

Letter from Bishop Cynthia Harvey to be read at Katrina/Rita Service of Remembrance

Katrina and Rita, two names we will never forget. For some it seems like we met them just yesterday, for others it seems we met decades ago. It was 10 years ago that Hurricanes Katrina and Rita made themselves known to those living on the Gulf Coast. None of us will ever forget August of 2005 as it has so clearly become a defining point for all of Louisiana. Louisianians have learned to mark time by hurricanes, but the mark of time has never been more defining than August 2005.

Some of us watched with horror from afar on our televisions while many of you watched with horror as life unraveled before your very eyes as Katrina made her presence known in New Orleans and those living near the waters of the Gulf. It was only weeks later that hurricane devastation repeated itself as Hurricane Rita made her appearance. Not only did United Methodists from around the world respond but Christians, non-Christians, and every day people responded in extraordinary ways.

All eyes were on you and what responders and the world quickly learned was that people in Louisiana are resilient—they were not victims of the storm, they were survivors!

Fast forward 10 years and we see progress in some areas of New Orleans while others still struggle to find a new normal. Some people never returned to their homes and entire communities were abandoned and were like ghost towns. But again, you are survivors and you will not only survive, but you thrive when challenge knocks at the door. The recommitment to the 7<sup>th</sup> Ward is just one example. We have had no United Methodist presence in the 7<sup>th</sup> Ward since Hurricane Katrina, but this July we recommitted ourselves to the people of the 7<sup>th</sup> Ward—and in partnership with other churches in the New Orleans District and across the Annual Conference, we are back! We are making our presence known to the deserving people of the 7<sup>th</sup> Ward as we reclaim our place of faithful witness in the community. The new LaFon Nursing Home, while not a part of the Annual Conference and The United Methodist Church, carries a heritage of our ministry in this community. The new state-of-the-art nursing facility is another sign that revitalization is alive in the 7<sup>th</sup> Ward. Dillard University is making news with new facilities and excellent leadership. It is because of your commitment that the people of the 7<sup>th</sup> Ward and of New Orleans can claim you as those sent by God to pave a new way.

Lake Charles and surrounding communities learned, too, that it is not enough to weather a storm but that resilience and perseverance must take hold. You also learned that the loving response and genuine love of the people is extravagant. By God's amazing grace and generosity of people from every corner of the globe, the area stands tall today.

While the impact of the 2005 storms was felt directly on the southern part of the state, the entire Annual Conference felt the blow. When one part of the body suffers, we all suffer with it. The rallying cry of the people was heard and you responded by opening your homes and churches and receiving displaced families including pastors into your midst. Louisiana's United Methodist churches sheltered evacuees, set up collection and distribution sites, housed recovery teams, served as part of recovery teams, and did so

much for others. You truly embodied what it means to share radical hospitality. You welcomed. You loved.

As the prophet Isaiah claims (Isaiah 43) “When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; when through the rivers, they won’t sweep over you. When you walk through the fire, you won’t be scorched and flame won’t burn you. I am the Lord your God, the holy one of Israel. Because you are precious in my eyes, you are honored and I love you. Don’t fear, I am with you.” The prophet goes on to say, “I am doing a new thing; now it sprouts up; don’t you recognize it? I am making a new way in the desert, paths in the wilderness.”

God continues to make new ways for us. I pray that we might have eyes to see and hearts to know the goodness of God in the new things God is doing. It is sprouting up all around us and just as was promised thousands of years ago it is promised today – through the waters, I will be with you; when through the rivers, they won’t sweep you away. I am with you says the Lord, to the end of the age. Do not fear.

My prayer is that we will hold on to the promises of God. God is indeed doing a new thing in New Orleans and all of Louisiana, but I also trust that God is doing a new thing in each of us. As we reflect on the past 10 years, may we know that God has brought us through the water and through the fire. While we would never wish this kind of devastation again on Louisiana or anywhere in the world, what we know is that we have come through as a renewed people. We are an even more faithful people who know first-hand the promises of God.