

Honors World Religions
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St. Charles Avenue Baptist Church
7100 St. Charles Avenue
New Orleans, LA, 70118

Together in Faith

The Religious Responses of St. Charles Avenue Baptist Church To Hurricane Katrina

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When a disaster strikes a community, many question their religious faith. Some may even begin to doubt their belief in a higher power in the universe. Hurricane Katrina shattered the lives of many people residing in the Gulf Coast, especially those living in the city of New Orleans. The storm's destruction has caused lasting effects, and this disaster has affected religious congregations as well. The members of St. Charles Avenue Baptist Church will not soon forget the devastation left by the hurricane. Although their lives have been disrupted and homes may have been wrecked, their spirits and their faith were not shattered; these intangible things remain intact, alive and well in the members of this vibrant congregation. Through a solid foundation of unwavering faith and a positive attitude of togetherness, the members of St. Charles Avenue Baptist Church continue to piece houses, lives, their church, and the city of New Orleans back together.

BRIEF HISTORY OF THE BAPTIST RELIGION

There are several views regarding the origins of the Baptist movement. One view is that Baptists began as separatists in the Puritan movement, which sought to reform or separate from the Church of England (which they considered corrupt) in the 1600s. In 1609 John Smyth and a group of separatists founded the General Baptist Church in the Netherlands. In 1616 Henry Jacob led a group of Puritans in England with a Calvinist theology to form a congregational church; this church would eventually become the Particular Baptists in 1638 under the leadership of John Spilsbury. Both groups had members who sailed to America as pilgrims to avoid religious persecution in England and Europe and who started Baptist churches in the early colonies. The Particular and General Baptists would disagree over Arminianism (a sixteenth-century theology that disputes Calvinist predestination theology and states that human free will is compatible with God's sovereignty) and Calvinism (the doctrines of John Calvin, which emphasize the omnipotence of God and salvation of the elect by God's grace alone) until the formation of the Baptist Union of Great Britain (for the purpose of missionary work) in the 1800s under Andrew Fuller and William Carey. American Baptists soon followed suit (McBeth 1979).

While this is the most common view, held by most modern Baptists, other views about the origins of the Baptist religion persist. Landmarkism is a name that arose out of a controversy

within the Southern Baptist Convention in the 1800s. The controversy surrounded the publication of a paper by James Pendleton called “An Old Landmark Reset,” which dealt with the concepts central to the Landmarkist view. In the Landmarkist view, Baptist churches and traditions predate Catholicism, and have been in existence since the time of John the Baptist and Jesus Christ. Advocates believe that Baptist traditions have been passed down through a succession of visible communities of Christians that were Baptist in doctrine and practice, but not necessarily in name (Wikipedia contributors 2006).

A third view is that Anabaptists, a group in the 1500s that rejected infant baptism and “rebaptized” members as adults, were influential in the development of many Baptist communities. Though the names suggest they have much in common, Anabaptists and Baptists differed on many issues, such as pacifism (Wikipedia contributors 2006).

Baptist churches have no central governing authority, resulting in a wide range of beliefs among various Baptist churches. However, there are some central beliefs common to most Baptist churches. Baptists believe that the Bible is the only authoritative resource for God’s word. Baptist churches generally have congregationalist church governance, which means that administration, leadership, and policy are usually agreed upon by the members of each individual congregation. Baptists also share a belief in the Protestant concept of the “priesthood of all believers,” meaning that each and every Christian has direct access to God and His word in the Bible without the aid of a hierarchy of priests. Two ordinances, believer’s baptism and communion, are usually performed on a regular basis at each church. Also, Baptists believe that each individual has the freedom to choose what his or her soul dictates is right, and is responsible to no one but God for this choice. The members of the Baptist religion have played a role in the historical struggle over the notion of separation of church and state, and still do today. Finally, most Baptist churches recognize two offices: the pastor, whose main duty is to relay a sermon each week, and deacon, who assists the pastor with the members’ needs (Wikipedia contributors 2006).

BRIEF HISTORY OF ST. CHARLES AVENUE BAPTIST CHURCH

St. Charles Avenue Baptist Church, located at 7100 St. Charles Avenue in New Orleans, has a rich history, reaching back to the nineteenth century. On the 16th of April in 1885, members of Coliseum Baptist Church began a Baptist mission located in unused servant’s quarters situated on the corner of Maple Street and Cherokee Street. Thirteen years later, on November 16, 1898, a group of 26 founding members created the Carrollton Baptist Church. In 1901 New Orleans annexed the city of Carrollton. The members of Carrollton Baptist Church purchased land on the corner of St. Charles Avenue and Hillary Street, and the congregation decided to change their name to St. Charles Avenue Baptist Church. In 1924 the land on the corner of St. Charles Avenue and Audubon Street was purchased, and two years later, the church relocated to its present site (St. Charles Avenue Baptist Church 2002).

