

## The Ultimate Adventure Vacation

So-called "adventure vacations" are apparently growing in popularity: participate in an archaeological dig, crew a schooner, experience a rain forest canopy. Even though these may be more active than the traditional rest and relaxation vacation, they are still ultimately—perhaps even more distinctly—self-indulgent. There's nothing wrong with such vacations. We all need to recharge our batteries now and then, to escape from the infernal busy-ness of our lives, but in this installment of *Ekklesia Then & Now*, I'd like to recommend a different type of adventure vacation, one which might change your life in more ways than a new collection of photos or a new souvenir or two.

Imagine a vacation during which you spend your nights sleeping with dozens of other people on the floor using air mattresses with an occasional tendency to deflate well before dawn, where you share a three-sink, two-stall restroom with them, and where you shower in unlit makeshift stalls with lukewarm water emerging in a vague trickle. I'm in that period of life charitably referred to as "middle age" which, in my case, is only true if I somehow live to 112, so I'm pretty attached to my creature comforts. When I slept less than three hours during the first night of my own adventure vacation last week, I questioned the wisdom of my decision.

Whatever discomfort I may have experienced during the nights, however, was compensated for during the day. I joined a group of twenty-five or so mostly nineteen and twenty year olds as we drove for about an hour to a quiet suburban neighborhood, where we donned masks and brandished sledge hammers, pry bars, and axes as we entered the homes of total strangers. Inside, watching for rats, snakes, and spiders, we proceeded to completely gut their houses. We carted all of their furniture, appliances, clothing, toys, paintings, utensils, lamps, and rugs outside and dumped them at the curb. We used the tools to remove every speck of wallpaper, paneling, and drywall. We tore down the ceilings and ripped out the insulation. We broke up sinks, toilets, and showers. We pried electrical plugs and switches from the walls, depositing everything on the growing pile along the street. When we completed the destruction, the homeowners thanked us with tears and hugs.

If you're totally confused by this scenario, it may help to know that these things occurred in St. Bernard Parish, a quiet suburban area just east of downtown New Orleans. On the morning of August 29, 2005, a fifteen- to twenty-foot wall of water pushed up the Mississippi River Gulf Outlet (MRGO) canal, breaching the protective levees and covering the entire parish (Louisiana's version of a county) with flood waters that destroyed virtually every structure. A month before Katrina hit, the population of St. Bernard Parish was estimated at 67,419. Some experts believe design flaws in the MRGO increased the already-disastrous storm surge by twenty percent and accelerated the water from three feet per second to eight feet per second, ripping away the levees and floodwalls that protected the town of Chalmette and the rest of St. Bernard. While the responsibility is debated, it is known that in less than thirty minutes, nearly every resident of St. Bernard was homeless. When the flood waters receded some three weeks later, some residents returned, seeking hope amidst the ruins. With only two homes unaffected by the storm, according to

reports, the best people could find was a jumbled mass of belongings on top of a foot deep layer of thick mud.

I did not go to New Orleans because I wanted to. The kind of work we were involved in there is well outside my comfort zone, but on February 26, our campus minister and several of the participants in our church's first relief trip to New Orleans spoke during our [Sunday morning assembly](#), accompanied by a heart-rending [video](#). My normal reaction to such mission reports is limited to praising those who went and writing a check. I never seriously considered going along on our trips to Mexico, Honduras, or the Gulf Coast, hiding securely behind the rationalization that such works were "not my gift." But that morning, I suddenly became personally touched by a concept advanced by Paul: "*For Christ's love compels us, because we are convinced that one died for all, and therefore all died*" (2 Corinthians 5:14 NIV). Ultimately, it was the words of one of our college students, an impassioned young woman named Gina. I turned to my wife, who had gone to Honduras with a team last year, and told her not that I wanted to go on the next trip to New Orleans, but that I **had** to go.



St. Bernard Parish Flooding  
[Click for larger image](#)

St. Bernard Parish has become a place of indescribable devastation, but it has also become a place of stories, not the hysterical media coverage that blanketed television screens for a few weeks after Katrina but is now all but silent. No, these are the stories of the people of St. Bernard Parish—stories they are aching to tell to those who will listen.

We heard three of those stories. Some of these are silent stories told with eloquence by the homes themselves when the residents are not there. The first of our stories was one of these. The piles of possessions heaped in the upper floor of a two-story duplex spoke of the family's desperate attempt to rescue videotapes, books, clothing, and photograph albums. The water rose quickly, but based on prior experience and the official forecasts, these people held onto the reasonable hope that their second story would be safe, but it was not. They retreated into the crawl-space attic as the flood rose, and in that attic, we found a neat round hole cut through the roof, where they eventually escaped and awaited rescue. A neighbor told us of another family's six-day ordeal on a nearby roof, but we knew nothing more about the plight of the family whose house we gutted.

Our second story—in one of the two houses our team gutted on Wednesday and Thursday—was of a close family who are in temporary housing elsewhere in the New Orleans area. As we worked our way through the house, the father and his brother-in-law worked alongside, but for the woman of the house, it was too much to bear. She remained outside, talking with some of the women in our group, expressing an incongruous embarrassment that we were seeing her home in such a condition. She had obviously always been a fastidious homemaker, taking considerable pride in the cleanliness of her home. Only when we had removed everything and torn out the drywall and ceilings was she able to enter. For the first time in seven months, she held out a glimmer of hope that her beautiful family might someday return to the home she and her husband had only recently paid off.

