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KATRINA SOUL SEARCH

Finding ourselves amidst the post-hurricane chaos

By

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Martin Schoffstall
& Seth Barnes

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KATRINA SOUL SEARCH

Finding ourselves amidst the post-hurricane chaos

INTRODUCTION

By Seth Barnes, Executive Director of Adventures In Missions

As I write this, it's been three weeks since Katrina. I've been to New Orleans twice and am doing OK. By that I mean, the city's throbbing pain hasn't overwhelmed me. A thirteen-year-old named Tony, whose house is in shambles, brought it near when his voice broke describing how he felt. As did Alice Adams, an older woman with no carpentry skills. She begged for help – she reached out through me and begged the Church for help. The mold on her home's walls was creeping higher. Her wet rugs needed to be torn out.

For a moment, Alice and Tony took on the face of New Orleans and came near my heart. Their pain went beyond the CNN reports and became three-dimensional. In responding, I moved from the posture of a passive observer, almost a voyeur, and became three-dimensional.

Yesterday I hopped a plane out of that city that is really just an oozing open sore, and within hours was in the sane oasis of my home. Last night while watching Monday Night football, my friend ventured a comment that touched the rawness of the place where Tony and Alice live in my memory.

"We can't all respond to this thing. We can't have a bunch of cowboys running around."

“That’s hardly the problem,” I said, “So few people have responded personally. If you sent me 500 cowboys tomorrow, I’d give them all drywall knives, divide them into ten groups, go to ten neighborhoods, and cut away wet drywall.”

“But it’s my impression that the Church has responded pretty well,” he persisted.

“Relative to what? The need is overwhelming. How many Alice’s are there tonight asking God for help? The Church is responding institutionally, but it’s up to each of us to respond personally.”

Specifically: after the drywall and carpet, there are roof repairs, and after securing homes, people need to walk a path that will fill them with love and hope again. And beyond that, fragmented and bitter communities need to be stitched together. The question of how you resurrect and sustain hope hasn’t begun to be answered.

Surprised at the edge in my voice as I spoke to my friend, I apologized to him for my passion and resumed watching football.

The danger of the calamity that is New Orleans is that we will collectively and permanently do what I did last night – return to our regularly scheduled programs. The danger is that it will go the way of the Tsunami or whatever the “disaster de jour” was before that.

New Orleans is different. It’s not just another FEMA project. A city twice the size of Nagasaki in 1945 has been devastated. An American city.

While the mainstream media has lost the plot, debating the nuance of words like “evacuee,” and passing the political blame for breached levees and bungled evacuations, the Church is in danger of missing its greatest moment since the Civil Rights movement.

Remember, Martin Luther King was a pastor. His marchers were congregation members. Their cause required an activist response by the body of Christ.

Justice and mercy exist at either extreme of the same continuum. The balance between them can only be maintained through an activist posture. But whereas the Civil Rights movement required the activism

of a just cause, Katrina requires the activism of a merciful heart.

These kinds of compelling opportunities only come along for the Church once in a generation. This is our moment. It will take at least three years to put many of New Orleans’ families back on their feet. We can’t switch the channels. We can’t look away from the Tonys and Alices. To do so would be to surrender the one great chance that we, as the body of Christ, may have in our lives to reaffirm our corporate identity as healers and difference-makers. It would be to turn our backs on our destinies.

By the time you read this, the drywall on most homes might be pared away. The roofs might be covered. But New Orleans’ pain will still be raw and the opportunities to touch it will be undiminished.

Adventures in Missions (AIM) exists to connect the Church to ministry. Like everyone, we had the opportunity to consider, “What is God asking us to do in response to Katrina?” Just as we still have that opportunity every new day we wake up.

This is the story of how AIM answered that question.

August 28, 2005

Some memories are indelible. Meeting that “special someone.” A call from a hospital emergency room in the middle of the night. Billy Graham’s voice at a Crusade saying, “Come. Come now. The buses will wait.” Smoke venting from the World Trade Center Towers. Hurricane Katrina.