Over the years, the church established itself as instrumental in the development and progress of the New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary, the Southern Baptist hospital, and many of the Baptist Home Mission agencies located in the city of New Orleans. St. Charles Avenue Baptist Church has always cultivated an emphasis and deep interest in both home and foreign missions. For instance, over 50 foreign missionaries have been members of the church (St. Charles Avenue Baptist Church 2002).

Although St. Charles Avenue Baptist Church is a relatively small congregation, its innovation and resourceful leadership have made it significant in the Baptist community. For example, the church has often invited women to serve in important leadership positions. In 1971 the church became the first Baptist church in the state of Louisiana to start ordaining women as deacons. Soon afterwards, in 1980, the church became the first Baptist congregation in Louisiana to ordain a woman to the Gospel ministry (St. Charles Avenue Baptist Church 2002). St. Charles Avenue Baptist Church pronounces that it strives to build and sustain an attitude of openness and a spirit of acceptance in order to live and affirm the true Baptist ideals. In a business session conducted on May 27, 2001, St. Charles Avenue voted on and accepted a decision to end affiliation with the Southern Baptist Convention (St. Charles Avenue Baptist Church 2002).

St. Charles Avenue Baptist Church's key beliefs include priesthood of the believer, and individual freedom, using the Bible as one's "textbook." Also, the church members agree upon the principles of separation of church and state, as well as autonomy of the local church (St. Charles Avenue Baptist Church 2002).

IMPACT OF KATRINA ON THE CONGREGATION AND ITS MEMBERS

Hurricane Katrina impacted the citizens of New Orleans in many ways, most visibly, in the physical damage to buildings and property. The actual structure of St. Charles Avenue Baptist Church sustained a minimal amount of damage compared to other houses and properties that were completely demolished by the storm. A door leading into the sanctuary of the church remains boarded up. But to look at the church from the outside, one would hardly think that a hurricane had recently devastated surrounding areas. The church remains a beautiful, red brick building, with little adornment on the outside of the building. Steep steps lead up to the sanctuary where worship services are held. To the right of the sanctuary is a pretty courtyard with flowers and a swing set for children. The interior of the sanctuary also remains intact, with natural light cascading over the bright white walls of the room where worship services are held (Curran 2006). Congregation and choir member Darla Rushing spoke fondly of this quiet place of worship: "The sanctuary is a very beautiful place to me. The natural light makes it just glowing when we have our morning services" (Rushing 2006).

However, the roof of the building was indeed damaged by the wind and rains of Katrina. In describing the Spanish and Baroque architecture of her church, Darla Rushing noted that the congregation is having their tile roof replaced. She said, "You know, that was really a gift from Katrina, because we were struggling to figure out how we were going to pay to replace the roof, and now our insurance is going to pay for it" (Rushing 2006)!

Clearly, Hurricane Katrina left its mark not only on the houses and buildings of New Orleans, but also on the lives and spirits of the people who call this city their home. The hurricane affected the congregation of St. Charles Avenue Baptist Church as a whole, as well as individual members of the church. Pastor Steven Meriwether spoke of the impact on his congregation members, and recalled that all but about six of the members decided to evacuate. Because the members of this congregation ended up scattered throughout the country, a couple of members, who were in Houston with access to the Internet, set up a blog site in mid-September to locate and check on the various families and individuals of the congregation. Within about a month following Katrina, almost fifty percent of the people of the church had made contact either by phone or by the blog website. In a way, said Pastor Meriwether, the site acted as a "virtual church" (Meriwether 2006a).

Katrina affected some of the members and the staff of St. Charles Avenue Baptist Church in very dramatic ways. "I didn't know this at the time," explained Pastor Meriwether, "but our custodian.... spent almost two days on her rooftop before being rescued" (Meriwether 2006a). A deacon of the church, H. Jac McCracken, said in an interview that his home was completely flooded (McCracken 2006). Various members of the church lost houses and suffered damage to their own personal property, and Pastor Meriwether noted that over forty families in the congregation were directly affected by the storm, and their needs were still being addressed. Also, because finances had to be adjusted and the budget had to be reduced this year, some staff members had to be let go (Meriwether 2006a).

