

# A Rabbi, a Priest and an Imam Get on a Boat:

Engaging the Faith Community in Louisiana's Land Loss Crisis

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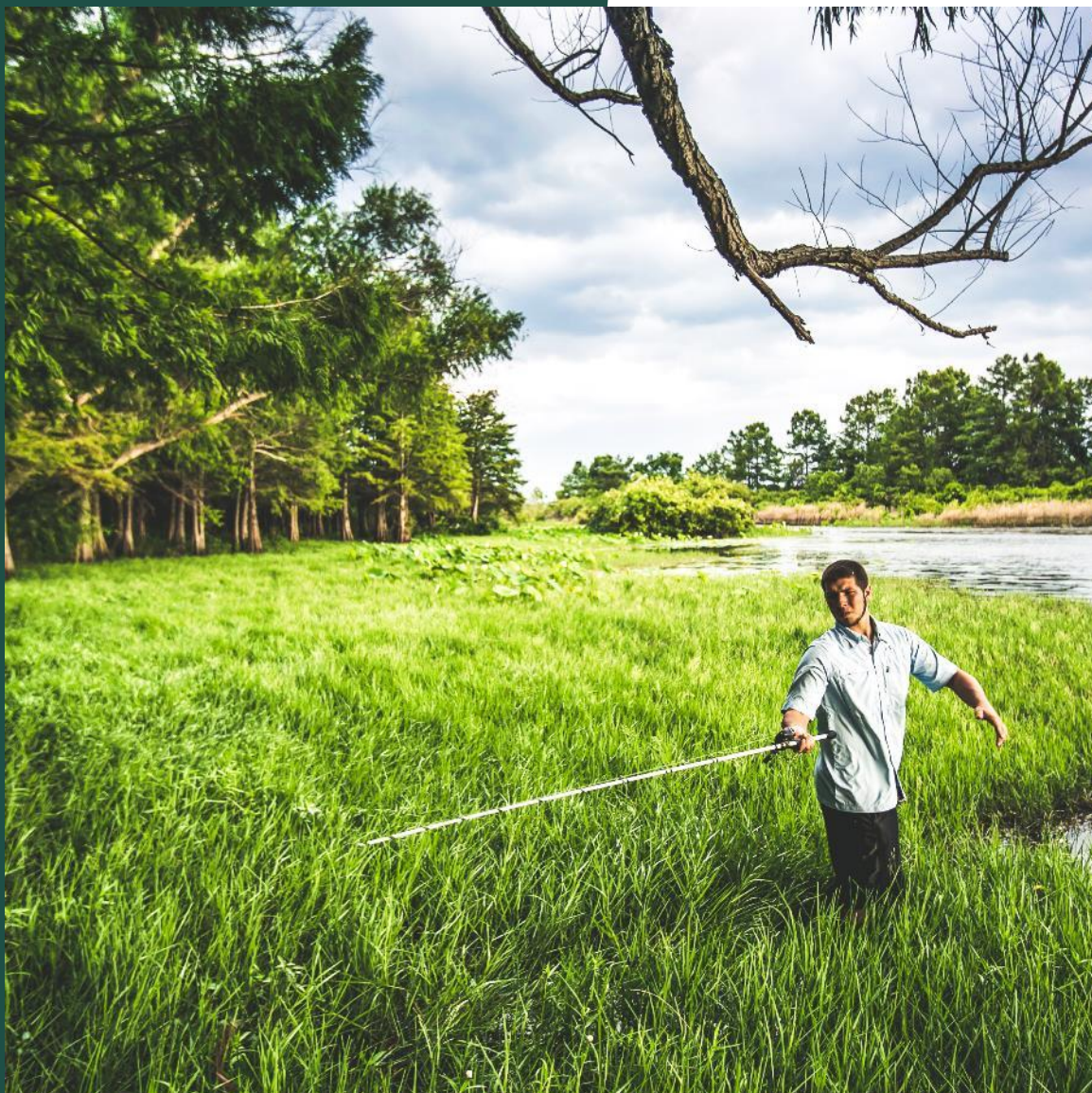
National Conference on Ecosystem Restoration

August 29, 2018



# WHAT WE KNOW

Louisiana is in the midst of a land loss crisis that without action could claim another 4,000 square miles within the next 50 years.



# WHAT'S AT STAKE

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## A LIVING SANCTUARY

for some of the most productive wildlife and fishery habitats in the country

## AN ECONOMIC ENGINE

that feeds and fuels our nation, and a portal connecting us to the rest of the world

