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St. George's Episcopal Church  
4600 St. Charles Avenue  
New Orleans, LA

## Rebuilding with Heart

### The Story of St. George's Episcopal Church

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Hurricane Katrina affected all people living in the city of New Orleans, including their religious communities. Some of these congregations left the area due to extensive damage; some were affected little and reached out to the those around them, and some, like St. George's Episcopal Church, were affected greatly but still managed to help those in need. With unselfish leadership, an optimistic attitude, and a committed congregation, this church community, whose sanctuary had been infested by mold following the storm, acted to improve itself as well as post-Katrina New Orleans and adopted the slogan "Rebuilding with Heart" to inspire its efforts.

#### **BRIEF HISTORY OF THE DENOMINATION**

Before seeking to understand St. George's reaction to Katrina, one must first understand the origins of the Episcopal Church. The Episcopal Church of the United States is a derivation of the Anglican Church. Despite many people's beliefs, the Anglican Church did not come into being with the reign of Henry VIII but was rather established many centuries before the Tudor dynasty.

The Anglican Church, or the church of the English people, must have been founded before 314 C.E., the year in which the Council of Arles was held, because there is evidence of British bishops being present at the council in France at this time. In 597 C.E., however, Pope Gregory VII sent a monk by the name of Augustine, later St. Augustine, to bring the Church of England under Roman and papal domination, and it wasn't until Henry VIII of the Tudor line broke from the Roman Catholic Church in 1533 that the Anglican Church could set its own doctrines once again.

The reason for this separation was due to King Henry's wish to divorce his wife, Catherine of Aragon, in order to marry Anne Boleyn and produce a male heir to succeed him; however, Pope Clement VII, highly influenced by Holy Roman Emperor Charles V, would not grant the annulment. Therefore, Henry broke ties with the papacy and placed church doctrine under the king's authority, and it was under Henry's successor, Edward VI, that "Thomas Cramner as archbishop of Canterbury produced a complete book of English prayers, in two, successively more Protestant versions which laid out a form of worship that incorporated both Catholic and Protestant ideals" (Locke 1991, 9). With this liturgical foundation and the burgeoning of the British Empire, the Church of England grew and spread throughout the world.

In 1607 the first Anglican congregation of the English colonies was founded in Jamestown, Virginia. In 1789, after the colonies had won independence, the Episcopal Church broke with the Anglican Church and declared the first American bishop, Samuel Seabury, whose apostolic succession was met through the bishops of Scotland. Today, a governing body, called the General Convention, comprised of bishops, priests, deacons, and lay people, meets every three years to set doctrines and policies for the Episcopal Church of the United States. At the same time, however, the church continues its bond with other Anglican faiths throughout the world, thus making it universal (Giles 2004, 9-17; Locke 1991, 3-12; Wikipedia contributors [2006]).

## **HISTORY OF ST. GEORGE EPISCOPAL CHURCH**

St. George's has carried on this Anglican tradition since its founding in 1859 under its original name of Emmanuel Church. This new congregation was located at the corner of Magazine Street and what is now General Pershing Street until after the Civil War, when factions arose within the church, resulting in the two congregations of Emmanuel Episcopal and St. Mark's Episcopal. The two churches were too close in proximity, however, and the financial burden of maintaining separate churches became too great, so in 1874 the congregations combined to form St. George's Episcopal Church, which was located at the corner of Magazine and Napoleon streets. It was not until 1899 that St. George's Episcopal Church was built at the site where it stands presently, the corner of St. Charles Avenue and Cadiz Street. The church was built in a Roman Cruciform style of architecture and contains excellent stained glass most made by Franz Meier of Germany and one Jacoby window in the Tiffany-style. Today, Fr. Christopher McLaren leads this congregation of around 415 parishioners (Mackey 2006; St. George's Church 1924; St. George's Church c. 1991).

