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Blanco signs covenant with churches on rebuilding state

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(225) 342-7333 BATON ROUGE -- Gov. Kathleen Blanco and other elected officials on Tuesday signed a covenant with religious groups pledging to use Louisiana people to rebuild the entire state, not just New Orleans, better than it was.

Pastors and members of more than 100 churches across the state gathered at the Louisiana Leadership Institute to pray, sing, share stories and pledge to work together to restart the state's committees that felt the impact of Hurricanes Katrina and Rita.

"This covenant could be written as a blueprint of things I truly believe in," Blanco told an appreciative overflow crowd that packed a gymnasium during the gathering focusing on building hope of a better Louisiana.

"Thank you for a crisply worded document and spelling out that we have to keep our people first." "Mother Nature took us, wrangled with us and gave us a fit," the governor said. "God blessed us all because we saved so many before the storm and then afterward. Unfortunately, we didn't save them all, and that's a sad tragedy.

"We have to do right by our people," she said. "Our entire state is engaged in this mission."

Blanco said she has requested that the Federal Emergency Management Agency grant assistance to churches and individuals who are housing evacuees. Under standard operations, only FEMA and Red Cross shelters are reimbursed for expenses.

She said that's just one item on "a long litany of needs" she has sent to President Bush.

The covenant, assembled by People Improving Communities through Organizing/ Louisiana Interfaiths Together, known as PICO LIFT, states five points:

- The right to self-sufficiency through education, job training and access to health care.
- The right of renters and homeowners to return or obtain temporary housing near their communities.
- The right to project a vision for rebuilding of cities and communities.
- The right of host communities to receive federal investment for bearing the burden of caring for evacuees and providing education and transportation.
- The right to hometown security, including adequate levee systems, community policing, protection from price gouging and an independent investigation of the response to the storms.

Joanne Lejeune, Verna Francis and Ruby Benoit of Lafayette, members of Congregations Organizing People for Equality, said Lafayette Parish was hit three times -- by evacuees escaping from Katrina and Rita and then being damaged by Rita.

Lejeune said Tuesday night's meeting was important because it showed "we have people interested in rebuilding all of Louisiana, not just New Orleans. We want it better than before."

Benoit said church shelters and host families are "asking for the same thing" that government shelters receive. "It's like if evacuees are not in a shelter, they don't care for them."

Jo Ella Dinan of Lake Providence, a member of the Delta Interfaith Network, said the covenant is important because it brings attention to the fact that most evacuees' needs are not being met.

Far more Louisiana evacuees are in private homes and church-run shelters than in FEMA and Red Cross shelters, PICO LIFT officials said.

"We need to help get people on their feet again," Dinan said.

Sisters Josita Marie Ogaldez and Mary Bertrand Neveu of the Immaculate Heart of Mary Convent in New Orleans said they are now Lafayette residents and probably will be for a long time since their convent, school, nursing home and day care were all destroyed.

"We're hoping that one day, not now, in years to come they can rebuild the city," Sister Ogaldez said.