## A LINE OF DEFENSE

for some of our most colorful communities

## HOME

to an equally colorful collection of people

# HOW DID WE GET HERE?

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## LEVEES

cut the tie between the sediment-filled river and its delta

## SHIPPING CHANNELS

allow salt water to penetrate deep into the wetlands

## OIL & GAS

directly impact thousands of acres of coastal wetlands and speed up land loss

## SEA LEVEL RISE

combined with subsiding land increase threat of submergence

## HURRICANES

destroy hundreds of sq. miles of coastal wetlands in a matter of days

## SUBSIDENCE

dominates without land-building deposits from the river





# MAKING GROUND

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MARSH  
CREATION



SEDIMENT  
DIVERSION



BARRIER ISLAND  
RESTORATION



OYSTER  
BARRIER REEF



SHORELINE  
PROTECTION



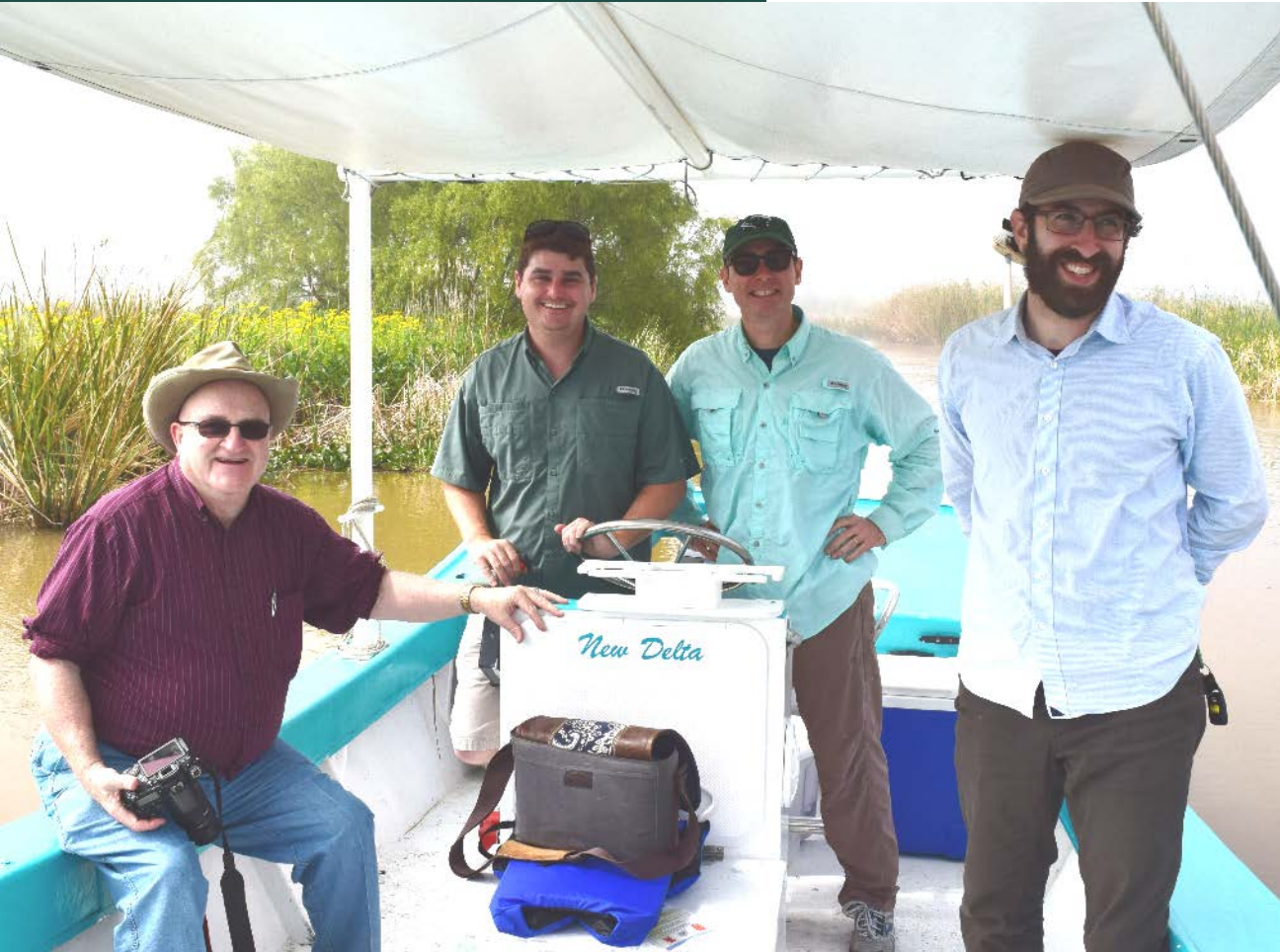
HYDROLOGIC  
RESTORATION



RIDGE  
RESTORATION



FRESHWATER  
DIVERSION



# ENGAGING THE FAITH COMMUNITY

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## Why...

Should we be engaging the faith community in restoration issues?

