

Writing down NOLA

Aug 9 – 18, 2008

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Every task becomes an opportunity to share in the activity of God. . . . We acknowledge the nearness of the kingdom of God, within and around us, which becomes visible to us through the eyes of faith. . . . The world can change if people see themselves and others through God's eyes. (Forty days to a closer walk with God, David Muyskens [2006] pp. 115-116.)

A home is not something a person chooses. It is given. Born to you like eyes and feet. It cannot be changed. For home, each part is like a body, each bend and crossing and hill is a place on the body, with heart, with legs, each place has a name and a story, each place has a name for something that happened in old time, and in that name and story is a people's greatness and proof of their favor in creation. A home has people. How can you know what is the best path alone? Without the words of old people, without the words of friends who knew the first name you were called, know the things you have done; how can you understand the right way? (A sudden country, Karen Fisher, [2005] p 278.)

My heart is very heavy the day after our return from NOLA (New Orleans, LA) (8/19/08). I feel like I am carrying in my soul the sadness and devastation of the place I have been for the past week. Perhaps writing it down will help me to move it to a different, deeper, place inside me. I can only share images. I cannot write down everything that happened or that I experienced. My days were too exhausting for me to keep a daily journal. I write today before I lose more.

Saturday, August 9

We had no idea what to expect, although we had received information from St. Matthew about what to bring and who would meet us when we arrived. Perry picked Ned and me up at 8:30 a.m., we loaded the SUV and were off. We met Chris, Sharon, and Randy at the church. Pastor Michael was there to send us out. I had developed plantar fasciitis overnight, it seemed. I stretched and iced my foot throughout the week. The four of us in Perry's car (Randy, Ned, Perry, me) got to know one another as we drove. Chris and Sharon were in Chris's PT Cruiser. That night we stayed at an EconoLodge in West Memphis.

Sunday, August 10

We arrived at St Matthew United Church of Christ at 4:15 in the afternoon. I had phoned Pastor Fred Meade as we were approaching NOLA. When we arrived we were let in the church by some parishioners. I went looking for Pastor Fred and ran into him without knowing who he was at first. He told me I had too much energy and intelligence to be doing this kind of work for the week. That was an interesting introduction to the week and to Pastor Fred. Pastor Fred had built the shower facilities at St Matthew, along with many other things he had done to provide housing for church people coming to help with Katrina damage. Urbandale United Church of Christ

(UUCC) had given a benefit concert at our church shortly after Katrina to raise funds to help construct the accommodations at St. Matthew. St. Matthew had some hurricane damage, but it was in a portion of the city that was not directly affected by the flooding that followed Katrina.

The Anthony Bean Community Theater (ABCT) is based out of St. Matthew.

Pastor Fred gave us the keys and rules of our home for the week. I was the keeper of the keys for the women. Our room had 9 bunk beds, a child-size bathroom (the room had previously been a Sunday School room), two air conditioners, a fan, and a power strip. Each of us had a chair on which to put our gear. (The men's room had more bunks.) Chris, Sharon and I settled in. We all went out for dinner at a Lebanese restaurant that night.

We planned our meals Sunday night;

and Chris, Sharon and I went to Rouses Super Market on Carrolton Av. to buy provisions for the week. While we were there Sharon pointed out Ray Nagin, the Mayor of NO, who was shopping with his wife. Sharon thought she saw a secret service person behind them. [On Weds. during our tour with Charles we learned that there is not great love for Nagin by many in NO. According to Charles, after Katrina he was re-elected mostly by people who had moved out of the City and were able to vote even though they no longer lived there.]

Monday, August 11

We drove over to Little Farms United Church of Christ for orientation to our work sites with Pastor Alan, Minister for Disaster Recovery. Also working with him were Sarah, who is based at Little Farms, and a site supervisor named Tim Coe. Florence Coppola is the UCC Disaster Coordinator; Karen Thompson, minister for recovery. Alan told us that our denomination has been helping with disaster rebuilding in the gulf coast from Fla. To Brownsville, TX.

He said that the most important part of our job was “what we would take back in our eyes and ears and hearts.” We will share how our faith has been impacted by working in this major part of the US that has been destroyed.

