

September 19, 2005

Dear friends:

Three weeks. It's been just that long since the wrath of Hurricane Katrina tore the Gulf Coast apart. It has been far too little a time for anyone here to even begin truly putting their lives back together. But it has been just enough time that we can begin now to see tiny improvements and hints of new routines.

For many, power is back on and phone lines are back up. Water is deemed safe for drinking in more areas each day. Some schools are announcing that they will re-open in the coming weeks, and businesses are **back** in business, even if only for limited hours. Bit by bit, day by day, you see these glimpses of some kind of "new normal", and for each simple thing you give God thanks.

But still there is so much to remind you that nothing will be "normal" here for a very long time. You find yourself reading the obituaries, even if you've never done so before, because there are people whose fates are still unknown to you, and still so many obituaries list August 29 as the day of death. You find yourself getting lost as you walk or drive once familiar neighborhoods, because all your landmarks have been obliterated by the storm surge. In Biloxi and other Gulf Coast communities, mountains of debris are everywhere you turn, and each one represents someone's home, someone's life, someone's livelihood. You begin to recognize the dazed looks on worn faces, and you hear with profound understanding the weariness in another's voice.

As time goes on, we begin to realize that the losses exacted by Hurricane Katrina extend farther than the most tangible losses of precious homes and property. The grief we bear has also to do with relationships that are forever changed, as loved ones displaced by the storm's fury choose to build a new life elsewhere, often before proper and heart-felt goodbye's can be said. One begins to feel uprooted, even if their home is intact, having lost that intangible sense of place, life's landscapes now irrevocably different.

In the midst of this, the staff and Board of Directors of Back Bay Mission are working to regain that sense of place. Although some members of our staff are still in other distant locations, having lost their homes, six others are here and beginning again the work of Back Bay Mission. The Executive Committee of our Board has met in emergency session in Houston over the weekend, to start the process of charting our new course. Amongst us all, there is a commitment to re-birthing the ministry of Back Bay Mission. Yet we are very aware of the enormous challenges we must overcome on the path to new life....

Staffing: All staff remain on our payroll at this point, and other financial relief is being provided to each staff member. In the next two weeks we will begin to discern what additional staff we may need in the next few months and beyond, either because some do not return to us or because additional skills and energy are needed for this time. The

Global Sharing of Resources ministry of the United Church of Christ has also agreed to provide support for a long-term volunteer who can assist us with special needs.

Facility: We have finally received word from our flood insurer that they will send a claim adjuster this week. In addition, we will conduct a building-by-building assessment this week to ascertain the needs of our campus. We anticipate that some buildings may be structurally sound enough to save given major repair and renovation, while others may require demolition. In any event, we are looking at a long haul of restoring, repairing, and, most probably, some new construction. In the meantime, we feel strongly that some sort of presence must be re-established on our campus. In the very immediate term, our hope is to either rent or have donated a basic construction trailer for placement on our campus, out of which two or three staff can daily operate and serve. Beyond that, we are pursuing the construction of one or two modular homes, to be placed on empty lots on our adjacent property, which will house staff offices, client services, and a distribution center for relief aid. These will allow us to once again serve the community while repairs and other construction are taking place on the primary campus. Afterward, these buildings will provide needed housing for volunteers, interns, sabbatical residents, and small work groups.

Work groups: Many of you are eager to come, and we are frustrated with our inability to receive you. With no way to accommodate you, our workcamp program is simply at a maddening stand-still at this moment. Until we know the status of our workcamper dorms and the workcamp cottage, we are stuck. Yet we are anxious to have work groups with us, because there is so much to be done, on our own campus and certainly in the wider community! A couple of groups that were already scheduled for this Fall have chosen to keep those dates, with the understanding that they must be entirely self-contained (lodging, food, tools) when they come. If you believe your group can do the same, be in touch with staff member Don Morgan at dmorgan@datasync.com. In the meantime, we'll keep working to figure out ways we can make your presence and service with us more possible, but please continue to be patient for the moment. (By the way, if you're anxious to work but don't feel like roughing it quite that much in Biloxi at this point, we are told that Florida still needs you to help them recover from last year's hurricanes! Be in touch with Florence Coppola, UCC National Disaster Ministries at coppolaf@ucc.org for more information on these opportunities.)

In-kind donations: So many of you have felt moved to collect clothing, hygiene kits, school kits and other in-kind donations to aid in the post-Katrina healing. As they say in the South, "Bless your hearts!" While we love the compassionate motivation that drives these offerings, we are forced once again to say "not yet". Given the flood-ravaged condition of every one of our buildings, we simply have no way to store or safely secure such items, nor do we presently have the capacity to distribute them properly. In order for all of us to be good stewards, the best advice is to hold off for now. We'll get word to you as soon as we can receive these generous gifts of concrete response.

Financial donations: We can receive them, and we certainly can use them. We have both short-term and long-term needs, some of them dealing with facility as described

above, but still others that deal with our hands-on ministries in the community. Imagine, if you can, losing absolutely everything in seven very full buildings! We will need to replace everything from office equipment to workcamper beds, appliances to food pantry items. Beyond these needs, we know the needs of our community will be enormous, and we are working now to develop revised budgets for our emergency assistance, outreach, community development, case management, and housing programs. Your undesignated gifts will help us attend to the desperate needs of our devastated communities in faithful and compassionate ways. You may send your gifts directly to our regular address (1012 Division Street; Biloxi, MS 39530) from which we are having all mail forwarded to my home, or through Wider Church Ministries of the United Church of Christ.

All of us at Back Bay Mission want to thank you for your abundant caring. We remain deeply moved by your emails, your phone calls, your letters, and your gifts. I've recently reflected again on the familiar verses of I Corinthians 13: "...and now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love." Surely faith remains among us, and tiny sparks of hope now begin to burn. But the outpouring love of Back Bay Mission's incredible extended family in the United Church of Christ has been a blessing of the greatest proportions. Thank you, from the bottom of our hearts.

Grace and peace,

Rev. Shari Prestemon
Executive Director, Back Bay Mission
Biloxi, Mississippi