

## BEYOND KATRINA: A Call for United Church of Christ Awareness and Action

There are many Katrina stories.

Hearing those about people who were evacuated, flooded, or displaced by Katrina is essential, especially when told by the very persons affected. Stories of disaster response teams on site or new visions of local mission inspire us. Yet another story must also be heard. It is the complex story of public policy and private business decisions over the previous century that set the stage for the disaster that occurred. It is the story of actions now needed to remedy and substantially improve hurricane protection to guard against future disasters. UCC leaders, congregations, and members nationally need to learn more about this policy history, its context in the Gulf coastal environment, and how they can become advocates to correct the hurricane vulnerability and flawed protection exposed by Katrina---even as we minister to the human suffering caused by the storm and grapple with our nation's inability to overcome poverty and racial exclusion.

### KATRINA'S ENABLERS

In various ways, all Americans today and others gone before us were Katrina's enablers. The storm was a destructive natural phenomenon, like all strong hurricanes, but its impact in southeast Louisiana was immensely worse due to the actions of businesses, of national, state, and local governments, and of individuals here and throughout the country in the 20th century.

In less than 100 years, some of those actions disrupted the Mississippi River's 10,000 years of building new land at its mouth. Ocean erosion now washes away many more square miles of coastal wetlands in Louisiana than the river builds each year, for a net loss of 10.3 square miles per year, or one football field every hour and a half. Loss of coastal wetlands on the Gulf of Mexico is a crisis, not only for the intrinsic ecological and economic importance of these wetlands, but also because they serve as buffers to mitigate the height and power of storm surges like those caused by Katrina. (Some experts say that every mile of wetlands crossed by storm surge reduces it by about one foot.)

Factors contributing to coastal erosion and other human intensifiers of Katrina's impact include:

1. LESS SILT. Dam and lock construction along the upper Mississippi and its tributaries reduces the amount of silt and sediment carried to build the delta and new land in the Gulf of Mexico.
2. LEVEES TOO CLOSE TO RIVER'S MOUTH. Massive levees were built along the Mississippi and streams flowing into it. Precipitated by the Great Flood of 1927(See John M. Barry's book, Rising Tide), their goal was to prevent river flooding. Near the river's end, however the levees extend too close to the mouth of the river and create a "chute" effect, propelling much of the silt that still reaches the delta into deeper Gulf waters rather than allowing it to settle in shallows and build new land.
3. SALT WATER DESTROYS WETLANDS THROUGH OIL AND GAS CANAL DREDGING. Energy companies dredged hundreds of canals for their drilling barges in fragile coastal lands with no remedial or restorative action. For

most of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, they sold and we Americans bought cheap oil and gas without covering the cost to correct the damage done. That damage takes many forms nationally but in Louisiana and parts of coastal Texas, it includes the intrusion of salt water via the oil and gas canals into healthy wetlands, killing trees, marsh grasses and other vegetation whose roots hold soil in place, resisting coastal erosion and reducing storm surges.

4. SHIP CHANNEL BRINGS MORE SALINITY, ERODING WETLANDS, AND STORM SURGE. At mid-century, port and ocean shipping interests and the Army Corps of Engineers secured congressional and state funding to dredge an enormous channel, the Mississippi River Gulf Outlet(MRGO) to shorten the distance from the Gulf for ships heretofore using the Mississippi River. Once complete, it did not attract many ships and thus was not an economic success--but its side effects were major. MRGO increased salt water intrusion, destroyed more wetlands, eroded its own banks, and became an ever widening funnel for more storm surges to reach levees in St. Bernard Parish and the sprawling Ninth Ward of New Orleans.
  
5. BOTCHED FEDERAL GOVERNMENT LEVEE DESIGN AND CONSTRUCTION. Since Hurricane Betsy in 1965, which flooded the Lower Ninth Ward, the Bywater area in New Orleans, and parts of St. Bernard Parish, the US Army Corps of Engineers has been "upgrading" levees and floodwalls along the lakes and drainage canals of the NO region. Many of those improvements are the ones that failed catastrophically during Katrina, according to studies by a variety of groups such as the American Society of Civil Engineers, the University of California-Berkeley team funded by the National Science Foundation, and the Louisiana State University Hurricane Center. The studies document how, during the last three decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century and on into the 21<sup>st</sup>, the safety of human lives has had to compete with a culture of cost cutting in presidential, congressional, state, and Corps of Engineers funding decisions, and in Corps flood control and hurricane protection design and construction processes. In the New Orleans area, these dysfunctional tradeoffs of safety for savings produced poorly designed and constructed levees and floodwalls that collapsed from a storm surge most were supposedly built to withstand. (See Times-Picayune, 5/22/06 and 6/2/02 stories at [www.nola.com](http://www.nola.com) for the latest independent reports on the failures of the Corps and its hurricane levees in southeast Louisiana.)

The federal promise of secure hurricane protection proved worthless when Katrina came to New Orleans. The result was more than 1500 deaths and a nearly lethal wound to the lives, cultures, and livelihoods of a million and a half people in or near a great and historic American city.

KNOW MORE, DO MORE: A CALL FOR UCC AWARENESS, ADVOCACY, AND ACTION

Human decisions and actions created the conditions which magnified Katrina's destruction, and human action can change and rectify those conditions. Many of us in the New Orleans Association of the UCC want to see more advocacy and support from UCC leaders and national bodies, and from conferences, congregations, and members for major federal funding and policy improvements in the wake of Katrina. We need active UCC engagement in our struggle for comprehensive and sufficient federal resources to recover from Katrina,

begin coastal wetlands restoration, and build hurricane protection able to withstand not just a Katrina but the even stronger Category 4 and 5 storms predicted as oceans warm and rise, and hurricanes become more frequent and more powerful.