He told us of others who have helped in the recovery effort. A “Faith Based Initiative” was started by President Bush following Katrina. Alan was sure that the compassion and care for others through the X'tian faith based community would be continued by the new President. Brad Pitt is building homes in the 9th ward [which we saw in our tour with Charles on Weds. Also we saw homes being built by Habitat for Humanity in the 9th ward.] There have been donations from the Red Cross, Housing and Urban Development, FEMA, and others. UCC is part of a “Long-term Recovery Committee,” consisting of several faith-based groups.

Alan said that rebuilding a home from scratch costs between \$40,000 and \$45,000. The United Church of Christ (UCC) has 25 active rebuilding projects under way at present. Still thousands of people are waiting for houses to be rebuilt. [We saw these throughout the week – on the drive to and from our work site, on our tour, and as we traveled around the city.] Many of these homes were in poor shape before Katrina, according to Alan. He called this part of the US a 3rd world country. The United Church of Christ has completed 26 building projects and gutted out 847

homes. UCC projects have been funded through 2010. Although homeowners do not have to be members of UCC in order to be accepted for UCC projects, Alan said that 1/3 of the current projects are being built for members of the Little Farms congregation.

The procedure for accessing help in rebuilding a home is as follows: An individual or family who needs help calls a central intake # (211), and the operator puts them in touch with a case worker. The home owner must commit to coming back to NO if they have left the area. The case worker checks on the call to see if the case is legitimate, then contacts builders (e.g. UCC). A needs assessment is done and placed in a file by case # and situation. If the case is accepted Alan contacts the owner and case worker and rebuilding begins. Alan said it takes an average of one-and-a-half years to complete the process of rebuilding a house.

Alan told us that there has been quite a bit of “contractor fraud” here. For example, on our site the crew head, Elaine, told us of two families who had paid \$60,000 to contractors to rebuild their homes. The contractors took the home owners’ money and did no work. One of the contractors lived only a block from the person from whom they took the money; he used their money to rebuild his own home. There is really no recourse for this. The home owners don’t have the time or resources to pursue these fraudulent contractors through the courts.

Alan told us that there are now 8 UCC churches in NO, all of which had damage from Katrina. One church (Central) closed, after losing half of its members. [This church has been combined with St. Matthew now. Its congregation is small, black and mostly elderly. I talked with three of the members at the Sunday worship service we attended on 8/18. The stately woman who spoke with me showed me through her words and her eyes how hard it has been for her to lose so many friends who have moved away. They keep in contact by phone, she said. I noticed that the three women, who were black, were seated in the sanctuary waiting for the service to begin -- not socializing with the (white) members of St. Matthew, who were gathering in the lobby of the church until time for the service to start.]

Pastor Alan told us that ½ of the population of NO before Katrina has located somewhere else. The population of NO is now 50% of what it was before Katrina, thus creating a much smaller city.

Around 10:00 a.m. we left for our site where we met our supervisor, Elaine Cavanaugh. Chris, Sharon and I were going to be working on a home belonging to a black woman named Emily Harris. Elaine had a degree in engineering and was currently enrolled at Andover Newton Theological Seminary to earn a M. Div. Degree. She told us that the woman we were rebuilding the house for was away with her daughter who had just had a baby. Emily’s son, Ezekiel, lived in a FEMA trailer (called candominiums by the occupants) next door to the house. We had a key to the trailer and could use the bathroom after Ezekiel and his girlfriend had gone to work. Elaine got us started on our project of sanding and mudding the rough spots in the drywall.

The house we were working on was a one-story brick structure built on a slab. (There are no basements in NO, just as there are no underground burials in cemeteries because of the high water table). There will be five bedrooms and two baths in the house. One bath will be handicap

accessible for one of Emily's sons. The back bathroom will have a Jacuzzi in it. There was a big hole under the slab where the Jacuzzi will go [Michael and Perry ended up filling that hole with sand on Weds. Perry felt that was a futile and wasted effort.]

I looked around the neighborhood. Many of the houses had been restored. There was a house catty-corner in back of our house that had been burned but had not been rebuilt. Elaine told us that some people had burned their homes in an effort to collect insurance payments, since most people did not have flood insurance. Unfortunately, that didn't work to get insurance companies to pay up.

