

**United Church of Christ
Justice & Witness Ministries
Gulf Coast Justice Initiative
Update 2009**

The initial vision in 2006:

The United Church of Christ National Disaster Response, housed in Wider Church Ministries, was mobilized immediately following the devastating Hurricanes Katrina and Rita that hit the Gulf Coast in the fall of 2005. Recovery efforts to assist persons who were displaced and those who needed immediate attention as a result of this tragedy were supported through generous giving to the Hope Shall Bloom Fund. Hundreds of UCC members came to the Gulf Coast to gut, repair and restore homes and churches damaged by the storms. (This work continues. In May of 2009, Church World Service sponsored an ecumenical build as more neighborhoods slowly come back to life.)

News reports coming from New Orleans right after Katrina were especially disturbing because they clearly revealed that the systems of local, state, and national support had collapsed. Justice & Witness Ministries dispatched staff to assess what was going on in the Gulf Coast region. Traveling through Houston, New Orleans, Biloxi and Gulfport, staff assisted communities of faith, local officials, and individuals in need and surveyed the injustice that was apparent. A Gulf Coast Justice Initiative was recommended to the JWM Board of Directors to address the ongoing justice issues in the region. (See report from 2006-07 at: <http://www.ucc.org/justice/gulf-coast-initiative/>).

The issues in 2009:

Since 2006, the JWM Gulf Coast Justice Team has developed partnerships with local groups and UCC members in New Orleans to address issues related to health, including mental health, education, criminal justice and human rights. A visit to the Back Bay Mission in Biloxi, Mississippi, resulted in potential partnership with a Coalition of organizations and individuals called the Steps Coalition (<http://www.stepscoalition.org/>) which is addressing concerns related to fair housing, affordable housing, juvenile justice, women's rights, human trafficking and environmental justice along the Gulf Coast.

Top issues in New Orleans include lack of affordable housing, juvenile justice, lack of opportunities for young people, mental health, and racism which disparately affects communities and persons of color in terms of recovery of homes and neighborhoods, schools, health, and employment.

Here are updates of JWM's work as of May 2009:

**Gulf Coast
Faith-Community-Health Consortium on Mental Health and Mental Illness
Prepared by Barbara Baylor**

Over the past two years Justice and Witness Ministries has been working with faith and community organizations on a ministry of Critical Presence. We have gained the respect of community leaders by responding to their concerns with compassion, dedication, persistence.

The Faith-Community-Health Consortium on Mental Health and Mental Illness continues to identify ways that we can make a difference together regarding the critical mental health challenges in New Orleans. To date this consortium has begun to write a grant that will be submitted to the W. K. Kellogg Foundation. The title of the grant is "Hold Out the Lifeline – Post Katrina Mental Health Issues: Building Resiliency, Recovering Strength, and Restoring Faith Among Individuals and Communities in New Orleans. The grant proposes to help residents reduce levels of stress, develop tools for assessing and improving resiliency and building the capacity of community members to respond to the mental health crisis in New Orleans.

The Consortium will begin to tackle a related mental-health issue – Criminal Justice and Mental Health. The current shortage of beds for the mentally ill has resulted in many being arrested and locked up in the Orleans Prison, which does not have the capacity or infrastructure to care for these persons. Lack of affordable housing, cost of food, insufficient health and lack of employment opportunities coupled with

post-traumatic stress has exacerbated criminal activities. By working with the Minister for Criminal Justice and Human Rights, the Consortium proposes to become an oversight committee within the justice system to highlight some of the injustices to the mentally ill and partner with law enforcement and judges to search for alternative solutions to the challenges of the mentally ill.

Currently, the New Orleans Adolescent Hospital which provided critical inpatient and outpatient care for the mentally ill of all ages is scheduled to close leaving many mentally ill persons without health care services and would require them to travel 50 minutes away to be treated! This will further escalate arrests in this population, as they are unable to acquire the appropriate medicines and treatment.

SELECTED RESOURCES

1. PBS Video: *The Old Man and the Storm*. PBS Home Video, a department of the Public Broadcasting Service. C2009 WGBH Educational Foundation.
2. "Health Challenges for the People of New Orleans: The Kaiser Post-Katrina Baseline Survey." Publication #7659. www.kff.org
3. "Voices of the Storm: Health Experiences of Low-Income Katrina Survivors." Publication #7538. www.kff.org
4. ***Bridging the Gap: Embracing Solutions to Eliminate Health Barriers. State of Health in New Orleans*** report by Dr. Kevin Stephens, Health Director. (504) 658-2506. www.cityofno.com
5. Louisiana Public Health Institute: "Overview of the Current Status of New Orleans Regional Comprehensive Psychiatric System". www.lphi.org