We’ve heard enough of wind velocities, barometric pressure, paths, projections, and seen enough weather reporters standing in the rain. There is good news though! God is alive. He cares. He is bringing healing to the people who have been hurt so deeply. And He is using regular, average, normal people who have dedicated their lives to Him to do the job.

Life for millions would be normal again if this were merely a nightmare from which they could awake, rub their eyes, have a cup of strong coffee and go back into autopilot for the rest of their days. But, this nightmare was and is real. For some it might never end. All we can do is care and give aid, and offer to bring Christ into their lives.

This book is all about what happens when soldiers of Christ become His caregivers.

The Executive Team of Adventures in Missions (AIM) met on Wednesday, August 31st to seek God’s guidance on how He wanted AIM to be involved in the Hurricane Katrina relief efforts. The watery floods in New Orleans and the subsequent human floods at places like the Superdome could not be ignored — even though “that’s not our department.” The pictures of families stranded on rooftops, pleading for water and the basic essentials for life were overwhelming.

Our response began with AIM staff member, Ben Messner.

Ben Messner:

I am sitting in a hotel room in North Carolina on the final day of a men’s retreat. The past few days have been full of paintball, honest

sharing, steaks grilled over open fires and new friendships formed. The guys in the room with me are ahead of their time for sure when it comes to Kingdom accomplishment.

I am exhausted. I realize now that Janeen and I never really recovered from the last eighteen months in Africa. I could fall asleep and not wake up for days. At the same time, I feel my heart once again breaking for a needy people. For the last few hours, the TV has mapped out the possibility of the complete destruction of New Orleans. Hurricane Katrina is the name of the storm barreling toward over one million people.

The guys seem a bit casual about this situation. My heart is pounding. I know we need to pray. I call the guys together and we kneel by our beds and cry out to God for the salvation of the people in the path of Katrina. I know the Lord has already broken my heart for this deal.

My prayer is, “Lord, show me how to respond to this, as you desire.”

From Janeen Messner’s Journal:

I was sitting at a cozy coffee shop in Chattanooga enjoying spending time with my friend, Aimee. After a while, I called my husband, Ben, who was doing a retreat with some guys. They had planned on camping out overnight, but decided to go to a hotel instead because of expected rainfall caused by Hurricane Katrina.

I only spoke with Ben briefly, but I remember he mentioned how bad the hurricane could be and how he had been praying hard for God to divert its path away from where it could do a lot of damage. I had not seen or heard much news that weekend, so I didn’t think much more about it.

August 29, 2005

Janeen's Journal:

I drove back to Gainesville. About an hour into the trip, I hit a lot of rain and thought of Hurricane Katrina. I got home and met up with Ben. No one said much about the hurricane, so I figured that it must not have been as bad as people were thinking. We went out to dinner with some friends and prepared to get up early the next morning. We were scheduled to help provide leadership for a training camp for 13 students who were leaving soon for the mission field.

Ben Messner:

The retreat ended and we all took our wives out for dinner tonight. A random Asian food place was chosen and we piled into cars to go there. The rain that hammered us along the way was crazy. Tornadoes ripped through a nearby county destroying 30 homes. The effects of Katrina are felt all the way out here.

August 30, 2005

THE FIRST AIM TEAM RESPONDS

Ben accepted responsibility for a team scheduled to spend the next three months in various countries with AIM. He'll lead them to Atlanta for a three-day mission trip at a homeless shelter called "Blood n Fire" (B&F) before they go overseas.

By now, the levies had broken in New Orleans. The destruction was beyond imagination. Relief was needed badly and quickly. We, at AIM, considered sending a First Year Missions (AIM intern) team to New Orleans to serve.

We got flashbacks to the calamity and intensity that followed 9/11. There was nothing we could do in 2001. This time will be different. We knew God was calling us all to action.

We had given our word to minister at B&F. We needed to check with our contact there, Bill Britton, and make sure that we had a blessing to be released from our ministry there. Just in case. When we called, he said that we needed to make a decision within the next hour, so that he could make other arrangements.

