

## Pastor's Column

**"Make Levees Not War"**

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Last week, I had the opportunity to visit New Orleans. Pastor Michael Henderson of the Shiloh Church of God in Christ of Oceanside and I represented *Congregations for Civic Action*.

St. Thomas More is a member of CCA along with nine other Congregations here in North County. With these ten North County Congregations, CCA represents 14,000 families.

Through this faith-based community organization, we are reminded that people are motivated to participate in civic life when they have leadership tools and power to accomplish things that are important to their families and communities.

*Congregations for Civic Action* provides the tools by teaching people how to listen to fellow community members, conduct research on problems, craft solutions and work with public officials to enact them.

CCA provides the power through our family of local congregations, which brings great numbers of people together for the common good.

CCA is part of the *PICO National Network*. *PICO* stands for "People Improving Communities through Organizing." With more than 1,000 member institutions representing one million families in 150 cities and 17 states, *PICO* is one of the largest community-based efforts in the United States.

Since 1972, *PICO* has successfully worked to increase access to health care, improve public schools, make neighborhoods safer, build affordable housing, redevelop communities, and revitalize democracy.

100 clergy representing much of the *PICO National Network* were invited to New Orleans to get a first hand view of the situation there and to assess what is, and most importantly, what is not being done to help people return to their city, their neighborhoods, and their homes.

We were invited by the clergy and the people of New Orleans from our sister organizations to help them in their efforts to return to normalcy.

Six months after the failure of the federal levees protecting the New Orleans region, hundreds of thousands of families wait in limbo for the Federal Government to meet its commitments to the region. Without

clear information about what will happen to their communities or what resources will be available to rebuild homes, families have been left to their own devices. The result is a self-help nightmare, a crazy quilt of people picking through debris, putting for-sale signs on destroyed homes, tearing off moldy sheetrock, gutting homes to the studs, and mostly waiting for word from city, state, and federal officials. Speculators have already started to buy up homes, preying on desperation and confusion.

128,000 homes and 133,000 rental units were destroyed when the levees failed. The people of New Orleans are now in Diaspora. A city of 450,000 people is now a ghost town of fewer than 100,000 people.

Many people want to return home. But there is no plan, and there is no money. ***More than six months after Katrina, families have yet to receive one penny in federal aid to help rebuild their homes!***

Place yourself in their situation—your home is flooded to the rooftop. You fortunately escape to a safe area, a few hours away by car. You are living in the home of friends or family who have generously opened their doors to you and your family. After the storm, you are eager to return to rebuild your home and your life—but there is no assistance, there is no plan, there is no help from your government. Six months later and absolutely nothing is done to assist you! Can you begin to feel the frustration, the feeling of helplessness, and the feeling of rage?

I left New Orleans with a deep impression that there is some kind of total "disconnect" between the people and our government. Something is "lost" that does not allow or give the ability for governmental agencies to respond quickly and appropriately to its citizens in such dire need. I know that I will commit myself in the weeks ahead to better understand the situation and this "disconnect."

I worry about what would happen in San Diego if we experienced a magnitude 8 or 9 earthquake. How would the Federal Government respond to us in our hour of need?

The lack of federal response to the needs of the people of New Orleans has implications for all of us across the United States.

Presently, there is a supplemental bill in Congress requesting \$4.2 billion in aid to go toward the rebuilding of New Orleans. The bill is stalled, and a decision may not come until May! In the meantime, the people of New Orleans continue to wait as their lives totally unravel.

Congress debates the issue of the source of the \$4.2 billion. From where will this money come? In the meantime, without question, we spend more than ***\$6 billion a month*** on the War in Iraq. For me, this indicates something is not right in the creation of our national priorities. New Orleans seems to be one more casualty of the War in Iraq.

Lastly, the question of the failure of the levees plagues me. Katrina did not destroy New Orleans. It was only the day after the Hurricane that the levees failed and the city was destroyed. The levees were created by the Federal Government to protect the people. It was known for years that the levees would not be able to withstand a category 4 or 5 hurricane. Yet nothing was done!

In previous years, Tulane University in New Orleans created all the technology for the levees that now protect the country of the Netherlands. This technology was created in New Orleans and then imported to that country. In the meantime, New Orleans still kept itself vulnerable to destruction by not using the technology that it created to protect others. To me, this is sheer nonsense.

Presently, the levees are being repaired to pre-Katrina days. There is no conversation about building new Category 5 Hurricane levees to protect New Orleans in the future. Will history repeat itself?

For me, at this point in time, as I look at our national priorities, I will agree with the tee shirt that is so very visible in New Orleans these days – ***"Make Levees Not War."*** This catchy phrase gives us all much to think about and to begin to make connections.

I ask that we all pray for the people of New Orleans, every Governmental Agency and all the people who will be making decisions about the future of New Orleans. May we strive to help the people of New Orleans to return to their rightful places and homes!

F. Mike