The actions of this family demonstrate the graciousness of many St. Bernard residents. The wife's brother, whose business has thrived since Katrina, insisted on

taking us all out to dinner. We protested, but there are times when it's important to let people express their gratitude. Friday night we were all treated to an all-you-can-eat seafood buffet at House of Seafood in Bush, LA. The food was great, but the most memorable part of the evening was the presentation to each of us of individual certificates of gratitude, complete with photos of us at the house. It is a document all of us will always treasure.

The final St. Bernard story came on our last day, when we decided to attempt the virtually impossible—mucking out an entire home in a single day. The residents—a young couple with an eight-year old son—were unable to be there until the very end of the day. They had been scheduled for the previous day by another team and had waited all day. We don't know what happened to the other team, but the residents must have been bitterly disappointed. Normally, it would have been impossible for our entire team of about 30 to work on a single home—it would have been too dangerous to have so many working at once, but God supplied the perfect home. Two stories and located on a large corner lot, it had many exterior doors and several well-defined work areas.

When the woman of the house appeared just before we were about to leave, we heard her story—how the official reports had not been insistent until the day before Katrina hit. She had woken at 2:30 in the morning and turned on the television at about the time the hurricane was designated a Category 5. She woke her husband and they removed what they could to their large SUV (the first time she said she'd appreciated the car). Just after daybreak, as they prepared to leave, she insisted that her husband take a picture of them in front of the house. "We won't be coming back," she told him. They had bought the home as a fixer-upper thirteen years earlier, and they had just finished their long-dreamed of renovations—a beautiful covered patio that no longer existed, new siding, and new windows. The husband's only request when our team leader reached him early that morning was that we try to preserve those windows. It took a little extra time and care, but the windows remain unbroken, but their dreams may not. They face the uncertainty of whether or not they will be allowed to rebuild.

Those were the profound stories of the St. Bernard residents we encountered on our trip, but there is one more story (of dozens I can't relate here) that I would like to share. On Wednesday, we were joined by two sixtyish Canadians who, having heard CBC reports that New Orleans still desperately needed help, drove down from Ottawa to pitch in. They had googled "katrina disaster relief" and located the [Tammany Oaks Church of Christ](#) (see below). For the remainder of the week, they joined the Delaware team and their selflessness and graciousness inspired us all. When we asked them what possessed two middle-aged Canadians to come to New Orleans, they claimed "temporary insanity," but we all know it was the kind of love of fellow human beings that Jesus displayed throughout his ministry.

About two and a half years ago ([ET&N 17](#)), I wrote about how Christian response to storms, floods, fires, and plagues had a profound influence on the growth of the early church. Tammany Oaks, located in Mandeville on the north side of Lake Pontchartrain, has dedicated itself to serving as a relief center for its neighbors. The grounds are littered with palettes of supplies, temporary trailers, makeshift showers, and piles of tools. Every night, dozens of volunteers (there were 190 there during our week) sleep in their sanctuary and their classrooms. One member is converting a large warehouse he owns into a disaster center—storing supplies and creating a dormitory and kitchen. Tammany Oaks is in it for the long haul and in doing so, who knows what affect they will have on the growth of the church in the New Orleans area.

As for me, the week was an amazing experience of empathy, exhaustion, and inspiration. The only serious downside was forgetting that I wasn't nineteen or twenty years old, like most of my fellow-workers. By Wednesday noon, I was so spent, I seriously doubted I could go on, so I told God it was up to Him. Between His power and feeding off the energy of the college students, I made it through the week with no further serious difficulties, although I still hurt.

I do not tell you all of this to seek any accolades. I do not deserve any—I was simply doing what I was compelled to do. I tell you this to encourage you to consider a trip to New Orleans, whether in a group or individually. The [Tammany Oaks Church of Christ](#) will be happy to house and feed you, and there is more than enough work for months to come. Our Newark Church plans two more trips in June and July/August, as well as one next January, which I may join. It does not matter what skills you may have, nor how fit you are. There are tasks anyone can accomplish.

If you go, you also may be privileged to hear Tod Vogt, pulpit minister at Tammany Oaks, whose simple devotional Wednesday night touched us all. Using John 11:35 as his text, he told us that at those moments during the week, when we were moved to tears by the sights we saw and the stories we heard, we were, regardless of our beliefs, just like Jesus. It was a powerfully impactful talk.

On August 29, 2005, Hurricane Katrina devastated St. Bernard Parish, changing the lives of every resident forever. Go there and your life will be forever changed in different but no less profound ways.

## Discussion

The special New Orleans issue (Ultimate Adventure Vacation, [ET&N 71](#)), drew a number of responses, mostly appreciative for the first-hand information about the situation on the Gulf Coast. One Mississippi subscriber commented that conditions in the coastal areas of his state are still similarly difficult. One New Orleans-area subscriber expressed gratitude for keeping the plight of Katrina victims alive. Several subscribers hoped that comments such as mine and others would motivate more people to provide continued help, but the best response came from Charles in Indiana:

"Thank you so much for your essay about Katrina victims in New Orleans, which caused me to talk with our church leaders about organizing a trip there next month. They invited me to speak at church in two weeks and I would like to read from your article if that's okay. "

Obviously, I was happy to give him permission (although he didn't need it), and I'll pray that his efforts are successful.

## NEXT ISSUE: Psalms, Hymns and Spiritual Songs

© Richard M. Soule, 2006 Unlimited copy and distribution permission is hereby granted on the condition that this copyright notice is included and no profiteering is involved. In addition, I would appreciate e-mail notification when an article is distributed to any group.

Website: [www.peculiarpress.com](http://www.peculiarpress.com)

View back issues at [www.ETandN.com](http://www.ETandN.com)

Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version, copyright © 2001 by Crossway Bibles, a division of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.