



INSTITUTE OF SCHOOL & PARISH DEVELOPMENT

*Bringing People, Process, and Ministry Together to Build the*

*Kingdom of God.*

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## *Development Directions*

### WHEN THE GOING GETS TOUGH: TEN LESSONS LEARNED BY CATHOLIC INSTITUTIONS FIVE YEARS AFTER KATRINA

by

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There are three influences that go into the title and theme of this month's newsletter, and although very different, when I bring them all together they do make some kind of sense.

When I was growing up, I would constantly hear the following old adage from my mom and dad, "When the going gets tough, the tough get going." I guess I heard that bit of wisdom dozens of time – mainly in reference to basketball, as I enjoyed the game in elementary, high school and college. Of course, it went on to mean many other things as life marched forward.

A couple of months ago, while visiting with Regina Haney at the new NCEA offices in Arlington, VA, she asked if I would be interested in writing another "fastback" book for NCEA entitled: *Lessons Learned through Twenty-Five Years in Catholic Development*. I wondered if it could be in multi-volumes because there have been so many. Hopefully, I can get that started and have it ready for the NCEA Convention here in New Orleans in April 2011.

This past weekend here in the Crescent City, we commemorated the fifth anniversary of Hurricane Katrina, the singular event that changed the landscape and the culture of south Louisiana and the Gulf Coast region forever. And so, with the above three thoughts in mind, it does make sense to write about lessons learned by Catholic institutions when we are five years removed from that fateful day in late August 2005. The tough did indeed get going.

Everyone has seen the pictures of the devastation – especially over the past week – as over 1,000 people were killed because of the “storm” as we now call it. As I often will tell my clients and workshop attendees, here in south Louisiana, we now refer to life as *before the storm* and *after the storm*. It is easier to reference that way. Our lives were turned upside down – our homes were destroyed; our churches washed away; our schools torn apart; our loved ones uprooted; our schedules and rituals no longer applicable; our way of life totally rearranged from what we had known for years. This was supposed to be just another hurricane, where we would evacuate for 2-3 days, and then we would be home again and back to the same old routine. We had done it before – many times. Get the double bed room at the Red Roof Inn in Meridian, MS; stay a few days and then head back when the “coast was clear.” In the past, we had even had our homes flooded, and our schools and churches had gotten water in them, but so what? That was part of living in south Louisiana; it was all part of the plan. Katrina and its wrath were not.

And yet today, as we look back, we know that we are better off than we were on August 28, 2005 – the day before the storm came ashore. And, we also know that quite a few lessons were learned by Catholic leaders in the days and weeks after Katrina – some of them rather sobering.

As a way to simply recall and reflect, and also to learn, here are the ten lessons I believe Catholic leaders learned, ISPD included.

**1. Catholic parishes and schools did not have a disaster plan in place to handle something of this magnitude.** In my opinion, I don’t believe any of us ever thought that the “100 Year Storm” would ever come. We simply were not prepared – especially when it came to communication and response.

**2. Individual Catholic leaders were the ones who “took the bull by the horns” and made things happen.** The positive responses came from the individuals who rose to the occasion and realized that if anything was going to happen, then it was going to happen because THEY would make it happen. Communities came together; Masses were celebrated on street corners; food and water were handed out because individuals and families and single ministries championed the cause.

**3. Communication brought positive results, and those with it were able to prevail.** The Big C word – *communication*. Still today, this continues to be the

number 1 challenge that many Catholic parishes face – being able to communicate with their parish families.

**4. Websites brought resources to communities.** Those parishes and schools who were fortunate to have a website set up and controlled from out of the New Orleans area, were able to attract support from all over the country and the world.

**5. Catholic parishes and schools across the country could be counted on to respond with an outpouring of many gifts.** Posting and monitoring the ISPD website from Lafayette, LA and Houston, TX days after the storm, we were able to channel close to hundreds of thousands of dollars in supplies and money to Catholic institutions along the Gulf Coast. As a company, we really have never talked about this, but now that five years have passed, maybe it is time that we acknowledge it. We were simply an instrument, a channel, and an avenue in which hundreds of Catholic parishes and schools from across the country poured out their gifts to other Catholic institutions.

**6. Hope was in the Eucharist.** Daily and weekly, Catholics celebrated Mass in run- down buildings and gyms with the walls blown out. What drove us was that celebration, that ability to share the body and blood of Christ with our faith communities. We knew we would prevail and not just survive.

**7. The more people who became engaged back into parish life, the more the parish came alive.** Every weekend, beginning with the first one in September 2005, parishioners would welcome back families who had left and who now were returning. It was heartwarming to see and feel. A Mass in early September with 30 people was now a Mass in early October with 75. A parish with 1200 families before the storm was slowly recovering bit by bit. *Belonging was leading to believing.*

**8. Clergy and lay leaders, working in collaboration, form a fantastic team.** There were so many pastors and parish leaders who united their parishes because they were willing to work together. As one pastor in St. Bernard Parish told me a few years after the storm, “Yes, we worked together to rebuild their parish. That was not “my” parish; it is the people’s parish. They are the ones – they and their families – that will be there long after I have gone.”

**9. True stewardship can become a way of life when survival depends upon relying upon our God given gifts.** For the weeks and months after the storm,

parishioners used their talents, their connections, their expertise, their wisdom, and their time to build the Kingdom in their parishes. True Stewardship was alive and at its best.

**10. There is such strong value in being part of a faith community that continues to break down the barriers of race, class and education and comes together as one.** Families in so many parishes were thrown together to make things whole and right again. And, they did – with no thought of anything other than, “Together we will make it happen.”

Five years later here we are. An oil spill now challenges us, but somehow we know we will get through that. After all, we made it through Katrina; we did learn some valuable lessons that others may profit by, and indeed, the going did get tough, and there were a lot of tough Catholic leaders who got going. His truth continues to march on.