



SAMUEL DEWITT PROCTOR CONFERENCE

TO: Samuel DeWitt Proctor Conference Family
FROM: Dr. Iva Carruthers, General Secretary

RE: Katrina Update - Report of 9/20/05 African American Clergy Meeting with Congressional Democrats*

Black Church engagement in responding to the impact of Hurricane Katrina upon families and communities in three states has been at every level including financial and material resource donations, local church adoptions of Katrina families in cities across America, interdenominational collaborations and as advocates and voices for justice in the wake of these disasters.

Federal policies and budget priorities related to the relief and recovery efforts surrounding Hurricane Katrina have already proven to perpetuate short and long-term disparities and unnecessary burdens upon those most exposed and vulnerable – African Americans and the poor. Too often, the policies and practices of FEMA and their private relief agency partners, are exacerbating this cycle and often precluding Black Church participation in the relief and restoration process. Continued exchange and dialogue at multiple levels is critical.

A September 20, 2005 dialogue between Congressional Democrats and a small group of Black clergy representatives outlined significant events and identified key issues that warrant immediate response and continued oversight to address the needs of those most impacted. A combination of clergy and congressional representatives' first hand field reports and White House and Congressional decisions inform this report. This report is a summary of the conversation and designed to provide you with critical and time sensitive information to assist in your strategic action planning.

Key Considerations/Discussion Points

Partnership Observations/Obstacles

FEMA presence is inadequate and many small towns in the Delta are not being serviced, impacting thousands. The FEMA 800 # which victims are instructed to call is not operative and/or goes unanswered.

Red Cross field operations are often using criteria of requiring Red Cross certified training to be a volunteer. Many African American clergy, professional counselors, physicians and volunteers are not being allowed access to help Katrina victims. It should be noted that it was the Red Cross who initially indicated they had not gone into New Orleans to help victims because they heard or felt it was too dangerous to enter.

FEMA and The Red Cross have two major contractual partners and vendors that are providing key relief workers and resources as contractors, including the food contract: The Southern Baptist Convention and Operation Blessing. Operation Blessing is an entity founded by Pat Robertson. Both organizations are found in tandem with the Red Cross and FEMA service. (Operation Blessing's presence on the FEMA website was removed after Robertson's comment on assassination of the Venezuelan president). There are many documented cases in which Katrina victims were denied volunteer contact and hot meals prepared by Black church programs and volunteers because of the FEMA/Red Cross food contracts for services with Operation Blessing and the Southern Baptist Convention.

Expense Reimbursements

FEMA is obligated in many cases to reimburse organizations that make financial and in-kind contributions to victims of disasters. It is important that Black Churches keep documentation of services, receipts and a ledger for any and all Katrina related expenses. Black churches and organizations should be prepared to exercise the right to submit requests for reimbursements like all other entities.

Black Colleges

Nine (9) Black colleges have been decimated. The students need to be tracked; their eligibility to use their PELL grants at other institutions should not be impeded. Policies to provide suspension of payments, extensions and/or other consideration for student loans should be implemented to maximize students' ability to remain in school.

Wage/Labor Protection and Minority Business Participation

Congressional and White House authority has already been used to suspend both the Davis Bacon minimum wage protection and the affirmative action/minority business participation requirements for public contracts. Contractors, including Halliburton, have already received cost plus not bid contracts for the clean up and reconstruction without opportunity for those most affected to participate as laborers with fair wages or as equitable and viable business partners. Lowering wage requirements and not capping contracts means increased profits and creating an environment for price gouging that is unconscionable.

(It should be noted that this same authority could be used, though it has not been to date, to waive licensure requirements, penalties and other criteria to support the participation of local community residents and volunteers, be they laborers, business owners, pastoral counselors, certified psychologists, students etc.)

Legal- Identity and Voter Protection

Reestablishment of personal identities and records and protection of voting rights is at stake for thousands of persons who have been moved. (There are February 2006 elections) There is a military model in place to ensure the rights of voters that can be implemented for the displaced Hurricane victims.