We started making calls to people we knew in Louisiana and Mississippi. We called a few organizations that were helping with relief efforts, but we had no success with any of them. They either were not answering calls or said they had nothing arranged or organized. A couple of places took our name and number, but never returned our calls. After 45 minutes, we had made no progress; so, we met together again to pray.

There were many feelings and impressions that people had. The unifying call, however, was that we were to go to Atlanta and help at B&F. We knew we must stay open to the leading of the Holy Spirit. We knew that God could give us opportunities to help, even if it wasn't right away.

The team went to B&F and arrived around 4 pm. After settling in and having a quick meeting/tour, they served dinner in the shelter and

began building relationships with the people there. They met that evening and talked about possibilities for the following day.

Bill Britton said he was going to try to reach someone at the Salvation Army to see if we'd be able to help somehow with "Katrina" the next afternoon.

August 31, 2005

This turned out to be a day of prayer. We didn't gather together to tell God what we were going to do — we sought His will.

There was prayer in the Executive Team meeting. Afterward, it was clear that the Lord wanted us to submit AIM's resources to the "first responders" to this tragedy.

Samaritan's Purse began to refer people in need of housing to us. Calls began coming in. One of our staff members organized a database to match those who had room to spare with those who had nowhere to go. We could not keep up with the calls. Yet, even more had to be done.

Back in Atlanta, as we prayed and asked God for direction in the morning we believed we were to go to the Salvation Army center in Atlanta, but we still did not have the green light to go. So we carried on with our planned activity for the morning.

EVACUEES ARRIVE IN ATLANTA

We served breakfast at B&F. At around 9 a.m., we met together to go out into the city to practice "listening prayer" – that's when we try to be quiet before the Lord and listen to what is so often called His "still, quiet voice."

We all went in different directions in small teams. The idea was that we would listen to what God might be saying, whether it was to hang out with the folks who were traveling with us, to engage in conversation, or to quietly pray for whatever we felt God was asking us to bring before Him.

Eventually one group went to a park and met a man whose entire family lived in the Lower Ninth Ward of New Orleans. He was very worried about his family, especially his grandmother. They lived in one-story, small homes and he had not heard from any of them since Katrina had hit. He was holding a newspaper and staring at images of the damage. One of the photos was of his street immersed in deep

water. He lost his wife last year to cancer and said that he was at peace with what "Allah willed."

We knew evacuees were coming to Atlanta because we met some of them on MARTA. One family said that they lost everything in the hurricane. They all piled in their car with their pets and ended up in Atlanta. They also said that they were expecting 20 more relatives to arrive. They all were trying to fit into one apartment because their landlord was charging them so much.

A GOD STORY

When we got back together, we prayed again and this time we felt like we were to go to the Salvation Army. Bill told us that the Salvation Army (SA) headquarters was not far away. We liked the idea about going and decided to pray to see what God would say as we traveled there. We wanted His will more than our own. As we drove we still believed He was leading us there, so we went and showed up at the door, ready to help.

Bill and Ben went into the office to see what we could do. When they came out they said that we were going to drive to a different location because that was where help was needed most. The crazy thing was that the people inside the office already had the directions printed out in case a volunteer team showed up to help. They were that desperate.

OUR FIRST TASTE OF CHAOS

We arrived just as the evacuees started to pour into the area. Walking through the doors there, anyone could have felt the tension inside. The front room was filled with people who needed assistance because of Katrina. We later discovered that the police had arrived a few minutes before we got there to calm a man down. Evidently, he was upset because SA workers could not give him more and better food.

The SA staff was not ready for those first few overwhelming days of evacuees arriving, although they were working extremely hard and

doing all they could. Joy was the person we met. She connected us with the people who would direct us.

We were taken to the gymnasium where tables had been set up, all scattered and spread out. Then the SA leaders showed everyone the donated goods and asked us to make some sense of it all. We broke open box after box and put vegetables on one table, fruits on another, meats on another, beans and soups on another. Then there were the wonderful random donations of things that seemed to have no category. Corn and green beans overtook the place.

