

Honors World Religions
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Celebration Church
2701 Transcontinental Drive
Metairie, LA 70006

Full Speed Ahead

Celebration Church's Response to Disaster

Rose Fienman



The relief center at the Airline Drive site on February 18, 2006. Photo courtesy of Rose Fienman.

On August 29, 2005, New Orleans and the Gulf Coast region were battered by a category three storm, Hurricane Katrina. Many residents, who had evacuated prior to the storm, watched the grim, live newscasts from all over the country. Floodwaters from broken canal levees choked the city, and many people lost homes, possessions, and businesses. Many people lost their lives. During the storm, houses of worship were not spared floodwaters and wind damage. Once the storm had passed, the enormous task of rebuilding the region became apparent, as well as the immediate need for emergency aid. People from all over the region and country joined the relief effort as soon as it was possible. Though Celebration Church did not emerge from Hurricane Katrina unscathed, the congregation is making a dedicated effort to reach out to the greater New Orleans area in the aftermath of the storm.

Celebration Church is a large, non-denominational, evangelical Christian worship center located in Metairie, Louisiana, which is a suburb to the west of New Orleans. The congregation sustained damage at their main church facility, and many of the congregants are still displaced across the nation. Celebration Church has set up a relief center that has served thousands of people. The congregation is committed to offering both physical and spiritual aid during this time of need in New Orleans. The congregation as a whole has experienced devastation and loss, but the members are still actively committed to social service and being an integral part of the rebuilding effort. The members of Celebration Church are inspired through their faith to reach out to others, and make a difference in the “new” New Orleans.

CHRISTIAN CONTEXT

Christianity is one of the world’s largest religions. It grew out of Judaism during periods of change and reform within the Jewish life and faith, between 300 BCE and 200 CE (White 2004, 16). Jesus was born between 7 and 4 BCE, and he was indeed Jewish. During his time, there were many people preaching the word of God in their own interpretations because the political unrest at the time provided a receptive environment (White 2004, 12, 14). It appears that the historical Jesus was a “charismatic preacher” in the eyes of some people, and “a magician or miracle worker” by other people. He was also seen as a prophet. “Some thought that Jesus was the *messiah*, a king like David of old, reborn to lead the nation of Israel” (White 2004, 13-14).

“Christianity did not exist for perhaps two generations after his [Jesus’] death” (White 2004, 12-13). The term “Christians” came from the Greek term *christianoï*, which means “partisans or proponents of Christ” (White 2004, 121-22). In the beginning, this term was often used in a negative sense.

One of the most important beliefs in Christianity is that of the Holy Trinity: the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit; “the oneness and differentiation of God within his own eternal Being as Father, Son and Holy Spirit” (Torrance 1996, 1). In this “knowing of the Triunity of God we [Christians] engage in a knowing in which we move from the ‘whole’ to the ‘parts’ to the ‘whole’”; “the oneness of the Trinity is a three-in-oneness, that is, a wholeness which includes the three divine Persons, such that each divine Person is himself whole God” (Torrance 1996, 29). In Christianity, the belief is that Jesus Christ is the son of God and “at once the complete revelation of God to man” (Torrance 1996, 29).

Today, Christianity is a world-wide religion, with people practicing in diverse ways in many countries. Celebration Church is a non-denominational, evangelical, conservative charismatic congregation. Evangelism in Christianity is defined as

a largely Protestant movement that emphasizes: (1) the Bible as authoritative and reliable; (2) eternal salvation as possible only by regeneration (being “born again”), involving personal trust in Christ and in his atoning work; (3) a spiritually transformed life marked by moral conduct and personal devotion, such as Bible reading and prayer; and (4) zeal for evangelism and missions (Marsden and Svelmoe 2005, 5: 2887).

At the root of evangelical theology is the belief in “the sole authority of the Bible and the necessity of personal trust in Christ” (Marsden and Svelmoe 2005, 5: 2887). Evangelicalism is a very large movement in the United States (Marsden and Svelmoe 2005, 5: 2891). All this information can be summarized to imply that evangelical Christians are looking to spread Christianity and the Bible and try to lead a life with a strong concentration and belief in Jesus Christ.

Celebration Church is also conservative charismatic (Fienman 2006b). Charismatic Christianity is often used interchangeably with Pentecostal Christianity, but Celebration Church does not hold a belief in glossolalia (speaking in tongues), a belief which is typical in Pentecostal churches (Fienman, 2006b; Anderson 2005, 10: 7028). Worship in charismatic Christianity “provides the believer with an opportunity for individual expression, forges an emotional bond with the spiritual community, [and] brings consolation and assurance” (Anderson 2005, 10: 7032).

