



Rev. Judy R. Fletcher
Executive

6100 Colwell Blvd., Suite 200
Irving, TX 75039
866-381-7075

Crisis in the GULF

I was reminded of the Presbyterian Disaster Assistance motto, “OUT OF CHAOS, HOPE,” as we toured the oil-damaged coastlands of South Louisiana for two days with other representatives from presbytery, synod and the General Assembly.

We met with members of affected Presbyterian congregations, local leaders, and with ecumenical partners doing relief work in the disaster zone along the Gulf of Mexico. We saw aerial views of the marshes and wet lands and we rode the waterways. We listened, talked, worshipped and prayed together. We broke bread at tables and The Table. We hugged – and we cried together.

Here are some of the messages these folks might appreciate me sharing with you:

1. **Pray for us – and don’t forget us.** We heard that repeatedly from everyone. We promised we would. We Presbyterians need to remember the power of prayer and pray often for these brothers and sisters. *“Help us know we are loved and remembered,”* one woman said.
2. **Working together to find solutions and helpful responses to this crisis trumps blaming.** While accountability and “fixing” things are important, these people know this was an accident, and that little is to be gained in playing the blame game. This does not mean their people are not angry; they are, and behind this anger is fear. But blaming is something different, something not helpful.

3. **This massive disaster affects every single household in coastal communities.** While there is the obvious unemployment of oil workers and fishers, loss of business is omnipresent. Restaurants and tourism spots are closed. Rig suppliers, diesel sources, hair salons, wholesale food and products, even schools - and all are affected.
4. **Coastal residents want the moratorium on drilling lifted.** They acknowledge that improving safety procedures is important. But they point out that the airline industry does not shut down when a jet crashes.
5. **Our friends on the coast care deeply about recovering and preserving the health of their ecosystem.** Folks in South Louisiana know that they are losing 35 square miles of land in the coastal area every year. They know their marsh land is shrinking thereby endangering birds, animals and an ecosystem that is irreplaceable.

Observations I feel moved to share after two days along the Gulf:

1. **You Presbyterians are wonderfully generous people having given millions to disaster relief work in the past.** That generosity is needed once again. I am buoyed in my request for financial support by knowing that PDA remains committed to being the best stewards possible of our contributions. I personally appreciate the clear accountability of the expenditure of funds.

2. **Uneducated attempts to help with cleanup will do far more harm than good.** You Presbyterians are indeed generous in giving of your energy as seen by the thousands of groups who helped muck out and rebuild hurricane-damaged communities. But this disaster, we are discovering, is far more complex than tearing out and replacing dry wall.

We need to trust the various conversations with communities and experts as they sort out what help will look like. We must be patient and wait and pray while we wait. Remember that Presbyterians and PDA created an effective long-term recovery plan following Katrina, Ike and other hurricanes.

3. **Advocacy work as well as effective hands-on work will involve a lot of study about the fragile ecosystem of the Gulf and Gulf coast.** The advocacy work may not be as personally fulfilling or rewarding as our mission trips, but will be just as important in the work needed to be done.

4. Finally, we Presbyterians must respond in ways that don't reflect our media-driven culture and be 'only as good as the last disaster.' We care deeply and want to do something now, so remember that we are still receiving work groups on the Gulf to continue hurricane recovery work. Any compassionate Presbyterians out there up for one of those life-changing work trips? Visit: pcusa.org/pda. I know so many of you and do know how much you care.

Thank you in advance for your compassion, for your commitment to stay informed and to respond in ways that are needed and helpful. Thank you for your prayers. Thank you for being a steward intent on helping to restore, protect and preserve creation, the gift God created and calls good.

