuits of the New Orleans Province, and MMA (Mennonite Mutual Aid) Community Development Investments.

Technical and operational complications delayed the launch of The Isaiah Funds until last week, Dekro said. But the need for redevelopment funds is as fierce as ever.

"There was a massive, beautiful, immediate cash response by people all over the United States and people all over the world, and that came very quickly," Dekro said. "But very little was put aside for capital investment. As a consequence, especially in low-income communities, there's a paucity of financial capital to do work that needs to be done today. That's especially true given that public sector money has continued to be so delayed."

The Isaiah Funds intends to make at least \$4.5 million in loans and grants to Gulf Coast organizations by early 2009.

Some religious groups that had come to New Orleans to assist with immediate relief and then recovery efforts have since left. Operation Blessing, for instance, announced in February that its relief efforts there were complete, and that it was handing over operation of a medical clinic and pharmacy that provided free care to a local partner.

Monday's event hosted by the White House Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives promoted public-private partnerships as an effective means to disaster response. The Department of Homeland Security, which encompasses the Federal Emergency Management Agency, has strengthened the national plan for domestic disaster response to ensure coordinated efforts and effective use of skilled volunteers, the White House noted in a release about the event. Additionally, federal agencies that supply food to relief organizations or help rebuild destroyed communities work regularly with faith-based and community organizations to provide short-term and long-term assistance to needy neighborhoods.

Following Hurricane Katrina, however, the federal government was widely criticized for its slow, ineffective response to the Gulf Coast's devastation. Reports from the White House itself, as well as from other public and private institutions, pointed especially to a lack of communication and coordination of responsibilities within various levels of government and private and nonprofit groups.

In October, the White House released an updated "National Strategy for Homeland Security" that called for the federal government to encourage citizens, the private sector, and faith-based and community groups to play a leading role in recovery efforts.

"Going forward, we must develop a comprehensive - but not bureaucratic or government-centric - framework wherein communities that are directly or indirectly affected by a large-scale disaster can flourish on a sustainable path to rebuilding and revitalization," the White House report stated.

In contrast, an October 2007 report from the Public Affairs Research Council of Louisiana and the Nelson A. Rockefeller Institute of Government (parent of the Roundtable on Religion and Social Welfare Policy) concluded that only government is large enough to take on the massive recovery work still needed in the Gulf Coast.

"The scale of devastation is so vast in Louisiana and across the Mississippi Gulf Coast that only the government has the capacity to handle significant rebuilding," concluded the report, "Response, Recovery, and the Role of the Nonprofit Community in the Two Years Since Katrina and Rita." "The nonprofit sector was not meant to replace government as the primary agent of recovery ..."

Internationally, faith groups responding to Cyclone Nargis have been struggling for weeks to get past the restrictions set by the government of Myanmar to reach victims. The government there had blocked access for aid workers to areas worst hit by the storm and has refused visas to many relief workers. The Christian organization Samaritan's Purse said it was working through local churches and training volunteers to deliver supplies, such as water purification kits, mosquito nets to prevent disease, and material for emergency shelter construction.

The Associated Press reported Monday that after weeks of international pressure, Myanmar agreed to let in medical teams from neighboring countries and give the Association of Southeast Asian Nations some oversight of foreign aid distribution.

[http://www.religionandsocialpolicy.org/news/article\\_print.cfm?id=8306](http://www.religionandsocialpolicy.org/news/article_print.cfm?id=8306)