## **IMPACT OF KATRINA ON ST. GEORGE EPISCOPAL CHURCH**

Hurricane Katrina had a great impact on St. George's Church and its members. First of all, the church building itself sustained great damage. Rain water came through the roof and caused flooding in the church, offices, and classrooms below. Pews and much of the wooden furniture in this area were infested with mold and is in the process of being restored. A new slate roof is being installed returning the church to its original look. Construction on the church is on-going and will hopefully be completed by late May 2006. Until completion of the sanctuary, Communion services are being held in the St. George's undercroft and gathering area, a relatively large, rectangular room lying under the sanctuary. The

congregation, as a whole, has decreased in number due to jobs leaving the New Orleans area. Approximately 25 to 30 families have relocated. The majority of the congregation that remains, most of them living in the uptown region of New Orleans, received varying levels of damage due to the storm, but as they rebuild, they remain true to the Episcopal faith and the St. George community (Mackey 2006; McLaren 2006).

## **THE CONGREGATION'S RESPONSES TO THE KATRINA DISASTER**

Although Hurricane Katrina greatly affected St. George's building and its congregation, their response to the disaster has been quite optimistic and unselfish. Directly following the storm and before being allowed back into the city, St. George's administrative staff set up an online message board so parishioners could verify the safety of their friends as well as discover the location of fellow congregants. On this emergency website, telephone numbers for FEMA, insurance companies, emergency disaster teams, the Red Cross, and other organizations were provided for anyone who needed this information. Upon returning to New Orleans in early October, many of the parishioners met in St. George's chapel to hold a prayer service in order to reinvigorate the spirit of the church community, and after Fr. McLaren returned, Communion services were reinstated and plans were made as to what steps St. George's would take to help the New Orleans community and better itself.

First of all, St. George opened its doors to Grace Episcopal Church, a fellow church that had lost its building in the storm. Next, the congregation established a feeding ministry called the Dragon Café, which offers a free meal on Thursday and Friday nights to anyone who wishes to come. Meals may be eaten in or taken to go, and in order to promote this event, flyers in both English and Spanish were printed and distributed at work sites throughout the city. To fulfill the large demand for this service, St. George's accepted the help of many partner parishes not only from Louisiana but from churches across the United States and Canada as well. The partner parishes send St. George's financial assistance as well as volunteers, who come in shifts, to help with the parish's needs. St. Matthew's Church, an Episcopal congregation in Connecticut led by The Rev. Mary Grace Williams and assisted by The Rev. Janet Waggoner has by far become St. George's biggest supporters. They have sent a team of six to eight volunteers every month since December.

As for internal changes, St. George's congregants and administrators took an optimistic view of the damages sustained and hope to improve the sanctuary area. While working on the ceiling, construction workers and electricians will hang new lighting fixtures in order to increase visibility and overall brightness in the place of worship. Also, with the removal of the carpet, the original wooden floors will be sanded and refinished, restoring the sanctuary to its historic roots. The area in which the choir stands and from which the priest leads worship will also be expanded and an additional altar rail installed to improve flow during worship.

The aforementioned are external signs of the congregation's optimism, but the manner in which the administrators and parishioners speak is also indicative of a positive attitude. Father Christopher McLaren, in the first Eucharistic celebration held in Dragon Café, made it a point to comment that the church is not a building, but indeed the people of God coming together to profess a common belief and to worship together. The parishioners pray in thanksgiving for the rebuilding efforts and for God's guidance during this time. Also, when spoken to, the congregants explain that they feel lucky because they have a church to go to,

and even if their homes were damaged, they have a place to live and loved ones who surround them. Thus both externally and internally, St. George's continues to live out its post-Katrina motto of "Rebuilding with Heart" (Mackey 2006; McLaren 2006).

## **THE INTERVIEWS**

Three interviews were conducted to gain knowledge as to the meaning of the Episcopal faith and St. George's Episcopal Church for certain congregants as well as investigate the impact Hurricane Katrina had or is having on these individuals. The three people interviewed were Ms. Karen Mackey, parish administrator; Father Christopher McLaren, rector and priest; and Mrs. Sarah Boelhower, parishioner and volunteer.

### **Karen Mackey**

The first interview was conducted on February 9, 2006 with Ms. Karen Mackey, parish administrator of St. George's parish. Born and raised Episcopalian in the city of New Orleans, Ms. Mackey came to St. George's ten years ago as a parishioner and began working as parish administrator in August 2005, before which time she worked as a parole officer. When asked about the strength of St. George's congregation, Mackey commented upon the "nice, welcoming atmosphere," the wide variety of people in the congregation, and the more liberal and tolerant demeanor of the church. However, she did say that she would like to see greater leadership within the church with more parishioners getting involved with the community. As for her views of the Episcopal Church, she enjoys the great tradition offered in its service. To use her words, "[the Episcopal service] has been said for hundreds of years, and it is being said by thousands of people at the same time." In this way, the Episcopal community is bound together universally and continues the apostolic succession of the church (Mackey 2006).