Legal – Insurance and Consumer Protection

It is projected that 80% of homeowners are likely to have no or inadequate home insurance. The effective date for pending changes in the bankruptcy law and consumer credit policies is at hand. Many Katrina victims will certainly lose their home investment if not afforded some special considerations.

Legal – Land and Property Restoration

Without some special considerations and waivers for Zoning and property use laws in restoration efforts will impact what long-term housing options exist for many low income and poor people.

Legal – Prisoner/Family Rights

Major prison displacement has resulted in many families not knowing where their incarcerated family member is at this time.

Media/Telling Our Story

The media is not and cannot tell our story. First hand reports need to be solicited and documented. Many children are still missing and isolated from families. The image of the President and Senator Landrieu flying over a New Orleans levee repair seems to have been a media event. During the President's fly over hundreds of National Guards, the Corp of Engineers and helicopters dropping sandbags was evident. The very next day, in another fly over, Senator Landrieu was astonished to see no one working the same site.

Follow the Money & Ask Who Benefits?

The debate on the federal budget has critical and long-term implications for the African American community and the most vulnerable Americans, low income, poor and the elderly. The present administration favors tax reductions in discretionary programs and tax cuts for the wealthy. This policy in the wake of federal dollars being required by Katrina (and now Rita) restoration will only lead to greater burden upon those who can afford it least. The areas targeted for cuts to offset Katrina dollars, while at the same time proposing tax cuts for the wealthy, include food stamps, school loans, Medicaid and pharmacy plans, law enforcement and earned income tax credits.

In 2000 there was a \$236 billion national surplus. In 2005 there is a \$331 billion deficit. The Department of Defense basic budget approximates \$450 billion, another \$200 billion was approved for the Iraq war and another \$100 billion is being requested for the war. This totals \$750 billion for the Department of Defense, much of it going to the same contractors now being given reconstruction contracts for the Delta. The road to understand the federal budget is simply "follow the money" and question "who benefits?"

Call for an Independent Commission

The White House has opposed the appointment of an independent Katrina Commission. The House of Representatives has passed a bill to establish what is being called a Bipartisan Committee consisting of 21 Democrats and Republicans, to be appointed by the Republican Speaker of the House. Only the Republicans on the committee will have subpoena power.

An independent Commission needs to be established akin to the 911 Commission. This independent commission would be charged to document what really happened and did not happen in the local state and federal response to Katrina; what critical steps must be taken for long term reconstruction and restoration of individual families and communities; what plans must be effected to ensure preparedness for disasters and emergencies in all communities across the nation; what long term public policies, budgetary and otherwise, can help to eradicate the gross racial and economic disparities made so evident by Hurricane Katrina. The victims and the Black Church must be an uncompromised voice to demand establishment of an Independent Commission.

*This was a Pre-Black Congressional Caucus Meeting. Ten clergy representatives participated, with Bishop Thomas Hoyt, President, National Council of Churches and Presiding Bishop 4th Episcopal District, Christian Methodist Episcopal Church (LA & MS) and as Rev. Stephen John Thurston, President, The National Baptist Convention of America serving as media clergy spokespersons.

Congressional Briefings by:

Sen. Hillary Clinton, NY
Sen. Richard Durbin, IL (Senate Democratic Whip)
Sen. Ed Kennedy, MA
Sen Mary Landrieu, LA
Sen. Barack Obama, IL
Sen Harry Reid, NV (Senate Democratic Leader)

Rep. James Clyburn, SC
Rep Nancy Pelosi, CA (House of Representatives Democratic Leader)
Rep. Bobby Scott, VA
Rep John Spratt (Ranking Member of Hse. Budget Committee)
Rep. Bennie Thompson, MS (Ranking Member of Hse. Homeland Security Committee)
Rep. Melvin Watt, NC (Chair, Congressional Black Caucus)