The job was very dusty. There was plaster dust flying all over from our sanding. It took me two days to finally put on a mask, but I was concerned about my lungs. The mask was very hot and uncomfortable. It made me sweat and didn't fit well with my glasses. It was difficult to breathe with it on. I mostly sanded and mudded spots down low, since I was prepared to kneel with my knee pads. Sharon and Chris worked up higher. Elaine warned us about the fire ant hills in the yard [which she stepped into herself on Thursday as we were cleaning brushes and received many nasty bites on the back of her leg].

I went into the FEMA trailer to use the bathroom at some point. It was tiny. It had a very small kitchen area with refrigerator, stove, and sink that abutted directly on the living/dining area. The aisle to the back of the trailer was very narrow. There was a bedroom to the right of the kitchen, which I did not look at. The bathroom containing a toilet, sink and shower was at the end of the living room area. I could not believe how small it all was.

We were leaving the trailer unlocked during the day so we could come and go easily. It rained very hard in the afternoon and the door to the trailer blew open, drenching the towel hanging over the front door and flooding the wood kitchen floor area. (The rugs in the bedroom and the living room kept the water from going any further, and the kitchen floor seemed to be somewhat lower). I went back to the house and gathered up rags to sop up the water on the floor. It took me quite a while to accomplish that, but it did clean the floor! After that we locked the trailer door when we finished using the bathroom.

At the end of Monday we were exhausted. I don't think we quit until around 4:00. We returned home, and Sharon and I began to help Chris make chicken enchiladas. The guys (Ned, Perry and Randy) were having beers at the Salt Water Restaurant across the street from the church. We could not find a working can opener in the St. Matthew kitchen, so I asked Chris to call Perry and have him buy one for us. He went to do that, and we ate soon after he returned from the errand. There were some issues around our request for the can opener. I think the guys thought we were being too demanding. Randy indicated to me that we needed to process the transaction. During dinner, however, Pastor Fred came to see how we were doing, and we never really got to talk about what had happened. Elaine and Garrett (Elaine Cavanaugh's husband, also a site supervisor, and the organist for Beecher Memorial Church) showed up and had dinner with us. The guys did the dinner dishes. We discovered an "industrial-type" can opener in the kitchen (similar to the one at the homeless meal shelter in DM) when Garrett pointed it out to us. We had a good group laugh over that, and the "can opener incident" kept being referred to throughout the week.

We took showers after that and had devotions led by Randy: “Where did you see God in the ruins?” Before we went to bed I told Chris and Sharon about how I thought the can opener situation had gone. They were supportive and said I’d probably overreacted.

Tuesday, Aug. 11

We returned to our site and continued sanding and mudding. About half-way through the day I started wearing a mask. Mudding and sanding were frustrating for me. I wasn’t clear about how well it had to be done, and I wasn’t very good at it. Elaine seemed to have high standards, which she probably relaxed as time went on. We were amateurs at this, and it took us tons more time to do tasks than it would take a professional. Elaine felt that we needed to do a good job for the home owner (Emily Harris) since she had already experienced so much disappointment (I think she had been bilked out of \$40,000 by a contractor who did not do the work she paid him to do).

Soon after we returned home on Tuesday Pastor Michael arrived. Perry had picked him up at the airport at 5:30. We all went out to dinner at the Saltwater Restaurant across the street. Everyone had a very big laugh when Randy got our waitress (Kayla) to serve Ned first. (At all our previous restaurant meals his meal had arrived after the rest of ours, and he was pretty frustrated). After devotions we went to a cold sports bar to watch the Olympics. Michael and I walked home together.

Wednesday, Aug. 13

We returned to our site and continued mudding and sanding. I think I was working on the entryway by then. That was not easy to do, because it needed lots of mud to fill it in. Elaine ended up finishing the project. Pastor Michael and Perry drove over from Beecher to accomplish the “fill in the sand under the bathroom project” that Elaine had designated for Michael. It was dirty, frustrating work. Poor Michael was on his back with sand dropping into his eyes. I found some goggles and put them on him.

We left work around noon Weds., returning home for a tour. We met our guide, Charles, a retired political science professor at the University of New Orleans and a member of the St. Matthew UCC congregation. It started to pour rain, and I got my rubber sandals. Charles gave us a long introductory session in the hot lobby of the church. We were eager to get going, and finally we did. Charles rode with Chris, Sharon, and I and used a walkie-talkie to communicate with the guys in Perry’s car.