There were fortunate members of the congregation whose homes were not damaged, but these members have suffered psychologically. In a sermon entitled "Feeling Guilty Can Be Good for You," delivered on February 12, 2006, Pastor Meriwether spoke about guilt. Guilt that brings about the consideration of others is good, he remarked. Guilt also motivates us to show others we care and sincerely wish to mend our wrongs. This sermon focused on guilt made much sense in the aftermath of Katrina, for many whose homes and possessions are intact feel a strong sense of "survivor guilt." They ask themselves, why did I survive when my neighbor did not? Why did my house not flood when so many others' homes did? Although it may be uncomfortable, Pastor Meriwether asserted that this clearly makes us more aware of how others are feeling and through the guilt we are motivated to show others we care, which could translate into participating in post-Katrina good works (Curran 2006). Indeed, Darla Rushing revealed her own feelings of guilt in an interview. "Once we found out there wasn't a whole lot wrong with [our house]...then, I was wondering, 'Oh my God, why am I so lucky? How can I be this lucky? And, [I was] feeling a lot of guilt about all my friends [whose homes had been damaged]" (Rushing 2006). So, even those members who did not experience the physical damage Katrina created still suffer in feeling guilty about their good fortune.

The church reopened its offices in New Orleans on October 4, 2005. Worship services began on Sunday, October 16. Professor Jac McCracken noted that when he arrived back in New Orleans to attend a worship service on the 23rd of that month, he "was very much amazed" to see so many congregation members in attendance; he estimated that about eighty percent was present on that Sunday morning (McCracken 2006).

RESPONSES OF THE CONGREGATION AS A WHOLE TO KATRINA

The aftermath of Katrina still vibrates through the worship services at St. Charles Avenue Baptist Church. In the service on the Sixth Sunday after Epiphany, the effects of Katrina were apparent in Pastor Meriwether's pastoral prayer. He spoke of some people who have resumed a sense of normalcy in life, while others are stranded and "still wait." His prayer was for those who are waiting to resume their lives; he asked the Lord to replenish their reserves. "Fill us to the brim," he said. "Our thirsty neighbors who crave balance will drink from our cups and bloom again. To our neighbor, You send us. In Jesus' name, Amen." Those who still suffer from the aftershocks of Katrina are very present in the minds and hearts of this congregation (Curran 2006).

During another worship service, Pastor Meriwether's sermon was entitled "God on Trial." He repeated this phrase throughout his sermon: "Nature mourns for lost good." The hurricanes were not God's punishment upon the Gulf Coast. Pastor Meriwether said, "God abhors hurricanes, [and] any force that shatters living souls for that matter. For in God's sight, there are no spare

lives” (Meriwether 2006b). According to Pastor Meriwether, God does not see any good in lost souls. Instead, “like epidemics and viruses, hurricanes are the result of a fallen creation... God so loves the world that he will rescue the beauties of creation from the torments of fallen nature. God is doing this through his Son. Jesus...is saving us” (Meriwether 2006b). For the members of St. Charles Avenue Baptist Church, God is not a punishing, vengeful God, and He truly cares about each and every human life.

In addition to the responses to the disaster found in worship services, this Baptist congregation on St. Charles Avenue is participating actively in the rebuilding efforts of their own church as well as the city of New Orleans. Of course, Pastor Meriwether made it clear that the first focus since reopening was, and remains, the families and staff of the congregation who may need help or money. The deacons of the church compiled a list of needs of the church members, and the congregation as a whole raised money in order to help these friends and neighbors. With the monies raised, a doctor was able to buy the sports coat he needed to get back on his feet and go back to work. For those families who have lost “everything,” the money raised was used for counseling. The community has also participated in gutting some houses of members whose homes might have been flooded or damaged (Meriwether 2006a).

Darla Rushing and Professor McCracken are both voluntary members of the congregation’s Mission Action Committee, which has played a large role in deciding what projects and activities the church can participate in to help in the rebuilding process. St. Charles Avenue Baptist Church and its members have housed relief workers and aid groups from out of town who have come to help in rebuilding. Many of these are church groups from Baptist congregations around the country. Darla Rushing spoke of one group from South Dakota who, in addition to sending groups down to help out, sent \$12,000 in cash to help the church in their relief efforts (Rushing 2006). H. Jac McCracken insisted that St. Charles Avenue Baptist Church must contribute “in anyway we can” to the rebuilding process, citing hands-on work, such as gutting homes, as one way that the members of his congregation can continue to respond to this disaster (McCracken 2006).

