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## CNS Story:

KATRINA-JACQUES Sep-13-2005 (830 words) With photos. xxxn

## New Orleans clergy want voice for poor in rebuilding efforts

By Agostino Bono  
 Catholic News Service

WASHINGTON (CNS) -- As New Orleans looks to rebuild, a group of Catholic and Protestant clergy want a seat at the planning table for their poor and working-class African-American parishioners.

At a Washington news conference, they proposed a long-term relief plan that builds on the community organizational structure that parishes and congregations already had in place in poor and working-class neighborhoods prior to the destruction by Hurricane Katrina.

"We don't want to just receive things. We want to participate. We want you to include us at the table," Edmundite Father Michael Jacques told Sen. Mary Landrieu, D-La., who was also at the Sept. 12 news conference.

Father Jacques is pastor of St. Peter Claver Church in the Treme neighborhood of New Orleans. Treme was completely flooded when several levees broke releasing water from Lake Pontchartrain into much of the city.

The priest is one of the founding members of All Congregations Together, known as ACT, a coalition of 30 Catholic and Protestant congregations founded in 1989 to improve conditions in their neighborhoods.

At the news conference and in an interview with [Catholic News Service](#), Father Jacques outlined the role of churches in the rebuilding of New Orleans. This involves speaking up for their parishioners, restoring church infrastructures that were functioning before the hurricane and working on long-term programs for an improved city, he said.

"What will happen after FEMA, the Red Cross and Catholic Charities leave?" he said.

"That's when community organizing takes over" because people need more than food and clothes, he said.

FEMA is the Federal Emergency Management Agency responsible for organizing federal response to natural disasters.

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But first there is a need to rebuild hope so that displaced residents are willing to return to New Orleans, he said.

A major part of the congregations' program involves providing jobs for displaced residents in the city's reconstruction, first in the clean-up operations and then in construction. The program includes training people to be skilled workers, such as electricians and carpenters, needed in construction work.

Other important aspects include debt relief and mortgage reductions for displaced residents, said Father Jacques.

Schools and grocery stores have to be placed near temporary housing, he added.

"I think many people will return once they see hope," he said.

"But we have to make sure that our people -- people of color -- have a place" in the decision-making process, said Father Jacques, who is white.

Many of the other clergy at the news conference were African-Americans.

Father Jacques' parish has 2,600 families with 89 percent of the parishioners below the poverty line. It is one of the biggest African-American parishes in Louisiana.

Working-class and poor people have to be part of the rebuilding effort, he said, as do the business community, the upper class and the middle class.

But the poor and the working class are often "the forgotten people," he said.

"Church groups are not being asked what they think, how they can be included," he said.

"Katrina was a reminder of how vulnerable our people are. We need a safety net to break our fall," he said.

Father Jacques said that his parish is no longer functioning because of the hurricane and flooding. Now he is trying to establish contact with his parishioners, many of whom escaped to Texas and other parts of Louisiana.

"One Sunday we had 1,800 people at Mass. The next Sunday there were none," said Father Jacques, dramatizing the "living nightmare" of his African-American parishioners during the storm and in its aftermath.

"We were a community that was functioning. Now we are a church without boundaries," he said.

Father Jacques said that he has made contact with about 450 parish families and is hoping through the Internet and newspaper advertising to get in touch with more.

Once he finds out where parishioners are staying, he plans to

establish satellite parish services for these populations using other priests and his parish staff.

"I need to go out and find the people, listen to their stories and develop an action plan to find a way to bring them back to the city," he said.

On the issue of whether people should return to live in the neighborhoods such as Treme that are below sea level and subject to future flooding, he said that the decision should be left to the people.

"We know the city didn't put a proper infrastructure in place," he said, regarding the levee system that is supposed to protect the lowlands.

It was a political decision not to improve the levee system and a political decision can be made to provide the infrastructure to protect people, he said.

Father Jacques said he did not want "to get into the blaming and naming game" when asked where responsibility fell for the failure of the city, state and federal governments to adequately respond to the disaster caused by the hurricane.

He said he favored an independent investigation of the failures.

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