We drove to see the new station that pumps water out of the city into Lake Ponchatrain. When it rains (which it was on our tour) one-inch is pumped out during the first hour, and ½-inch for each hour thereafter. We experienced lots of deep water in low lying spots on the streets as we were driving. Charles showed us the canals through which the water is pumped out of the city. The canals are walled to protect homes from the water flowing through them. During Katrina water from Lake Ponchatrain surged back into the canals toward the city. Three of the four canal walls broke due to the force of the water, and many homes were flooded. For example, the house I was working in had water up to the height of my shoulder, as I could see from the water

line on the front wall. Houses in the 9th ward, which were located along a canal, were completely inundated. When we visited that area all that was left were open fields overgrown with vegetation and heartbreaking slabs and front steps of what had formerly been people's homes. Almost all of the homes in the 9th ward had been torn down.

We visited a Habitat for Humanity rehabilitation site. One of the habitat houses had been vandalized by neighborhood kids who poured paint all over the living room floor and painted stuff on many of the walls. Charles talked with some Habitat folks who were nearby. They seemed pretty philosophical about the damage. They said there was nothing for the kids to do, and when roads had been put in the kids had access to the houses by bikes. The habitat house had been left unlocked, and the kids took advantage of the situation to mess it up.

Arlean and Dale prepared red beans and rice for dinner at St. Matthew Weds. evening. Also they served tossed salad and brownies. Apparently various churches prepare a meal for workers every Mon, Tues, & Weds. St Matthew's night is Wed. Arlean and Dale thanked us for buying the can opener! ;>) It was Randy's birthday, and at the end of dinner we women presented Randy with a super can opener and a bottle opener (which had been requested earlier). We had bought them on our way to work that morning, and wrapped them in newspaper. We all sang to him.

We had Randy's devotions in the dining room with Pastor Michael. They talked about strategies for presenting our journey to the congregation. Everyone had suggestions except me. I was so exhausted I thought I was ill. At 9:30 I went to bed and fell asleep immediately.

Thursday, August 14

I woke up feeling much better. After breakfast we went to our site and got to start priming the walls! Sharon used the paint roller, and I was painting trim down low at first, but it became clear to me that more work needed to be done at the ceiling level. In the afternoon I mounted the high ladder and painted the area in the living room where the wall and ceiling join, the area around the fireplace, and the area on both sides of the center beam of the ceiling. I thought of Marie while I was high on the ladder and how she and Brian could contribute here. I channeled her and summoned her strength and skill to surround me.

Today would have been my mom's 94th birthday. I think of her as being more right brained than my dad, who I think of as more left-brained. I used right brain inspiration as I was painting trim around the fireplace. Sharon asked Elaine for some tape to plug up a hole where some wasps were getting in and bothering her, and Elaine gave her blue painters masking tape to use. WOW! I had been having a hard time keeping the paint off of the fireplace masonry. I realized that I could use the tape to mask. (I hadn't known up to that point that there was any tape, or the use for it.) Elaine complimented me on figuring that out all by myself! It was scary for me to be up so high on the ladder masking and painting the center beam. I used tasks to keep my left brain engaged (math and alphabetical names of relatives, fruits, flowers, etc), since the left brain is the "approach" side. It worked pretty well, and I accomplished the task over Thurs. and Friday.

We returned home late Thursday, and the guys had made dinner – delicious vege stir-fry and bow tie pasta. I think Sharon and Chris drove to Baskin Robbins before dinner. I had them drop

me at the church for a shower. I think that was the night that Chris talked about how little we had understood what we were praying for at UUCC when we prayed for St. Matthew during the pastoral prayer on Sundays. Afterwards we three women returned to our room and continued to talk. I told Chris that I wanted to learn from her on this trip how she could give of herself so totally to help others; for example with the UUCC Interfaith Hospitality Network hosting the homeless. We had a good, open talk among the three of us before we went to bed. We were very bonded by this point – working together and sharing our feelings.

I felt very good about myself and my work that night.