Report on Public Education Involvement in Gulf Coast Team
October 2007–January 2009
Prepared by Jan Resseger

Within a month of Hurricane Katrina, the Louisiana Legislature had taken over the public schools of New Orleans, and the U.S. Secretary of Education had granted nearly \$40 million to underwrite a massive experiment in charter schools. By the end of 2005, the Louisiana Legislature had fragmented the district, terminated all of the district's teachers, and broken the teachers union. Eventually because it was unable to attract enough charter school operators with qualifying applications, the state created a Recovery School District, which very soon became a set of schools-of-last-resort for children who could neither choose nor be chosen by independent charter schools. The results have been complicated and in many respects tragic, with a mass of positive publicity by charter school advocates, who have bragged about "so-called" success.

Many leaders in the New Orleans community have been more skeptical as they have watched the results. Here is a 2007 commentary circulated across the web by Bill Quigley, a law professor at Loyola University, describing the transformation of public education post-Katrina as part of a recipe for how to destroy a community: "Even better, flip the public school system into a charter system and push foundations and the government to give extra money to the new charter schools. Give the schools with the best test scores away first. Then give the least flooded schools away next. Turn 70% of schools into charters so that the kids with good test scores or solid parental involvement will go to the charters. That way the kids with average scores, or learning disabilities, or single parent families who are still displaced are kept segregated... You will have to set up a few schools for those other kids, but make sure those schools do not get any extra money... In fact, because of this, you better make certain there are more security guards than teachers." Although Quigley sounds cynical, he is in fact describing the sequence of events that followed Hurricane Katrina in the New Orleans schools.

As part of the Justice and Witness Ministries Gulf Coast Team, from October 2007 until January 2009, I convened and basically staffed an initiative to secure funding for a New Orleans Institute for Equity in Public Education. The idea grew from discussion at a consensus building meeting convened by Justice and Witness Ministries at Dillard University in New Orleans in October of 2007, to test for concerns about the transformation of the schools and to discover what local leaders believed could be a meaningful response. After that time, I met with a steering group of leaders that emerged from that first meeting; our purpose was to draft a grant proposal outline we could circulate for a research and advocacy agency to be housed in New Orleans with local participation in the research design. I drafted an outline and we revised it collaboratively until all in the local leadership group were satisfied. I took responsibility for researching funders and circulating the proposal. In July, 2008, the Ford Foundation expressed serious interest. At the end of 2008, this project was turned over to the College of Social Sciences at Loyola University, whose dean, Luis Miron, submitted a final proposal to the Ford Foundation.

As of February 2009, there are very strong indications that start up funding will be approved soon by the Ford Foundation. Unfortunately, this proposal as submitted by Loyola's College of Social Sciences, does not outline a role for the United Church of Christ. Although my involvement kept the group together through the grant application process, we are unlikely to be involved formally in its future. I am very comfortable with that outcome, but I think it is important to create a record of our involvement in this project. The United Church of Christ Justice and Witness Ministries faithfully played the roles of:

- convening key local stakeholders to test concerns and priorities around the school-takeover and charterization post-Katrina;
- recording and organizing the feedback of local participants;
- convening a steering group through late 2007 and 2008 to create a funding proposal outline for a local research and policy agency to realize the goals of local leaders;
- researching potential funders;
- circulating a proposal outline;
- connecting the group back to the Ford Foundation, when this funder contacted me to express interest in the project;
- connecting the local and national stakeholders with Luis Miron, the new Dean of Social Sciences at Loyola University, who offered to create the agency within the Loyola College of Social Sciences;
- convening conference calls with the local stakeholders, the potential funder, and Luis Miron to ensure that the vision of the local activists is embodied in the final proposal, which, though drafted and submitted by Luis Miron, faithfully incorporated the original vision of New Orleans stakeholders).

Timeline for Project Development

On October 15, 2007—Justice and Witness Ministries convened a group of approximately 40 participants from across New Orleans to consider concerns relating to what had happened to the public schools since September 2005. Organizations that were represented in the October 15 conversation at Dillard or follow-up discussions include: The Algebra Project, All Congregations Together, Amistad Research Center, Beecher United Church of Christ, Downtown Neighborhood Improvement Association, Frederick Douglass Community Coalition, FYRE Youth Squad, Louisiana Justice Institute, staff at Loyola University and the Twomey Center for Peace through Justice at Loyola University, People's Institute, Pyramid Community Parent Resource Center, Sixth Baptist Church, Students at the Center, Southern Institute for Education and Research, United Church of Christ Justice and Witness Ministries (a national partner), United Teachers of New Orleans, and staff from the University of New Orleans.

