

## **Responding to Katrina**

By Billie Chandler --October 2005 Pastor's Column

**"...as you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me."**

On August 27 I was in Birmingham Alabama. As I unpacked my bags, I flicked on the TV and heard that a huge hurricane was heading for New Orleans. Last year I saw an episode of the PBS program NOW that showed how environmental destruction of the Mississippi delta left New Orleans in danger of destruction by even a moderate hurricane. I recognized immediately the situation was grave.

The worst we experienced in Birmingham were downed trees and power outages. We weren't flooded like New Orleans: we were flooded with people fleeing the storm. The looks on their faces and the tension in their voices still haunt me. The stories in the hotel lobby of friends left behind were heartbreaking. One family told of leaving pets in a kennel on top of a table, then hearing that their neighborhood was flooded to the rooflines. I was surrounded by newly homeless people.

On TV I saw endless interviews with people stranded without transportation. What good is an evacuation order without an evacuation plan? After returning home I continued to be horrified as so many died waiting for rescuers that never came. These people come to me now in nightmares, but they will stay in my heart forever.

Then I saw a transformation in the news coverage that was as horrifying as the gruesome scenes: the poor black victims, and they were overwhelmingly poor and black, were transformed before our eyes into criminals. Curfews and shoot-to-kill orders were imposed on people merely trying to survive. Heightened security drew manpower away from rescue efforts, and evacuation centers were transformed into concentration camps. Police blocked bridges to prevent the poor black residents of New Orleans from flooding into the not-so-poor, not-so-black suburbs.

What destroyed New Orleans was not just the Hurricane. The destructive force of racism, cloaked in denial, has worked for decades compounding the poverty of the black parishes. The hurricane exposed the cancer. The hurricane also exposed the cancer in our national priorities. Our leaders pour out our resources and blood in Iraq but treated New Orleans with utter neglect.

Ordinary people have given generously for hurricane relief, and we must continue to give, but we must do more. We must confront the racism that alienates us from our neighbors in need. We must address the inequality that traps generations in poverty. We must build infrastructure that respects the environment and provides a safe and healthy place to live. We must build true community, not just buildings. And around the world we must make friends, not war.

For Jesus, the test of true spirituality was not words, or even beliefs, but actions toward

"the least of these my brethren." The "least of these" were abandoned to die in New Orleans. Spiritual values, on the national level, do not consist of professions of faith, but priorities and policies that value people.