The rhythm of our system was broken after a couple hours of focused work. We heard the news that gas was running out and that it might be out for days. Prices were jumping to \$3 or \$4 a gallon, so our drivers took a break to fill up the vehicles. The Salvation Army asked us to return, if possible, the next day. We went back for three more days.

In debriefing that evening, we all felt the weight of Katrina in a much more tangible way. This was the first day we had met evacuees and seen the devastation and shock in their faces. We knew that the scope and effect of the storm was enormous and would take more work to heal than we could imagine.

September 1, 2005

A NEW DAY

We woke up energized and overwhelmed, looking forward to being able to help again at the Salvation Army (SA). It was as if living and eating in a homeless shelter was preparing us to better be able to serve the evacuees we met during the day. It gave us a taste of what it is like to have nothing.

After serving and eating breakfast at B&F, we went to the SA center that now had a big sign out front reading, "Hurricane Disaster Relief." Many more boxes were waiting to be doled out. Donations flooded in all day long. So did evacuees. Things were dragging along, however, because SA only had four staff caseworkers. They were nice, but they were just so outnumbered.

The waiting area was extended into the gym, where we were sorting donations. We had evacuees surrounding us as we worked. They waited and waited and some grew very irritated. Others were just tired and hungry. But nobody was able to grasp the enormity of what had just happened.

Sorrow was in the air we breathed. We felt it fall on us several times that day. We would glance over and see someone trying to fill out a form. It was no longer rational to ask for typical personal information such as address, profession or phone number. In fact, it was crazy. There was an artist who had just lost his entire studio, all his plans, work, tools, computer and home. How was he supposed to fill in the blanks? His whole life was now a blank that couldn't possibly be filled in.

People were being told it might be months before they could return home. But nobody even knew if they had a home left standing.

We paused a few times while sorting goods and went over to talk with people, to listen to the journey that brought them here and to share the weight of their pain. We prayed with a family who had a

baby born two weeks prior to Katrina. The baby was actually due the day Katrina hit but, as the grandma said, "He knew he had to get out early."

Something sparked in us today — it made us aware of our desire to be more involved in helping in this crisis. We processed that feeling much of the day.

BROKEN HEARTS

As our group drew together that night to pray we sensed that we gathered with broken hearts. We saw people of nearly every social class affected today. "We lost everything; we have nothing left to go back to." These horrible phrases pound us and are driven deep into our souls. But this is not "about us." We're the lucky ones. We haven't lost anything. Just the opposite. We have gained new insights into the suffering of man. And into Jesus Christ — who volunteered for action to save mankind.

Ben's Journal:

The Church is slow to respond thus far. It's as if the reality of this has not hit yet.

What will make that change? Talk won't change anything. We pray that God will use AIM to effectively serve the needy and to mobilize the church to respond.

This is a long-term disaster. Today, it was about manning the call center, sorting donations, counseling evacuees and praying. Next week, it will be about getting people settled into homes. The month after that it will be something different. Next year...

We are ready to go back tomorrow. No, not just ready. Excited to be used by the Shepherd to feed and love His sheep.

September 2, 2005

LIFE CAN CHANGE SO MUCH IN A WEEK.

Janeen's Journal:

After packing up our things, we left Blood and Fire. Ben and I knew that the next few days might be days of organizing and preparing for further involvement. Our drive was packed with friendly silence. We only spoke in scattered thoughts.

On Thursday of the next week, we were responsible for coordinating a "boot camp" for young adults (18-24) at AIM's headquarters in Gainesville. Ben began mentioning the idea of moving the upcoming training camp to Baton Rouge. I thought it would be great idea; perfect training grounds for intense ministry situations.

Everything at the Salvation Army (SA) seemed to be running so much better. There were many more volunteers. Large-scale systems were in place to manage all the donations. Evacuees were arriving in greater numbers. The SA folks really knew what they were doing now. Volunteers were still needed to be caseworkers and to do organizational tasks. We told the SA staff we'd come in early the next day.