Through a facilitated all-afternoon process, participants identified their deepest concerns (full report attached) including the following which surfaced by consensus as the priorities of the group:

- There is an urgent need for restoration of democracy through a unified and democratically elected school board that permits access for the public to decision making. Goal is unification of all the schools with equalized funding across all schools.
- We need to address the crisis created because the schools are Balkanized, fractured.
- There is an urgent need to change the mind-set in New Orleans that accepts the Recovery School District as a given. A set of "schools of last resort" cannot be a given.
- "A major goal has to be to bring back a system."
- There are no consequences for school operators when things go badly and no process by which the community can try to get problems addressed. There is no way to address massive inequities.
- There is a need for a community-based organization to provide research and advocacy support for the unification of the district and for addressing the mass of issues we have been discussing.

Between October of 2007 and April of 2008—I met in person and in a series of conference calls with a local steering group to create a proposal outline that reflected the voices of the New Orleans advocates who attended the October 15, Dillard University meeting to prioritize issues. Local advocates involved in on-going planning and visioning included Ursula and DJ Markey of the Pyramid Parent Resources Center (for parents of special needs children); Ted Quant, Director of the Twomey Center for Peace through Justice at Loyola University; Lance Hill, Director of the Southern Institute for Education and Research at Tulane University; and Harry Russell, Assistant Professor of Social Work at the Southern University at New Orleans School of Social Work. This group expanded to include potential national partners including Lisa Delpit, author and professor at Florida International University; Janice Jackson of the Harvard Graduate School of Education; and Richard Gray of the Annenberg Institute for School Reform at Brown University. The proposal outline, attached, was designed to remain faithful to the needs of the community identified on October 15 and developed with ongoing input from community leaders. The words of speakers at the October 15 meeting appear directly in the proposal outline.

Between April and June of 2008—I researched possible funders and circulated the proposal outline to the following foundations:

- Louisiana Disaster Recovery Foundation
- Carnegie Corporation of New York
- Unitarian Universalist Veatch Program at Shelter Rock
- The Arca Foundation
- The Ford Foundation
- The Bauman Foundation
- The Charles Stuart Mott Foundation
- The Annie E. Casey Foundation
- The Public Welfare Foundation
- The Forum for Education and Democracy
- The Schott Foundation for Public Education
- The Twenty-First Century Foundation
- The Open Society Institute
- The Foundation for the Mid South
- The Margurite Casey Fund
- The Mary Reynolds Babcock Foundation
- The Needmore Fund

July 25, 2008—I received a phone call from Cyrus Driver, the Education Program Officer at the Ford Foundation to express strong interest in the project. After this call, I convened the members of the steering group talk on several occasions to prepare for a follow-up call with Mr. Driver. When Dillard University fell through as a possible site, we met by phone several times with Luis Miron, new Dean of Social Sciences at Loyola University, who contacted us to explore collaboration on the project.

September 29, 2008—Cyrus Driver convened a conference call among the steering group at this point of the New Orleans Institute for Equity in Public Education, including: Cyrus Driver, Ford Foundation Education Program Officer; Jerry Maldonado, Ford Foundation gulf Coast Team; Luis Miron, Dean, College of Social Sciences, Loyola University; Ted Quant, Director of the Twomey Center at Loyola University; Ursula Markey, Co-Director of the Pyramid Parent Resources Center, New Orleans; Lisa Delpit, Education writer and professor at Florida International University; Janice Jackson, Harvard Graduate School of Education, Lance Hill, Southern Institute for Education and Research, and Jan Resseger. Additional local committee members were unable to join the call.

Fall, 2008—I helped convene several conference calls to keep local leaders engaged as the project continued to move through the funding application development process.

January 20, 2009—Luis Miron, Dean of the College of Social Sciences at Loyola University submitted full grant proposal (attached) to Cyrus Driver of the Ford Foundation. The full proposal includes virtually all of the philosophy, the specific elements of the community proposal outline that grew from the October 15, 2007 meeting convened by Justice and Witness Ministries, and much of the original language of local leaders in New Orleans.