INTERVIEWS

Pastor Steven Meriwether

Pastor Steven Meriwether had an interesting Katrina experience to share. He decided to stay in town with some of the older women of the congregation, for it would not have been easy for these women to evacuate. They rode out the storm together in one woman’s apartment. He said that during the storm, all of them really felt as though they had “dodged a bullet” (Meriwether 2006a). But by Tuesday evening, with the radio blasting reports of looting at them constantly, Pastor Meriwether decided it was time to leave. On Wednesday morning, he and the women left the city of New Orleans and headed to Baton Rouge to “set up shop.” He stayed in a spare bedroom in someone’s home (Meriwether 2006a).

A strong sense of faith, as well as his responsibilities as a spiritual leader, had strong influences in creating Pastor Meriwether’s own religious responses to Hurricane Katrina. He felt a strong sense of support from other Christians in Baton Rouge and around the country, and spoke highly of the blog website as a relieving method of making contact with his congregation to make sure they were all right. When asked whether he questioned his faith as a result of his hurricane experiences, Pastor Meriwether answered with a plain “no.” For him, worship every

Sunday nurtures and strengthens him in the recovery process. “Stepping into that building...I’m stepping into something that’s physically larger than me. And this reminds me that it’s not just me in the world, and that I worship a God that contains me” (Meriwether 2006a). Pastor Meriwether connotes the worship services of his congregation with joy, but it is also a time to voice laments, and “you don’t have to pretend or deny your grief.” Pastor Meriwether tells those congregation members suffering from “survivor’s guilt” to allow themselves to feel the guilt, but to realize also how God can use them in this time of so much need (Meriwether 2006a).

Pastor Meriwether voiced concern about racial unrest in New Orleans, calling it “raw,” and saying that he sees much distrust between African American and white citizens. Pastor Meriwether said that “obviously, the biggest physical threat is the levees,” which he believes is a problem that must be amended. As for his hopes for the rebuilding of New Orleans, Pastor Meriwether was clear that the education system must be reformed and redirected. Also, the fiscal threat in the city should be corrected by economic steps, such as tax reform, and better city governance (Meriwether 2006a).

Darla Rushing

Darla Rushing, a librarian at Loyola University New Orleans Monroe Library, had her own unique storm experience. Her husband was out of town at their cabin in Colorado, and although she had never evacuated before, this time she did: “things looked pretty bad, and I had woken up early that morning [Sunday], and that’s when I heard about the mandatory evacuation” (Rushing 2006). On Sunday, she and colleague evacuated together in her car, and they stayed with her cousin in Monroe, Louisiana. After a few days, when it was clear that no one was going to be able to get back into the city for a while, Darla and her colleague drove the distance to the cabin in Gunnison, Colorado where her husband was. Darla ended up traveling with Father Kevin Wildes, S.J., the president of Loyola University, during the months of September and October for part of her stay in Colorado. In Gunnison, she and her husband felt at home, and attended a United Church of Christ congregation, and the members there “were so comforting, and they donated to our church at home,” Darla remarked (Rushing 2006).

Darla Rushing described St. Charles Avenue Baptist Church as a place full of warmth, comfort, and “close friendships that persist across time and distance.” Hurricane Katrina may have caused psychological and emotional turmoil for her, but her faith is still intact. She, too, did not question her faith. She says that she felt “angry, angry, angry with...people who were talking about New Orleans people being bad people and poor and depraved and looters...and I was so angry that that was the perception” (Rushing 2006). Although Darla said that Katrina did not cause any religious revelations for her, the storm did clarify for her what she really wants from life, and things she might like to change, such as the fact that she and her husband live so far away from their adult children. As a member of the Mission Action Committee, Darla participates in helping to house relief groups from out of town. “Personally, what I do for the group is feed them...so I regret that I’m not able to help [due to her physical health], and my husband and I are on the fringes, and we feel bad about that” (Rushing 2006). She and her husband are also housing a Loyola law student, who is not paying rent. For Darla, attending worship services is the “thing that keeps me uplifted” (Rushing 2006).

Darla explained that she doesn’t believe in a God that “targets anybody. Forces of nature are forces of nature.” She has many fears and concerns about the rebuilding of New Orleans. She worries that construction companies hoping to make a profit will build high rises along the river.

