



An Open Letter from UCC Disaster Ministries – August 2015
on the Occasion of the Tenth Anniversary of Disasters on the
U.S. Gulf Coast and New Orleans, Louisiana - Hurricane Katrina, August 2005
A Time to Recall and Recommit

Ten years ago this week, disasters caused and precipitated by Hurricane Katrina changed forever the lives of people on the U.S. Gulf Coast and in New Orleans, Louisiana. The storm surge that swept away swaths of the Gulf Coast and triggered the breach of levees that flooded the city of New Orleans left the landscape different and our collective psyche stunned. How could this happen and what could we do?

People of the United Church of Christ in all its settings turned to the church for connections that embodied response to those questions. The local UCC was present in New Orleans and the Gulf Coast as neighbors brought each other to safety, as families welcomed displaced loved ones, and as decisions were made about the shape of recovery. Around the country and in global partner churches, UCC people responded with connections wrapped in a love that would not let go. In the days immediately following the storm surge and flood, thousands of UCC individuals and congregations signed onto a national “Covenant of Compassion” that kept them connected until it became clear how volunteer mission groups and long-term volunteers would be utilized in the recovery



During the following six years, almost 15,000 people volunteered in New Orleans with UCC ministries and with Back Bay Mission in Biloxi, MS, multiplying gifts and talents through an estimated total value of \$7.9 million in volunteer hours—gutting and rebuilding hundreds of homes and restoring communities. Groups from 47 states and six countries joined together to

accompany people in their recovery. Long term volunteers through the UCC's *Partners in Service* program served in the leadership and facilitation of volunteer groups. Local UCC congregations in New Orleans hosted those groups with space in their buildings and a mid-week hospitality meal; while Back Bay Mission in Biloxi rebuilt to double its capacity for mission groups in disaster housing recovery. People from Missouri and Connecticut, from California and Ohio worked side by side as part of the recovery while also strengthening UCC identity by coming to know each other deeply in common commitments of mission.

The UCC lived covenant connections as over \$6.1 million in donations were utilized through a special *One Great Hour of Sharing* fund, named "Hope Shall Bloom." Donations to Mississippi's Back Bay Mission and the South Central Conference joined the outpouring. The Council for Health and Human Service Ministries rallied around its member, Back Bay Mission, with financial and gifts of expertise in rebuilding and visioning mission for the new context. United Church Funds, the Cornerstone Fund, United Church Insurance Boards and UCC Pension Board all used their areas of ministry for significant contribution in the recovery. These generous gifts enabled the UCC to serve as a catalyst wide-ranging response that met immediate needs, stayed for the long-term and addressed systemic root causes. At the UCC's 2006 national General Synod, then General Minister and President, Rev. John Thomas, addressed a group of Gulf Coast/New Orleans residents and volunteers committed to the recovery. "We are not just rebuilding," he reiterated. "We are JUST rebuilding." That commitment to systemic justice continued.



Environmental Justice
in the face of oil spill



Resilience that builds on
long-term community
relationships



Jenise Green of the UCC
in New Orleans entering
her home again

Groups not only shared time and talent, but became personally connected to the recovery and formed a constituency of informed and authentic advocates for legislative action at state and national levels. UCC's national and ecumenical networks addressed inequities in housing, health care, public education and environmental protection. Resources leveraged other resources so that even though the UCC is not the largest national church in numbers, the UCC was among the last national church disaster programs to transition. The South Central Conference led the celebration closing the disaster ministries program in New Orleans in November 2011, proclaiming that "Hope Shall Bloom and Bloom It Did." Back Bay Mission

continues on the Mississippi Gulf Coast with strong presence and programming, catalyzing new partnerships in the community in the change from overt disaster recovery to continued long-term preparation and community building.

Several months after the storm and flood, residents of the Gulf Coast and New Orleans began wearing T-shirts with a slogan signaling their resiliency of spirit – “Recovery is a marathon, not a sprint.” Ten years later, the national media again is engaged in the important recalling of events caused and magnified by Hurricane Katrina. UCC Disaster Ministries urges not only this re-call but also a re-commitment to action. Both root causes and recovery continue in [New Orleans](#) and on the [Gulf Coast](#). Natural and human-caused disasters continue to wreak destruction throughout the U.S. and around the world. So the marathon continues—empowered by glimpses of Hope Blooming:

- Rev. Jim Hightower, then Pastor of Little Farms UCC, New Orleans: “Hope Shall Bloom helped us feel connected to the larger denomination, in a way that without it simply could not have happened.”
- Bessie Griffin, New Orleans homeowner: “The UCC has truly been a blessing, for a lot of reason. I’m just so grateful for the UCC’s expertise and support.”
- Rev. Shari Prestemon, then Back Bay Mission director and currently Minnesota conference minister, testifies that “when the church does mission, it is at its best.”
- National UCC Disaster Ministries continues to leverage talents and financial resources offered by each of you to make connections that facilitate abundant life in the midst of destruction—with a love that will not let us go. [Donate](#); [Volunteer in Disaster Recovery](#)
- Your spiritual gifts now also are sought in a research project of Christian Theologies in Disaster and Recovery. Your responses to this survey on [Who is God? Who are we? Theology in Disaster](#) will add your voice. You also can expand the conversation by sending copies of any sermons, poetry, music, art, created around themes of disaster and recovery (to be utilized only with your permission and credit). They can be attached to an e-mail to Mary Schaller Blaufuss, team leader, UCC Global Sharing of Resources blaufusm@ucc.org or mailed to 700 Prospect Ave., Cleveland, OH 44115.

Thank you for your commitment. Thank you for living our covenant connections in such powerful ways. Thank you for joining God’s mission in changing lives.

In Hope, Compassion and Covenant,



Mary Schaller Blaufuss,
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Zach Wolgemuth,
UCC Disaster Ministries Executive