HISTORY OF CELEBRATION CHURCH

Celebration Church began in 1988 as a small group of people meeting in a private home “to pray for revival and to seek the Lord’s direction in finding or forming a church” (Celebration Church 2005a). As more and more people joined, the worship was moved to larger homes, and the church was officially formed in September 1989. The current senior pastor, R. Dennis Watson, was hired in November 1989, and the church took the name Celebration Church in December of the same year. “In January of 1990, the church chose to affiliate with Southern Baptists in order to support their world-wide missions ministry” (Celebration Church 2005a). The Southern Baptist Convention is “the largest of American evangelical groups” (Marsden and Svelmoe 2005, 5: 2891).

Celebration Church experienced rapid growth in the size of the congregation. The church leased and subsequently purchased a space in Metairie, before moving their 2001 Airline Drive location in October 1996. The Airline Drive property is located in a shopping complex. “After renaming the shopping center, Celebration Center, the church began the process of renovating the church facility and making plans to transform eventually the entire shopping center into ‘need-meeting’ ministries”(Celebration Church 2005a). Pre-Katrina, the Airline Drive location housed the worship center, as well as several other Celebration-owned and operated entities, such as a bookstore and a coffee shop (Celebration Church 2005a).

In August of 2005, before Hurricane Katrina, Celebration Church decided to merge with the Crescent City Baptist Church, located at 2701 Transcontinental Drive in Metairie, Louisiana (Fienman 2006d). “Everyone [from both churches] was united in this merger” (Leverett 2006). One congregation voted 92 percent in favor of the merger and the other was 96 percent in favor (Leverett 2006). This merger turned out to be beneficial for both churches after Katrina.

The worship style at Celebration Church is very interactive and enthusiastic. Much of the prayer is conducted through music, and the band and choir are a large part of the worship

services. The sermons tend to include audio-visual components and the church seems to relate well to modern life, especially in the changed city of New Orleans (Fienman 2006a; Fienman 2006b). Celebration Church also has active cell groups, called Life Groups. These are Bible-study groups composed of people in the same age range with similar life experiences. The Life Groups incorporate worship through music, discussions of the Bible, and sharing prayers with one another. People also share stories of the impact of God in their recent lives. The main purpose of these groups is to help foster community (Fienman 2006c).

IMPACT OF KATRINA

The Airline Drive location of Celebration Church sustained considerable damage from floodwaters, which stood at five feet for over two weeks (Watson 2006). The worship center had to be gutted. The inside of the worship center was painful to see, the cross was still hanging from the wall but the entire room was bare. There were leaves and debris on the floor and it was a depressing sight (Fienman 2006d). The congregation was displaced all over the nation; the three people interviewed were in three different locations during the evacuation. The congregation is also much smaller in this post-Katrina world. Before the hurricane, around 3,000 people were members of Celebration Church and “we [Celebration Church] are now [at] about 55 percent of our pre-Katrina weekend attendance” (Watson 2006).

The “weekend Katrina hit is the first official weekend that the two churches [Crescent City Baptist and Celebration] were officially one church” (Leverett 2006). This caused added complications to the merger and caused some from Crescent City Baptist, the merging church, to feel less connected upon returning to New Orleans (Leverett 2006). Celebration Church members were strongly affected by Hurricane Katrina, as were the majority of people living in New Orleans and in the Gulf Coast region.

RESPONSES TO KATRINA

Celebration Church members began responding to Hurricane Katrina immediately. There were several “cell groups that would go to Fort Worth and Dallas together and travel together” (Leverett 2006) during previous evacuations and they did the same during Katrina. The “church played a huge role in the whole hurricane situation” (Chennault 2006). The church’s website was used to help members find one another and reconnect while displaced all over the country. There was a specific form to give location and status. It was very important step in connecting with the church (Chennault 2006).

The congregation has been meeting for worship services at 2701 Transcontinental Drive in Metairie, which had previously been the site of the Crescent City Baptist Church. Services have been held there since September 25, 2005 (Watson 2006). The subject matter of the sermons does not ignore Hurricane Katrina at all; in fact, the congregation seems to be tackling the issue head on. One recent sermon focused on success and what it means to be successful, including how to emulate Jesus in daily life, especially in the recovering city of New Orleans (Fienman 2006a). Another recent sermon was entitled “Pursuing Our Destiny.” The sermon spoke of following Jesus in the rebuilding of the city and doing God’s work where it is most needed (Fienman 2006b). The “pastor’s sermons are geared towards healing and rebuilding and moving

on and staying strong” (Leverett 2006), which is helping to motivate the congregation in the relief effort.