As the interview continued, Hurricane Katrina and its affects on Ms. Mackey were discussed. On the Friday before Katrina hit on Monday morning, Karen Mackey and her family remained optimistic that the hurricane would turn away from New Orleans; however, by Saturday, the reality of the storm was apparent, and Ms. Mackey boarded her windows and went to secure church papers and artifacts before she left on Sunday morning. She and her parents stayed with a fellow parishioner in New Roads, Louisiana; the trip there, which usually takes an hour and a half, took twelve hours. In the days following the storm, Mackey said it felt as if "life had to start over again." Remembering her obligation to St. George's, Mackey began a yahoo group to contact other parishioners to ascertain their safety. This task took about a month, but she was diligent. Once she returned to the city, she found St. George's sanctuary infested with mold and her own home with roof damage but still livable. Despite the damage, she and the St. George administrators made a decision to be "the hands of Jesus" during this time of great trial (Mackey 2006).

When asked why St. George reached out to help others despite damage of its own, Mackey answered, "There were a lot of people in need, and someone had to do it. Who else has the visible presence besides the churches!" To her, it was not charity but an obligation to the community she calls home. So, when the Episcopal Diocese asked St. George to begin a feeding ministry, the parish wholeheartedly accepted. Originally supposed to occur every

night, the Dragon Café ministry was shortened to Thursday and Friday nights, and now feeds 150-200 people per night. Mackey recognizes that there is still a lot to do and is anxious about the number of parishioners who have left due to the storm, but she looks forward to a rebuilt New Orleans and a renewed St. George parish (Mackey 2006).

### **Fr. Christopher McLaren**

The next interview was conducted on March 2, 2006 with Father Christopher McLaren, priest of St. George's. Originally from Oregon, Fr. Christopher was raised in the Assembly of God church, where his mother served as pastor. He went to college in Salem, Oregon where he discovered the Episcopal Church, a religious tradition with the order, sacraments, history, rich music, and an affinity for icons and art that he was seeking. It was in this denomination that McLaren felt he belonged, and after many years of working at different jobs, he felt a call to its priesthood and attended seminary in Austin, Texas. Finally, in 2000, he and his family moved to New Orleans and St. George's, where McLaren has spent the past six years, three as associate pastor and three as rector. When asked the greatest strength of the Episcopal Church, Fr. Christopher highlighted its ability to include a wide variety of people. He explained that with the church's practice of open Communion and its latitude of beliefs, the Episcopal faith can welcome all people, of various sexual orientations and ethnicities into its arms. He also commented upon "the genius of melding the Catholic and Protestant ethos" within one faith, providing history and liturgy in a more open atmosphere (McLaren 2006).

The biggest fear Fr. McLaren holds for the Episcopal faith is that the denomination may split over the issues surrounding homosexuality and sexual ethics. Although Gene Robinson was consecrated bishop in New Hampshire in 2000, an upcoming Convention may re-open recent divisions, and since the Episcopal Church has no magisterial head, schism is more probable without a strong consensus. Even the Archbishop of Canterbury, head of the Anglican Church in England, has little control in that Anglican Churches are autonomous provinces based upon country (McLaren 2006).

When talking of St. George's and its strengths, McLaren called his parish a "warm community, which welcomes people into it with open arms." He said its people were the most vital part and the beautiful church structure was second in importance (McLaren 2006).

As the interview continued, focus shifted to Katrina and its personal and professional impact on Fr. Christopher. The Saturday before Katrina ravaged New Orleans, McLaren packed up his van with computers and photos and sent his wife and three children to Crowley, Louisiana to sit out the storm. He stayed behind to board up the house and perform a wedding, which was poorly attended due to contra flow being opened on the interstate highway. Afterwards, he sent an email to his parishioners informing them of the cancelled Sunday services and left to meet his family in Evangeline parish (McLaren 2006).