Friday, Aug. 15

Our last day on the job. We started out going over to Beecher Memorial Church to see where the guys had been working. There was a new large blue porcelain baptistery there. I broke down as I looked at all the devastation in that church. I saw the big church bible that had been open on the altar when Beecher was flooded by Katrina. The bible had been soaked, so that it was impossible to turn the pages or read most of what was there. I worked with the pages a bit and tried to determine what scripture the bible had been opened to when the waters came. As closely as I could determine the bible was open to Psalm 69. After returning home I looked up the passage. This is what I read:

Save me, O God; for the waters are come in unto my soul. I sink in deep mire, where there is no standing: I am come into deep waters, where the floods overflow me. I am weary of my crying: my throat is dried: mine eyes fail while I wait for my God. (Verses 1-3)

Deliver me out of the mire, and let me not sink: let me be delivered from them that hate me, and out of the deep waters. Let not the waterflood overflow me, neither let the deep swallow me up, and let not the pit shut her mouth upon me. Hear me, O Lord; for thy lovingkindness is good: turn unto me according to the multitude of thy tender mercies. And hide not thy face from thy servant; for I am in trouble: hear me speedily. (Verses 14 – 17)

After Beecher we stopped at Walgreens for a card for Elaine. We bought one with a little girl dancer on the front that said “Now for the thankyou dance”. We made up a dance to do for Elaine at lunch. We did motions for the can opener, chicken, chorus line kicks (10), and typewriter. We ended with the hokey pokey, with Elaine included. I was breathless after that and remembered my lungs. Garrett stopped over and we repeated the dance for him. [We also showed it to our guys that night on Bourbon Street, and, unfortunately, I fell with Sharon on top of me. OW!]

We worked long and hard because this was our last day. We finished priming (rolling and trimming) the kitchen, dining area, living room, and a bedroom closet.

We returned home after 5:00 and took showers. Then all of us took the streetcar to the French Quarter and Bourbon Street. We got a recommendation for a restaurant from someone on the

trolley. Dinner at Petunia's was delicious, and the wine was good. We enjoyed our waiter, Ronnie. Then we walked up and down Bourbon Street, going in little shops and listening to the bands. We went into a gay bar and watched a couple of guys dance for a few minutes. We got the trolley back by 11:00.

Saturday, August 16

Sharon, Chris, and I got up and cleaned our room and the shower rooms. They were pretty dirty, especially our room. It was really nice to have it clean for my last night there. Then Sharon and Chris left for IA about 11 o'clock. The guys and I drove down to the French Quarter again. We visited a cemetery (all burials above ground in mausoleums because of the high water table), and walked along Bourbon Street some more. We ate late afternoon at a fish place then went home and packed.

Sunday, August 17

We went to St. Matthew and presented the prayer shawl from UUCC to the church at 10:00. Then we drove over to Dillard University for the 10:30 service of Beecher Memorial Church. They are meeting at Dillard while their church is being rebuilt. Beecher is where Ned, Perry and Randy had been working all week. The congregation is entirely black. Ned said as we drove in that this was like "Look who's coming to dinner." Randy presented the prayer flags that the UUCC Vacation Bible School kids had made to the Beecher congregation. As part of the service Jenise Green, the church moderator, talked about an "evacuation plan for members of Beecher" in case of an eminent weather emergency. She said, "let us know if you don't have a ride." She announced a coming "Rally for Recovery" at the Super Dome and a memory service for those who had died in Katrina. She also mentioned a "Hands around the Dome Rally" for voter registration. A voter education session was scheduled for August 30 from 10 to 1:00 o'clock in the Dome Café. [I wonder if that was held given the situation with Hurricane Gustav threatening].

After the service we talked with various members of the church. Ned and I were moved by our conversation with Brenda, who is the vice-moderator of the church. She said all but three members of the congregation had lost their homes in Katrina. She is still living in the second story of her house while she rebuilds the first floor, which was completely flooded. Half of their members have not returned to NO since Katrina. Perry talked with Cely Pedescleaux, a master quilter, about her making a quilt which we can raffle at UUCC. Her quilts are quite famous, selling for up to \$1500 a piece. We want to raise money to help Beecher rebuild their church. They need \$150,000 to do the job.

We left the church, ate some sandwiches I had made in the early morning, and pulled out of NO at 1:15 p.m. The drive home was long but not too bad. We stayed overnight Sunday in Sikesville, MO. We drove the rest of the way to IA on Monday, Aug. 18, arriving home at 5:30 in the afternoon, after dropping Randy off in Beaverdale.

All in all it was a good and memorable trip. I'm glad I went. It was the hardest thing I've done at my age, but I did it, and I'm proud of myself. I was a tough girl!