Short term disaster "relief" is not enough. Justice requires the long term recovery of communities by assisting people to rebuild their homes, and reclaim their lives. That is the objective of the UCC disaster response ministry through efforts such as the Hope Shall Bloom Fund and volunteer recovery teams now working on the central Gulf Coast. In support of this objective, the UCC family must learn and do more to enhance recovery and save lives.

For example, many people are not aware that it took Congress nine months since Katrina to pass funding to finance housing(including affordable purchase and rental units), to restore businesses, jobs, and utilities, to rebuild local government facilities and services, and to start large scale levee improvements beyond the quick fixes being made for the 2006 hurricane season. You can follow developments in the New Orleans region through the Times-Picayune at [www.nola.com](http://www.nola.com) . This New Orleans newspaper won two Pulitzer Prizes for coverage of Katrina and its protracted aftermath. Here are other needs about which the UCC family can study and offer advocacy.

#### 1. UNDERSTAND AND SUPPORT GULF COASTAL RESTORATION

Congress and the White House continue to delay action on Louisiana Senator Mary Landrieu's legislation to dedicate a portion of the government's revenue from oil and gas pumped from Gulf federal waters to coastal restoration and hurricane or flood protection in Louisiana, Texas, and other offshore oil producing states. Mountain states receive much larger proportions of federal revenues from oil or gas drilling on federal lands in the western US than coastal states receive from such revenues in federal waters off their shores. Giving coastal states a comparable share and restricting its use would be a major change to expedite a healthier coastal environment and safer communities as well. Let the White House, Congress, and federal agencies know you want funding for coastal restoration by going to this website: [www.americaswetland.com](http://www.americaswetland.com) and click on the One Plan/One Voice box and follow prompts to sign the message of support that will be e-mailed to relevant officials. Learn more about coastal restoration and hurricane protection and how you can help by clicking on the Resources section of the America's Wetland website, and by visiting other websites such as [www.healthygulf.org](http://www.healthygulf.org) , [www.saveourlake.org/wetlands.htm](http://www.saveourlake.org/wetlands.htm) , and [www.restorewetlands.com](http://www.restorewetlands.com) .

#### 2. HOLD THE CORPS ACCOUNTABLE

The US Army Corps of Engineers must be held accountable, have its culture and policy revamped, and its funding sufficient to make protection of human lives a top priority. Are you aware that its spending decisions about the strength, size, and safety level of levees does not consider loss of human life but only narrowly defined economic impacts? Are you aware that dams are built with much higher margins of safety than levees, even when those levees are ostensibly protecting urban areas with thousands of people? Levee safety is an issue not only in Louisiana and along the Mississippi River and its tributaries from the Rockies to the Appalachians. Levee failures could inundate locations such as the northeast Bay Area and the Sacramento area in California, and the area around Lake Okeechobee in Florida.

Watch for the final report due in July from the Independent Levee Investigation Team, funded by the National Science Foundation and led by Ray Seed, geotechnical engineer at the University of California-Berkeley. Support its findings for overhauling the Corps of Engineers and creating a National Flood Defense Authority to oversee levee projects from design to construction to assure safety standards and watchdog the Corps. See also the website of [www.levees.org](http://www.levees.org) for more information on levee improvements needed for safety and what you can do to hold the Corps accountable.

### 3. SEAL MRGO AND REMEDIATE ITS WETLANDS DAMAGE

Support closure of the Miss. River Gulf Outlet(MRGO), the ship channel that devastated wetlands southeast of St. Bernard Parish and New Orleans for a half century before Katrina and helped funnel Katrina's surge direct to inland levees unprepared for the onslaught. For more information and action options, visit the website of the Coalition to Close the Miss. River Gulf Outlet at [www.ccmrgo.org](http://www.ccmrgo.org) .

### WE NEED YOUR HELP

The people of southeast Louisiana and the New Orleans area have been moved to tears by the outpouring of aid and sympathy from millions in the United States and around the world in the wake of Katrina. Our tears continue as we confront the enormity of the challenge to make our part of the world safer, more equitable and just, and more able to thrive and sing songs of joy again.

We need support and advocacy from all levels of the United Church of Christ for federal and private funding to re-build lives and housing for families, and to restore businesses and institutions. We need messages to Congress and the White House to assure substantially improved safety in hurricane protection (levees, floodgates, pumping capacity, and coastal wetlands restoration). If top flight storm protection does not receive full support and prompt action, then all the people being assisted to re-build places to work, live, and celebrate life will be at the mercy of nature's vagaries every hurricane season.

Human lives have been at risk from a major storm for years along the Central Gulf Coast, but the few truth tellers sounding the warnings were largely ignored. Now, there is no longer any doubt about the great danger that lurked---and still lurks. The difference is that after Katrina, no one should be able to get by with saying they were not aware of the deadly potential.

Please hear this call to the UCC to join us in assuring a better and safer future for the people of the New Orleans and central Gulf region.

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John Pecoul  
St. Matthew United Church of Christ  
New Orleans, LA 70118

(UCC Clergy retired, former Vice President and faculty member in political science at Xavier University of Louisiana, and former executive staff member for two Mayors of New Orleans)

[japecoul@yahoo.com](mailto:japecoul@yahoo.com)