



Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

God's work. Our hands.

October 23, 2009

Dear ELCA Brothers and Sisters,

September 12, 2008, was a day that changed my life and many other lives forever. On that day, Hurricane Ike made a direct hit on my hometown, Galveston, Texas, bringing with it more than 100-mile-an-hour winds and a 16-foot storm surge.

The storm surge did the most damage, putting 80 percent of Galveston Island underwater, leaving massive destruction in its wake and the island in a jumbled mess. Salt water left plant life dried out and dead, even mighty 100-year-old oak trees throughout the city.

What I found at my business filled me with anguish: my building sustained major damage from the seven feet of water that rose up from the bay. Over 95 percent of the contents were mud-soaked, damaged, or destroyed. Years of building up a family business was totally ruined; the future I had planned was forever altered.

Statistically, Ike was the third costliest Atlantic hurricane of all time. It caused an estimated \$32 billion of damage and affected areas from the Bahamas to eastern Canada. I'm sure many others across the United States and Canada were thinking the same thing I was: **Why Lord?**

The answer did not come immediately. First, there was much cleaning and healing to be done. Lutherans from across the nation helped with physical presence and donations of money, clothing, and household items.

The sustaining power of prayer comforted us and gave us hope for a brighter future. We knew people throughout the world were praying for us.

One year later, I can see the benefits of this experience. Galveston is coming back stronger than before and welcoming citizens and businesses, both old and new. The island has received a face-lift: homes and buildings have been remodeled, rebuilt, renewed.

My business is better than ever. We just celebrated with a grand re-opening, I am employing more workers, and the business is stronger than pre-Ike levels.

I feel as though I have experienced a resurrection. Good things are coming to light out of the chaos and darkness of what seemed like a hopeless situation.

Why Lord? *Because sometimes we discover our strength and God's amazing grace through life-changing events. Because sometimes it takes a really big push to shake us out of complacency and head toward a new direction to which God calls us.*

It is my sincere hope that the good people of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America see the actions of the recent churchwide assembly related to human sexuality as a catalyst to further strengthen our church and our relationships with each other. I have lived through vast changes and come out better and

stronger for it. I know with all my heart that, with diligence and hard work, we can come through this together as a renewed church, boldly proclaiming God's mission for the sake of the world.

Why Lord? *Because it is time for a better understanding of the love of God for all people.*

If you are considering redirecting benevolence, I would urge reconsideration. We must remember that it is our congregations working together through the ELCA that bring about amazing things. Together, we *are* the church. If our numbers were to diminish, it would lessen our capacity to carry out God's mission. It is our benevolence dollars that fund seminaries that educate and prepare leaders for tomorrow and support the work of ELCA missionaries throughout the world. Working together, we help alleviate hunger close to home and abroad. Without our help, people around the world would have a harder time recuperating from disasters. They need us and we need each other.

Of course, the sustaining power of prayer will comfort us and give us hope. People throughout the world are praying for us.

I pray for the continuing efforts of the ELCA, my understanding of people different from me, and the future, though sometimes it is hard to predict. And I pray for my fellow Lutherans that they may have the strength to commit and weather the storm.

Your brother in Christ,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Carlos Peña". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke at the end.

Carlos Peña
ELCA Vice President