She calls the river a “life-giving force” for New Orleans. In terms of how New Orleans can recover from so much destruction, Darla fears that the devastation is so vast that there may be no way to truly recover. She sees that there seems to be “no national will to help us” anymore. As for her hopes for New Orleans, she hopes that people won’t rebuild in low-lying areas, and that health care in the city will soon return to pre-storm status. Darla still sees her church as “such a wonderful community...I wish more people knew about it” (Rushing 2006).

H. Jac McCracken

H. Jac McCracken, a music professor at Loyola University New Orleans College of Music, spoke about his vivid memories of worship services at St. Charles Avenue Baptist Church, where he is a deacon and a choir member, and how he has always felt a great sense of “belonging” in that community. Professor McCracken evacuated before the storm, leaving on Saturday and going to Montgomery, Alabama “thinking that if worst came to worst, at least I’d be heading in the right direction, which is toward my mother’s home in North Carolina...and certainly, that’s where I ended up” (McCracken 2006). And, of course, since he ended up staying in the town he grew up in, he felt quite at home, and had a very strong community there who supported him. At his home church in Oak City, North Carolina, the congregation members there “were all immediately concerned about what they could do...and after about a month, they collected an offering for me, which had funds for me to buy clothes...so that was really quite special.” In returning to New Orleans, Professor McCracken has found the members of his congregation at St. Charles Avenue Baptist Church to be “very supportive, and many of our members offered donations to those of us who lost our homes” (Professor McCracken’s home on Elba Street in the Broadmoor neighborhood was basically destroyed). He also said that of major importance to him was that recently, “a volunteer group from New Hampshire came, and they gutted my house. And that’s a huge relief, I can’t tell you...and enormous weight off when that one step is done” (McCracken 2006)!

Like his friend Darla Rushing and his pastor in the congregation, Professor McCracken revealed that he did not at all question his faith as a result of his hurricane experience. “As a matter of fact,” he said, “it reinforced it.” He also noted that “it’s a relief in some ways to know that you can survive without a lot of baggage or ‘stuff’.... The things that I treasure the most were never endangered by the flood to begin with. What I have lost that I really regret is friendships, contacts, people moving away...and those things are irretrievable.” In his roles as a member of the Mission Action Committee and also as a deacon, Professor McCracken said that “we’re dedicated to getting the church back onto firm financial footing,” and to bringing back those staff members who had to be let go. St. Charles Avenue Baptist Church certainly nurtures and strengthens Professor McCracken. He said, “I really believe that people have been praying for me, and I can feel that” (McCracken 2006).

For Professor McCracken, his religious outlook does not inform how he understands the meaning of the devastation of New Orleans. “Things like this have always happened, and they always will,” he noted matter-of-factly. He believes that there have been massive failures in leadership in government, and he fears that if these failures continue, there will be no New Orleans to rebuild. His immediate response to a question regarding how his religious community can contribute to the rebuilding efforts in New Orleans was, “In any way we can.” As for his hopes for the city, Professor McCracken envisions that over the next ten years, about half the homes in Broadmoor will have to be demolished, and he hopes that there will be a way to retain

the spirit of his neighborhood. He also thinks that New Orleanians, now more than ever, have to be responsible citizens, especially in terms of voting. “I don’t know of a single person in my church that is not planning on voting in this mayoral election!” exclaimed Professor McCracken. “And of course in every service,” he concluded, “the prayers of the people are targeted toward the suffering still ongoing around here” (McCracken 2006).

CONCLUSION

Although they have expressed doubts and fears, concerns and guilt, the members of St. Charles Avenue Baptist Church will keep on piecing houses, lives, their church, and the city of New Orleans back together, for their faith is unwavering, and the church is the place where they find solidarity and companionship. Pastor Meriwether cares deeply about the fates of his congregation’s members, and he does his part to encourage them, and to calm their worrying minds, and to open their souls to how God can use them. For Darla Rushing, the church has been the most constant thing in her life in New Orleans, and it still is. She finds solace and peace in singing in the choir, and for her, music relates her to a higher power. The warmth and comfort of her congregation persist ever more following the destruction brought by Katrina. H. Jac McCracken is thankful for all that his congregation is doing for him, and the congregation’s prayers and support have surely made a difference to him in this time of need. The city of New Orleans should follow the example set by this congregation on St. Charles Avenue, and go forward in the rebuilding process, together, in faith.

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