A SURPRISE E-MAIL FOR THE MESSNERS

Ben Messner

Janeen and I finished with the AIM intern team this morning. At lunch, my phone kept ringing the whole time. The most random call was from Mark Almand, a recent acquaintance from the AIM network. He asked if Janeen and I were going to say "yes."

My response was, "Yes to what, Mark?" When he realized that I did not know what he was talking about, he

read an e-mail sent to me from Seth.

AIM was going to respond to the Katrina crisis in a big way, and I was the suggested leader of this response. I was freaked out by the opportunity and yet I wanted it at the same time. I told Mark I needed time to pray with Janeen.

A SURREAL MOMENT

By the time Ben and Janeen walked into the AIM office that afternoon, the word had spread that AIM was responding to the crisis and that they were the likely leaders. It was a surreal moment, almost like in the movies. Ben later reflected that it felt as if people peered out at them as they walked down the hallway to Seth's office so they could talk and pray together about how to respond.

AIM had sprung into action. Seth sent this memo less than a week after our busy, happy and meaningful annual staff retreat in Dahlonga, GA...

Since we left the retreat center, Hurricane Katrina has laid waste to the lives of hundreds of thousands. Because we exist to mobilize and equip the Church for missions and because we've done a lot of mission work in New Orleans, it was only natural for our leadership to consider how God would have us respond. We prayed about it and God told us to mobilize the Church for this particular mission. In the last two years, God used us to respond to the AIDS crisis in Swaziland and to the Tsunami; times of great human suffering cry out for the ministry of Jesus' people.

I took a call from a person who also felt God wanted him to help. He was a pastor who had buses waiting to head to Baton Rouge after the service on Sunday. Lots of people have that same desire to help.

In Baton Rouge, a city whose population has swelled by 150,000 in a few days, our good friends have been relaying

stories of all the broken people showing up with nothing but their despair. The needs in each place are as compelling as they are endless.

The word continues to spread. Nathan Clay just sent out an e-mail to the 25,000 people on our mailing list. Mark Lindberg designed a database to connect those needing housing with those offering their homes. Ben and Janeen are praying about doing the AIM intern training camp in Baton Rouge. Here in Gainesville, we have set up a “war room” with charts on it seeking to bring order out of the chaos.

America has never experienced a natural disaster of these proportions. The Church must rally. We at AIM must rally. Jesus will show Himself strong through many of you in the months to come. Many people have come to us and said, “How can I help?” We’re organizing as quickly as we know how. We need people to cover the phones. We need volunteers to do legwork in places like Baton Rouge and Houston. And, of course, we need prayer. Please contact us, if the Lord prompts you to help.

**Yours for the Kingdom,
Seth**

PREPARING FOR BATON ROUGE

Ben and Janeen had to decide quickly if we should relocate the First Year Missionary (AIM intern) training camp to Baton Rouge, as a relief team. In just a few days, 50 college-aged students preparing for 90-day trips to the uttermost parts of the earth for Christ would arrive at AIM Georgia for pre-field training. What would happen if we went to Baton Rouge? God seemed to be leading us there.

Janeen and Ben sat down with Seth in his office and informed him that they were ready to respond. They were tired but willing to lead the AIM intern teams out to Baton Rouge. As the decision to relocate

the camp spread through the office, the response was immediate.

We still did not know what to do about bringing all 70 people involved in the AIM intern training camp to Baton Rouge. It seemed crazy since all the preparation to that point revolved around thinking that the location would be Gainesville. Alli Mellon, the AIM staff member in charge of the trips, called. She was “with us” if the plans changed. Typical of her, but a relief anyway.

Another thing we had working in our favor was a church, River Community Church, that was welcoming us to come, stay on their property and minister out of there. A good friend of AIM’s, Steve Wallace, serves at the church and was helping us make connections.

Janeen’s Journal:

Again, we spent time asking God what we should do. This was the first night we felt very led to go to Baton Rouge.

Late that night the notification went out to the AIM intern’s by email: “Prepare for Baton Rouge, rather than Gainesville.”