

Getting Ready description: March 2009

Listening, Vocation, and Compassionate Justice **“Listen, God is calling!”**

In preparing to write these Getting Ready Materials, I attended a three-day planning summit in New Orleans with a group of people from throughout the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, including a dozen very articulate high school youth. I spent the weekend listening to these young people describe their hopes for the 2009 ELCA Youth Gathering in New Orleans. They talked about growing in their faith and growing closer to other youth who shared similar values. They described a sincere hope of experiencing a deeper connection to the larger church and to New Orleans. Almost unanimously, they spoke about wanting to see a rebuilt New Orleans as we pull out of town at the end of the Gathering. They wanted to leave there knowing that every person in New Orleans had a safe place to call home. Without a doubt, our young people are compassionate and desire justice.

I met a dozen or so residents during my three days in New Orleans. These were the people bussing my table at lunch, walking next to me along the sidewalk, and sharing a cab or a hotel elevator. I told them we'd be bringing 36,000 people down here for our ELCA Youth Gathering in July of 2009, and I asked them to tell me what they thought we could do to be most helpful and less intrusive. From what seemed to be some mysterious source of collective wisdom, almost as though they had gotten everyone in the city together to rehearse this answer, I heard each of them respond, "Come and meet the people. Listen to our stories. Hear about what happened down here. Then, take those stories home with you and don't let people forget about New Orleans."

They were not asking us to rebuild the city, to challenge corrupt political powers, or to make significant financial donations. They were asking us to listen. They were asking us to hear their stories, to sit with them as fellow human beings in the midst of their suffering. Listen. Go. Tell. Do not forget. This is the challenge that is placed before us as we prepare to enter New Orleans. This is the challenge that is before us each day as we live as God's redeemed people.

There are many ways to begin listening to New Orleans. Here are a few ideas:

- If you have someone in your congregation or neighborhood from New Orleans, ask them to speak with your group.
- Consider showing the film [New Orleans](#), produced by PBS as part of their American Experience Series.
- Show the film [When the Levees Broke: A Requiem in Four Acts](#) by Spike Lee. Please note this film has graphic visuals and language. You will want to thoroughly preview any segments before showing it to your youth.
- Explore [The Neighborhood Story Project](#) as neighborhoods in New Orleans are helped to write their own stories and histories. ([Buy](#) one of their books for your group, they are fascinating. You can buy all 7 for only \$100!)
- Download and listen to one of the stories at the [Katrina Stories Project](#) Web site. Again, be sure to prescreen anything you play for your group to make sure it is appropriate.
- [The New Orleans Kid Camera Project](#) has some great photographs and videos taken by kids that help them tell their stories.

We will serve our brothers and sisters in New Orleans by hearing their stories, getting to know them, compassionately working for justice with them, and remembering them as we return home. This month's lesson will help your group understand how God has called them to the vocation of faithful listeners and compassionate doers of justice.