After the storm had passed, the McLaren family traveled from Crowley to various places in the United States, including Vermont and Albuquerque, New Mexico. While his family moved around, however, Father Christopher returned to New Orleans to find his house with two feet of water in it and his church sanctuary damaged. When his family came back to the city, they stayed in a friend's apartment until they received permission to live in the home of a parishioner who had moved to Philadelphia after the storm. This is where they currently

reside. Renovations on the McLarens' house are expected to take a significant amount of time (McLaren 2006).

As for St. George's, McLaren has plans to rebuild it and the city of New Orleans. In addition to the feeding ministry, which will be kept going as long as there is a need, McLaren hopes to build an early childhood center where the rectory now stands in order to attract people back to the city and to the church. Also, he has taken steps to make housing initiatives for those affected by the storm. When asked why St. George is working to rebuild New Orleans when it could concentrate on its own needs, McLaren answered that by helping others St. George is given a mission that stands above selfish motives. Through the feeding ministry and other ministries, people may build community and become a part of what St. George's is, a place guided by heart (McLaren 2006).

### **Sarah Boelhower**

The third interview was conducted on March 23, 2006 with Mrs. Sarah Boelhower, a parishioner of St. George's Episcopal Church since the summer of 2005. Mrs. Boelhower was born and raised Episcopalian in Little Rock, Arkansas, where she lived for twenty-one years. Afterwards, she traveled to Atlanta and Baton Rouge before settling finally in New Orleans four years ago. She and her husband chose St. George's because the congregation, though smaller, reminded her of her childhood religious community. Another major factor in the Boelhower's decision was the large amount of young families with children in the parish; this was significant in that Mrs. Sarah was expecting the birth of her daughter, Elizabeth, and wanted to insure a healthy environment for her child (Boelhower 2006).

When asked why she was a member of the Episcopal denomination, Mrs. Boelhower had much to say. First of all, she commented that she had been born and raised in the Episcopal Church and had come to love it. She had spent some time in the Methodist faith, but the Episcopal denomination offered the tradition, structure, and Eucharistic celebration she sought. Also, she saw flexibility in the Episcopal Church, which could be formal or informal and seemed open to different interpretations. She explained that her denomination's belief system offered the "freedom to choose and have some different beliefs and not be judged on that" (Boelhower 2006).

As the interview progressed, Hurricane Katrina and its impacts on Mrs. Boelhower and her family were discussed. At first, she, like Karen Mackey, thought Katrina was going to hit Florida, but when the storm headed for New Orleans, she, her husband, and her three and half week old daughter left for Baton Rouge taking with them all of the family's financial information, photos, and insurance papers. After the storm hit and no one knew the length of time it would take before residents would be allowed to return to New Orleans, Sarah and her daughter, Elizabeth, went to stay with family in Iowa until Thanksgiving, while her husband went back to work and returned to the city on October 1. The Boelhower house received damage from the storm, including minor flooding, wind damage, and mold; however, Sarah was optimistic and called her situation "lucky" in that she still had a home. Post-Katrina New Orleans for Sarah "is getting better" in that the city is no longer vacant. She believes the college students returning in January had a major impact on the spirit of New Orleans being revitalized, and as for her involvement with St. George's and observations on the changes taking place, she noted that, despite decline in the number of parishioners, she is hopeful for

the parish and is thankful that it has given her a place to give back to the community through its feeding ministry. Having service in the basement is temporary, and she is excited about the improvements taking place while renovations continue. Thus, Sarah Boelhower maintains an optimistic outlook for New Orleans and hopes to rebuild with heart (Boelhower 2006).

## CONCLUSION

St. George's Episcopal Church truly is rebuilding with heart. By taking the disaster of Katrina and seeing it as a way to improve themselves and the community, the parishoners triumph despair and attain an optimistic view of the world. Through the Dragon Café feeding ministry and other plans for rebuilding and revitalizing New Orleans, St. George's Episcopal Church also grows internally and is able to express its vision externally with greater depth and clarity. With strong leaders, like Karen Mackey and Fr. Christopher McLaren, and committed congregants, like Sarah Boelhower, St. George Episcopal Church is sure to flourish in this post-Katrina New Orleans.

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