

Reflections on My Participation in the Advancement Project's Voter Revival Project, October 24–November 7, 2006

By: Joe Givens

Written: November 13, 2006

More than 300,000 Americans have been driven from their homes by a natural and man-made disaster of historic proportions. We've lost everything, LIVES (survivors continue to die each day), HOMES, PROPERTY, HISTORY; now, aided by the most desperate of circumstances imaginable for those who escaped with their lives, these exiled survivors are threatened with the loss of their basic CIVIL RIGHTS as American citizens, the right to vote. No doubt this is a national disgrace!

The Advancement Project's attention to this gross injustice and intervention on our behalf is a blessing that has impact far beyond the tragedy of New Orleans. First, Advancement Project's efforts demonstrate to us in exile that we're not now alone in our struggle, that there are still men, women, and institutions with a conscience that haven't forgotten that there are still 300,000 people in exile. This helps rekindle hope in a people filled with hopelessness and despair. Secondly, Advancement Project's efforts have reminded many of us that if we relinquish these precious rights we have lost the capacity to fight within a democracy and we have then truly lost it all, and if we think we didn't matter before this, we matter even less without the right to vote for our leaders. And finally, the Advancement Project's effort, along with our clergy leadership, I believe, is awakening our communities of faith to their power and prophetic responsibility in this generation's season of challenge, reviving an historic but nearly forgotten role of the church in America.

I believe that the results speak for themselves; not merely in the number of ballots cast, but in the expressed willingness of our congregations to rise up and work together, even as our government seems unwilling to aggressively protect the rights of exiled Americans (as it protects the rights of Iraqi citizens to vote). The results speak in our congregations' willingness to organize in spite of the hopelessness and despair of the exiles themselves. And the results speak in the willingness of our congregations to find a way in spite of the time constraints. With only days in which to work, congregations in Houston and Dallas recognized their prophetic responsibility and accepted the challenge to try. If nothing else, this, I believe, is a hopeful sign of the willingness of this generation's religious leadership and their congregations to stand for and with the least of these. It shows their willingness to stand in their season, and to be the moral standard, fulfilling the critical role of God's church in this democracy.

Eddie Hailes described a compelling story of people who are going to exercise their rights "anyhow," and the story of the church stepping into the void to become the "satellite" voting polls for exiles who can't get home. The story is essentially the story of the church, especially the African-American church, continuing to be at the center of advocacy for and protection of the civil rights of the people. And finally, Alaina Beverly recognized that those congregations assembled for this effort in New Orleans must continue its work together. Your thoughts and realizations in this regard gives me hope, hope that we shall continue to struggle together and that the disaster and misery of New Orleans is seen as the metaphor that it is, an indication of the failures of conscience and policy in America today.