

## **Winds of Change**

*September 7, 2005*

We in the Alabama Arise family are heartsick at the suffering caused by Hurricane Katrina, and we applaud every effort, large and small, to relieve it. The storm has sent thousands of survivors into fellowship halls, homes, community centers, hospitals, motels and other places of refuge in Alabama, and many of our organization's members are on the front lines, providing direct assistance. Public and private resources are being stretched to new limits in communities across the United States. The outpouring of grass-roots generosity, self-sacrifice and competence – and the progress that is already being made in dealing with this unprecedented crisis – remind us vividly of what it means to be Americans.

The images and stories pouring out of the ravaged Gulf Coast also remind us of more painful truths about our nation. We have demonstrated our capacity to plan, organize and implement massive and timely humanitarian efforts around the world, yet we have now seen corpses floating for days in the streets of an American city. We entrust our safety every day to a network of systems including transportation, health care, flood and fire control, and communication, yet we've let our representatives and leaders divert public funding away from our common good. Federal officials have attempted to explain their belated action by calling Katrina's devastation an unforeseen double blow, as if a flood can be separated from the storm that produced it. Similarly, some will strive to separate this event from the political, socioeconomic and racial realities that compounded its human costs.

On the very day that Katrina was striking the coast, Arise and similar organizations around the country were releasing new poverty statistics from the U. S. Census. The four-year economic rebound since the last recession is lofting the top income brackets ever higher but leaving median household earnings stagnant. Employee health coverage is falling. The number of working people who live in poverty is rising. Before the deluge, these statistics would have been unlikely to nudge Congress off its headlong course toward more tax cuts for the super-rich, cuts to food stamps and Medicaid, and other assaults on low-wealth Americans. We pray that the winds can bring a change.

Hurricane Katrina has displaced Gulf Coast residents of every race, class, age and condition. But those left behind for the world to witness have given the most vulnerable – and ordinarily the least visible – among us a human face. It is the face of a minimum-wage worker, a disabled retiree, an unemployed father, a child of a battered mom.

We must keep these faces before us and before our leaders when the cameras retreat. Honor their dignity. Help them assess, restore and maintain their physical and mental health. Welcome them into adequate schools. Prevent unscrupulous landlords from trapping them in substandard housing. Engage their energy and productivity by providing access to

transportation, jobs and commerce. Protect them from predatory lenders waiting to drown them in debt. Stop taxing them deeper into poverty. Guarantee them equal protection under Alabama law. And put the most vulnerable first in line when the rebuilding starts.

It's a daunting job, and good deeds alone won't get it done. We need good public policy and visionary legislative action at the federal, state and local levels. Maybe an "act of God" is what it takes for us to invest ourselves and our resources in building the just, equitable and caring society that we like to claim. We must rise up and speak out, renewing our commitment to address the forces that were ravaging our nation long before Katrina revealed them and that will ravage even more harshly in her wake.

*By Jim Carnes  
Communications Director  
Alabama Arise/ACPP*