

*“The devastation is greater than our worst fears.”*

Louisiana Governor **Kathleen Blanco**

## The Gulf Coast Disaster of 2005

### **Katrina**



**8/29/05**

### **Rita**



**9/24/05**

### **Wilma**



**10/24/05**

When Katrina made landfall at 6:10 AM CDT on August 29, 2005 as a Category 3 hurricane with sustained winds of 125 mph (205 km/h) near Buras-Triumph, Louisiana, hurricane-force winds extended outward 120 mi (190 km) from its center. A few hours later its landfall near the Louisiana/Mississippi border produced a record storm surge along the entire Mississippi and Alabama coastlines. The surge caused several breaches in levees around New Orleans. Most of the city was subsequently flooded as the breached drainage and navigation canals allowed water to flow from Lake Pontchartrain into low areas of the city and St. Bernard Parrish. The storm surge also devastated the coasts of Mississippi and Alabama, making Katrina the most destructive and costliest natural disaster in the history of the United States. Then came Rita, and finally Wilma with more of the same.

It was this sequence of events that brought much of the Gulf Coast and especially New Orleans to its knees. With hundreds of thousands of displaced persons being dispersed, support infrastructures throughout the South were quickly overwhelmed. Some evacuees were relocated as far North as Pennsylvania and West to California. As requests for help were received, it was in this historic moment of chaos and suffering that many members of the ICPC came from all over the country to provide assistance and comfort.

Fifty-seven Chaplains were deployed from August to November: 10 served in Baton Rouge; 8 in Gulfport; 11 in Houston; 3 with the Louisiana State Police; 24 in New Orleans; and 1 in San Antonio. These were in addition to countless others who served in their own departments, towns, and states throughout the country in both the storm damaged areas providing direct care, and beyond the reach of the storms, raising money, collecting clothes, and assembling boxes of urgently needed personal items. ICPC members throughout the country volunteered their services through the Destin office, and kept informed by reading the bulletins and updates posted on the ICPC web site.

Analyzing a sampling of their experiences is the task of the recent After Action Study conducted by the Disaster Response Committee. The purpose of the study is to learn

from our member's experiences, to consider what worked and why as well as what didn't and why not. Each After Action Report helps create the pool of wisdom that informs our standards of practice. The candor, thoughtfulness, and clarity of many of the After Action Reports are outstanding. All are heartfelt and paint a vivid picture of the experiences the ICPC Chaplains encountered in response to this disaster. So what did we learn? In a montage of their own words, this is an edited sample of what our members said: (The actual report is 56 pages long and may be found on the ICPC DRC web site.)

"If the atomic bomb would have hit us, it would have been a lot better than Katrina." "This catastrophe is going to linger for a long time."

"As chaplains we provided a 'Presence of Ministry and a Spirit of Comfort.'" "At our first meeting [we identified] a need for death notifications as evacuees were updated on the conditions in New Orleans." "My goal was to provide a ministry of encouragement and comfort to those who were directly or indirectly impacted by the disaster." "Officer [name and place] shared with us how he saw his partner shoot himself in the head [details] and the pictures he has in his mind." "Dogs that were once family pets were now running in packs."

"As far as coordination between the many groups, there wasn't any." "It seemed that the right hand never knew what the left hand was doing." "I would suggest that all members who are deployed, be given a photo ID made up in Destin." "A dress code consisting of an ICPC disaster team shirt [...], police pants with lots of pockets, and boots would be very professional looking."

"I am most grateful for the opportunity to have been able to serve!" "It was my distinct privilege to work with each and every chaplain on site." "I really appreciated the supervision of [names] as team leaders." "Positively, this deployment demonstrated the capacity that the ICPC has to mobilize quickly and deploy multiple chaplains in multiple locations on short notice."

"Food was not a problem. As volunteers we were invited to eat on-campus and food and water was abundant." "The living conditions on board the ship were excellent and I was privileged to have such accommodations."

"... the heat was horrific ... the humidity was high." "Much of the chaplaincy effort was "grunt" work but was performed with compassion and without complaint."

"Before leaving home, I made sure that I had an adequate supply of personal medications and other personal necessities." "He brought his lap top computer and printer which [...] helped us immensely." "While we were there hurricane Rita 'came by.' It would have been good to know to take rain gear."

"I was taken from the airport to EOC and immediately given shots and identification." "I thought the information, directions, and guidance prior to our assignments was good and really appreciated the exit interview I received by [name]." "Briefing was excellent and the daily sharing between chaplains was a key to the success of the response."

"[Name] and the two chaplains who preceded me in [place] provided much helpful information headed into this week of ministry." "A two page sheet of "realities" was left by the other chaplains from [state] that proved to be very helpful as well."

"ICS and NIMS training should be required for all disaster chaplains." "I believe it would be good for us to establish disaster response teams [two or three persons each]." "The disaster track at the ATS is probably one of the best [training] tools that the ICPC has at its disposal." "Leadership, communication, and compatibility among the chaplains are key to any deployment" "[...] once again emphasize to those responding, to go with a real sense of humility and servant hood." "[...] it was an honor to serve and be used as a Chaplain and I would welcome an opportunity to serve again."

The “lessons learned” include: An appreciation for the wide variety of experiences encountered by our members, from scarce accommodations and marginal food in a difficult and dangerous environment to the opposite extremes. The general chaos of disasters multiplies any confusion about assignments or expectations. We need to improve our self care as a profession, especially as Disaster Response Chaplains. Journaling helps responders cope. (An ICPC blog site?) We need ID’s and uniforms.

We need to continue to review our concepts of tasking, deployment, and the rationale for the services we offer. Our members desire more training and the opportunity to serve again. A single point of contact for deployment, coordination, communication, and web site information worked well and was commended. There is strong support for having a "Supervisory" Chaplain wherever multiple chaplains are serving. We need to solve the two-way radios, cell phones, Blackberries, Palm Pilot, etc. communications enigma.

Since publishing the Disaster Response Committee’s policies and Disaster Response Chaplain Application in the June 2005 edition of the ICPC *Journal*, the committee has been able to establish a list of 47 approved, deployable Disaster Response Chaplains who are currently being issued photo ID’s through the Destin office. Uniforms and communications are the next issues on the agenda. We also want to continue to offer the Advanced Disaster Tract for the training of Disaster Response Chaplains at each ATS.

This disaster has also resurfaced a philosophical issue. Is the ICPC a first responder agency or an association of first responders?

Should we, as an organization, use our membership with their unique training and expertise to try to fill a disaster response role corporately during these kinds of events; or, as our present policies state, is our mission one of training and educating chaplains who volunteer to individually respond to special agency and departmental needs when requested. Each perspective presents both opportunities and challenges. Can we do both? This fundamental question will continue to be addressed by our leadership as we move forward. Your thoughts and comments will help them.

Finally, it was reinforced once again that those who respond to disasters must display three important characteristics: *flexibility, patience, and wisdom*. The ICPC responded in a manner that was exemplary to events the likes of which this country has never experienced. Katrina, Rita, and Wilma overwhelmed our country in a disastrous season unparalleled in history. We are learning from our successes and mistakes and we are committed to continuing to prepare our people to serve those in need in the many ways our members and leadership deem appropriate for us as an organization.

Respectfully Submitted,



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ICPC DRC Chair