In terms of immediate relief, “the church hit the ground running” (Leverett 2006). Celebration Church established a recovery ministry encompassing a relief center (clothing and food) and a free house gutting service. Celebration Church took advantage of their temporarily disabled Airline Drive location to set up a relief center in the large parking lot. Anyone with a Louisiana driver’s license can go there to receive emergency aid. The center is organized and run with the aid of lots of volunteers from around the nation, although it only takes about fifteen people to have the facility fully operational (Leverett 2006).

The center consists of a food tent, where people can obtain various food items (whatever has been donated) and bottled water. There is also a clothing tent, which has a variety of clothing for all ages. Blankets are one of the most popular items (Leverett 2006). The gutted shopping center area is being used as a warehouse for all the donations (Fienman 2006d). At some points, Celebration Church’s relief center has been “providing free humanitarian aid to 700-1,000 people on a daily basis” (Watson 2006) and feeding thousands of people a day. These numbers have decreased as the city has become more and more operational, in terms of grocery and retail stores reopening and electricity being restored throughout New Orleans (Leverett 2006).

This operation is somewhat unique. It is “one of two churches that I know of with a full functioning relief center that’s just solely church-ran” (Leverett 2006). The “church has definitely contributed what needs to be contributed and will continue to” (Chennault 2006) while the need is present. Judging from the amount of traffic at the center in February 2006, the need will be present for quite some time to come (Fienman 2006d).

However, the congregation also feels that it is important to give people the “prayers that they need” (Chennault 2006) in addition to taking care of physical and material needs. The center has brought in grief counselors to help people recover from Hurricane Katrina (Leverett 2006). As volunteers help people carry their materials to their cars at the relief center, the volunteers offer to listen to their stories and pray with them before they drive away (Leverett 2006). It is just as important to “emotionally and spiritually take care of folks” (Matthews 2006) as it is to feed and clothe them. It doesn’t matter if the person is a Christian or not: “my prayer still affects you because God still answers my prayers” (Chennault 2006).

Celebration Church can continue to aid the city of New Orleans by serving and helping people deal with the hurricane (Matthews 2006), and a main contribution that Celebration Church can offer New Orleans is “to be like Christ, and Christ was loving and he was patient and he was giving and he prayed for people” (Chennault 2006). The congregation is acting through their faith tirelessly to offer tremendous aid to New Orleans in this difficult time of need.

INTERVIEWS

Anthony Leverett

Anthony Leverett, also known as Tony, is the assistant director of the Airline Drive relief center, as well as a community pastor for Celebration Church. Before Hurricane Katrina, he was a student at New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary, as well as working at a hotel. He lived in the Gentilly area near the University of New Orleans with his wife. His neighborhood was

kind of a bright spot in a somewhat dangerous neighborhood and “one public tradition would be just be walking out in public and socializing that way” (Leverett 2006).

Celebration Church was and still is an important spiritual center for Leverett and his wife, as well as an important social center. The Life Group was especially important and remains important in forming relationships within the church. As a member of Crescent City Baptist Church, Leverett was somewhat concerned with “how the merger was going to unfold” because differences between Crescent City and Celebration, but since the hurricane, he has obviously become very involved at Celebration Church (Leverett 2006).

When Leverett first heard that Hurricane Katrina might be a threat to New Orleans, he immediately knew his wife would want to go, and she knew he would want to stay. They had only been married two and half months at the time. On Saturday, they went to the Baton Rouge area to his in-laws house. The “storm came through and the storm left and we went to bed Sunday night and woke up Monday morning and everything was gone” (Leverett 2006). The Gentilly neighborhood had sustained flooding from a canal breach and the apartment complex where Leverett lived had been damaged.

Celebration Church “did not play a firm role” for Leverett immediately after the hurricane because he was from the merging congregation. Celebration Church had been meeting in Baton Rouge after the storm, but Leverett and his wife did not find the community there that many others did. “Everyday we were just praying our hearts out” (Leverett 2006).

Leverett never questioned his faith during Hurricane Katrina and he considers his faith “most definitely stronger.” He has found a “deeper appreciation of God’s hand and the personal role He plays in our lives.” In this post-Katrina world, Leverett finds that he tends to “live more day to day now than before” and “value relationships more” because they had been torn away in the hurricane. He states that “God was not surprised by Katrina,” and he strives to show the good that has come from the hurricane: “never before has so many people been so open to prayer and help and connection.” Leverett’s hope for New Orleans is that “God will continue to move through its people” (Leverett 2006). He fully intends to stay here and rebuild.