Links to more information on the status of education post-Katrina can be found at:

<http://www.ucc.org/justice/public-education/pdfs/message-lower-res-08.pdf>
http://www.ucc.org/justice/public-education/pdfs/jwm_publiceducation.pdf

Report on Criminal Justice and Human Rights Issues
Gulf Coast Initiative
Prepared by Sala W.J. Nolan Gonzales

Shortly after the levees breached in 2006, I joined the Minister of Communication in a first foray into the Gulf Coast region. We drove a rental van loaded with emergency supplies and clothing. Fortunately, the van was equipped with GPS, which became essential because there were no road signs standing. We could only navigate by satellite positioning. In the five years since, I have returned to the region several times each year, most recently in the spring of 2009. The Gulf Coast looks much the same in far too many areas. People are still living in trailers. Tarps are still on roofs. People are still searching for money to rebuild and return. In our last trip, we spoke with many children and parents who are living in fear of the next hurricane. Caregivers and

other professionals were holding their own as they worked in the region, but today, signs of shellshock and trauma are growing among providers as they continue to navigate a landscape without clarity and order.

The challenges to stability in the Gulf Coast continue, and now the community is clamoring for help in dealing with a wave of crime and gang activity. In contrast to national decreases in violent crime in the past few years, violence has soared in the region. In New Orleans, murders rose from 162 in 2006 to 209 in 2007; rapes increased from 87 to 115; and aggravated assault increased from 1,245 to 1,973, according to the FBI. The early focus on immediate needs for housing and basic services is shifting toward a need for safety in the wake of this growing violence. It has become clear that incarceration is not a solution. In fact, over incarceration remains an enormous problem. One emerging issue is that services for the mentally ill are generally unavailable, leaving people with mental illness to fend for themselves. They are regularly removed from the streets and taken to jails, where many do not receive medication for several days, and some do not receive medication at all. The most seriously mentally ill suffer tremendously as a result, and it takes considerable time and professional effort to stabilize their conditions. The jails are ill equipped to deal with their problems, which worsen with incarceration. Together with the Minister for Health, I am developing a plan to work with criminal justice system workers and the community to educate judges on the plight of the mentally ill, and to develop alternatives to prison for people who need mental health services.

Refuge is still necessary. We continue to work extensively with churches and community groups in the region to maintain a presence on the Gulf Coast. Presence makes it possible for us to be called upon efficiently and effectively, especially for things that require a quick response, and it keeps us aware of what is needed now and what the next steps are likely to be. Much of this work has been one-to-one, but some of it has focused on bringing together faith groups and providers, as with A Day of Presence in 2007. We continue to collaborate with Critical Resistance, the Malcolm X Grassroots Movement, and others to address justice issues in the area on a case-by-case basis.

In the years since the hurricanes, widespread human rights violations in the region have become visible. They have to do with inequitable distribution of services and support and on the disenfranchisement of internally displaced persons. We have developed solid, continuous partnerships with local groups, and work constantly to identify and publicize human rights violations in the region. Some of this is through petitioning for an international tribunal on human rights. Some is through general education. We have supported efforts by educating our larger faith community through the Justice & Peace Action Network (JPANet) Action Alerts, by preparing pastoral letters and documents for the church, and for Governor Blanco and other governmental leaders in the region, through histories and updates to the UCC's Ministers for Racial, Social and Economic Justice (MRSEJ), and through various UCC communication outlets. Because we are headquartered in Cleveland, we organized a local forum on justice the Gulf Coast in 2007, which was attended by more than 500 people from this community; we supported similar initiatives in cities across the country.

We have trained mediators in the Gulf Coast region to work with police, courts and community leaders to protect citizen rights and address justice concerns. We have also partnered with a number of local and national groups that focus on legal issues to address immediate and long-term consequences of cases that have reached national attention, such as the Jena 6.

A hot summer is upon us, and the money for summer programs for youth has not yet solidified, so schedules are not available and people are uncertain. Programming support is needed.

Five years in, and the communities of the Gulf Coast still struggle with problems of housing, schools, basic health care, and poverty. The crime wave that besets the region is not surprising. It cannot be ignored. We continue to work for justice, for fundamental care for our people, and for safety. It is a day-by-day, case-by-case, step-by-step process. We maintain our partnerships in the region and throughout the country, and continue to do the work.

For updates on the situation in the Gulf Coast, go to www.levees.org/news.

Connection with UCC Churches in the Region Prepared by Loey Powell

There have been several pastoral changes since the hurricanes in United Church of Christ congregations in New Orleans and nearby communities, and many members of those churches have not returned or do not intend to return. A new congregation, Freedom Fellowship UCC, was welcomed into the association in 2008. Little Farms UCC and St. Paul's UCC both provide space for volunteer groups coming to do recovery work. Beecher Memorial Congregational UCC is getting close to completion of its renovation and the congregation has called a new pastor to lead it. JWM, in cooperation with funding from the Hope Shall

Bloom Fund, will partner with Beecher's pastor as a community organizer who will supervise two interns as well as reach out to the other UCC churches to find common cause for advocacy. We hope to have this plan in place by fall of 2009.