Jaime Chennault

Another member of the congregation is Jaime Chennault. She lived in Kenner, Louisiana before Katrina and continues to live there now. Pre-Katrina, she had a group of friends from the church that she met primarily through her Life Group. They shared the “common bond of being Christians” (Chennault 2006) and none of her closest friends came back to New Orleans after the hurricane.

During the evacuation, Chennault and her fiancé traveled to Monroe, Louisiana to stay with her family. On top of the hurricane situation, Chennault was in the middle of planning her wedding. When the devastation of New Orleans became apparent, she thought she might have to elope with her fiancé in order to buy a new house somewhere else. “We’re Christians and don’t believe that we should live together before we’re married, if nothing else because of how it looks” (Chennault 2006).

Chennault was able to stay connected with her friends through prayer. “As Christians, that’s our peace, that’s our comfort.” Praying helped to alleviate feelings of helplessness because “prayer is the best thing you can do for someone.” Chennault reports, “I did not question my faith one bit.” However, her evacuation experience “made me more distant from my faith

because it was so hard to feel like I was alone with God.” Because she was staying in a house with twelve family members for a month, it was hard to have “alone time” with God, when she could hardly find a moment to herself (Chennault 2006).

Chennault spent some of the evacuation “learning more to rely on God” and her “focus [for the future] is definitely on how God’s going to rebuild and how God’s going to strengthen New Orleans and make it more of a city for God and less of a city for sin.” In terms of her own contribution to the relief effort, Chennault states that “my job was definitely still standing when I got back,” so she could not volunteer as much as she wanted. Chennault has “total hope” for the “new” New Orleans (Chennault 2006).

Paul Matthews

Paul Matthews is a senior at Tulane University and also involved with Celebration Church. He has lived in New Orleans for his whole life, mostly in the Uptown area, but most recently in the Seabrook/Gentilly area. He is active in a Christian group on Tulane’s campus. He thinks that a strength of Celebration Church is to “try to be a family” (Matthews 2006), even though it is so large.

Before Hurricane Katrina, Matthews evacuated to northeast Louisiana with some friends from school, while his mother traveled to Florida. Once school closed for the Fall 2005 semester, Matthews had to “step out on faith” when deciding to go to Baltimore to find a school. Everything eventually worked out for him to attend Bucknell University in Lewisburg, Pennsylvania. Matthews believes that “God has a reason for me to go to Bucknell” (Matthews 2006). He found a church that readily accepted him as a member of their congregation, and felt very welcome at Bucknell.

After finally returning to New Orleans, Matthews found it a very different place than the city he grew up in. “I say I’m from New Orleans, but I want to finish the sentence sometimes and say I’m from New Orleans pre-Katrina because I’m not from here.” In some ways, he feels like “a walking cultural artifact” (Matthews 2006).

He questioned his faith as a result of the hurricane and he has learned that “all this is nothing.” He states that “what I care about is relationships,” because material possessions can all be washed away. Matthews said that his religious outlook informs how he views Katrina: “God was just in what he did.” While Matthews states that “more people are open to God through this,” he stresses that those preaching religion should not “try to be holier than thou” (Matthews 2006).

Through his experiences with Hurricane Katrina, Matthews has learned that one should not “live to die” because one holds a belief in heaven, but that people should “live to live.” Matthews is unsure how much longer he will be residing in the New Orleans area: “if it was up to me I’d be going to Lewisburg, Pennsylvania [location of Bucknell University] when I graduate.” As a result of Hurricane Katrina, he hopes that “people would learn that there’s more to this life than what we have here” (Matthews 2006).

CONCLUSION

Celebration Church is making dedicated efforts in the recovery of the greater New Orleans area. The most obvious contribution is their relief center, but they are also attempting to cause change through prayer. The relief effort of the church is very much motivated by the collective

faith and belief in Jesus Christ and Christianity. The worship at Celebration Church is centered on the future of the city and helping to inspire the members of the congregation to aid in hurricane relief. Interviews with three members of the congregation reveal different hurricane experiences and current circumstances, but all three people are committed to doing as much as possible in the relief effort. Even though Celebration Church sustained significant damage as a result of the hurricane, the congregation is focused on moving forward. The church and congregation as a whole are looking towards the future of New Orleans. Rather than dwelling on the devastation of Hurricane Katrina, Celebration Church is working hard to help New Orleans thrive again.

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