## How...

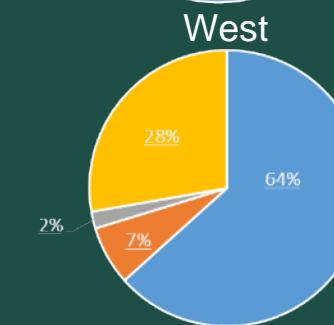
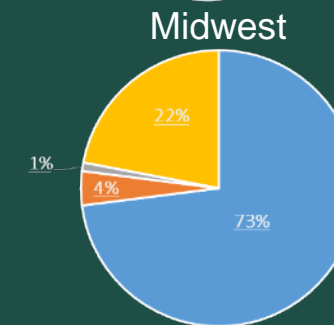
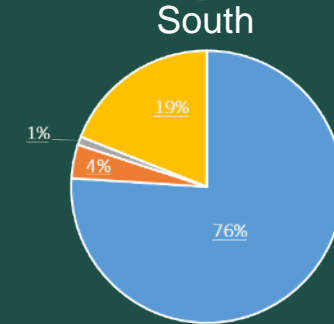
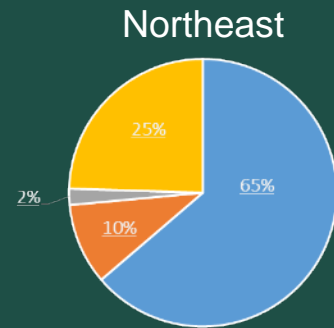
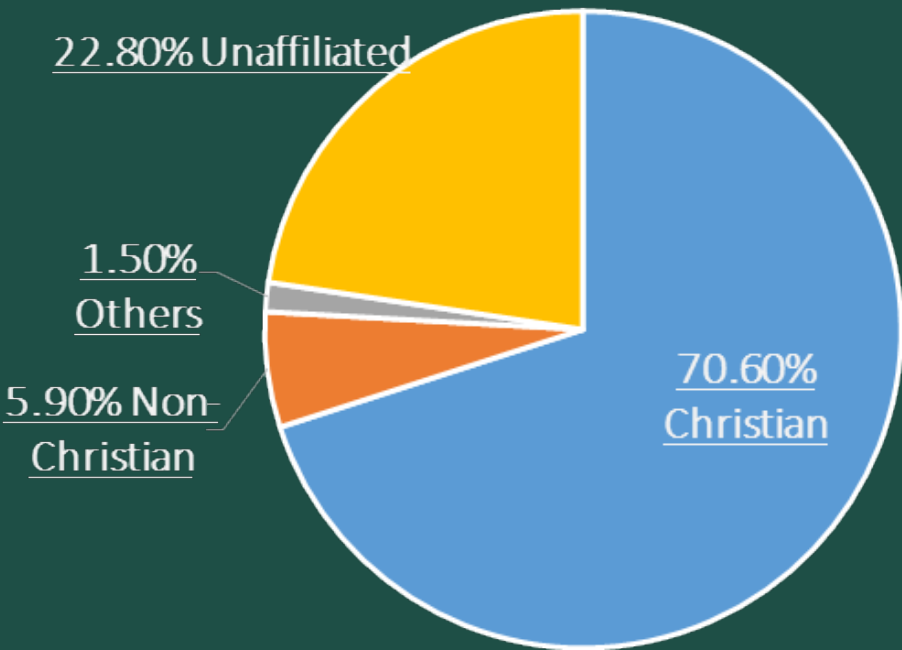
Do we approach and engage faith leaders in an honest and authentic way?

## What...

Values and kinds of advocacy can faith leaders bring to our work?

# DEMOGRAPHICS

Religious Composition of Adults in the U.S.



data drawn from Pew Research Center's Religious Landscape Study  
<https://www.pewforum.org/religious-landscape-study/>



# COMMUNITY IMPORTANCE

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## Cohesive Communities

Centered around shared values.

## Organization Structures

With leadership that can be engaged at every level.



# WHY FAITH VOICES MATTER

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“The delegation’s booth, which offered information and stressed the Church’s solidarity with nations dealing with the damage and challenges from climate change, was met with skepticism from the visitors about a religious institution’s role in combatting environmental challenges. ‘Many identify religious institutions as being either perpetrators of abusive behavior to the environment, or at the most as passive bystanders to the destruction of the planet...’





# SUCESSES IN LOUISIANA

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## Network of Faith Leaders Advocating for Coastal Restoration

Over the course of 3 years I have cultivated a network of over 30 faith leaders who are willing to take action in support of coastal restoration.

## Relationships with Larger Religious Bodies

I work closely with both the Louisiana Interchurch Conference and the Episcopal Diocese of Louisiana to help them build more support for environmental issues among their membership.

## Blogs By Faith Leaders

Our website hosts several blogs from faith leaders speaking about the importance of coastal restoration in their own words.

## Monthly Newsletter

Our monthly *Creation Care Newsletter* goes to a list of over 100 faith leaders in Louisiana and beyond.



# SUCESSES IN LOUISIANA

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## Regular Field Trips with Leaders and Congregations

Over the course of 3 years I have taken over 40 members of the faith community on field trips that put them up close and personal with our land loss crisis.

## Presentations to Congregations

I give regular presentations to congregations and other formal groups within faith communities to develop greater awareness of the facts of land loss and restoration.

## Workshops

I have offered two workshops for faith leaders interested in learning more about how to be effective advocates for our coast.

# ENGAGING FAITH COMMUNITIES 101

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## Honesty and Integrity

It is essential to be upfront with your own views on faith.

## Think Outside the Box

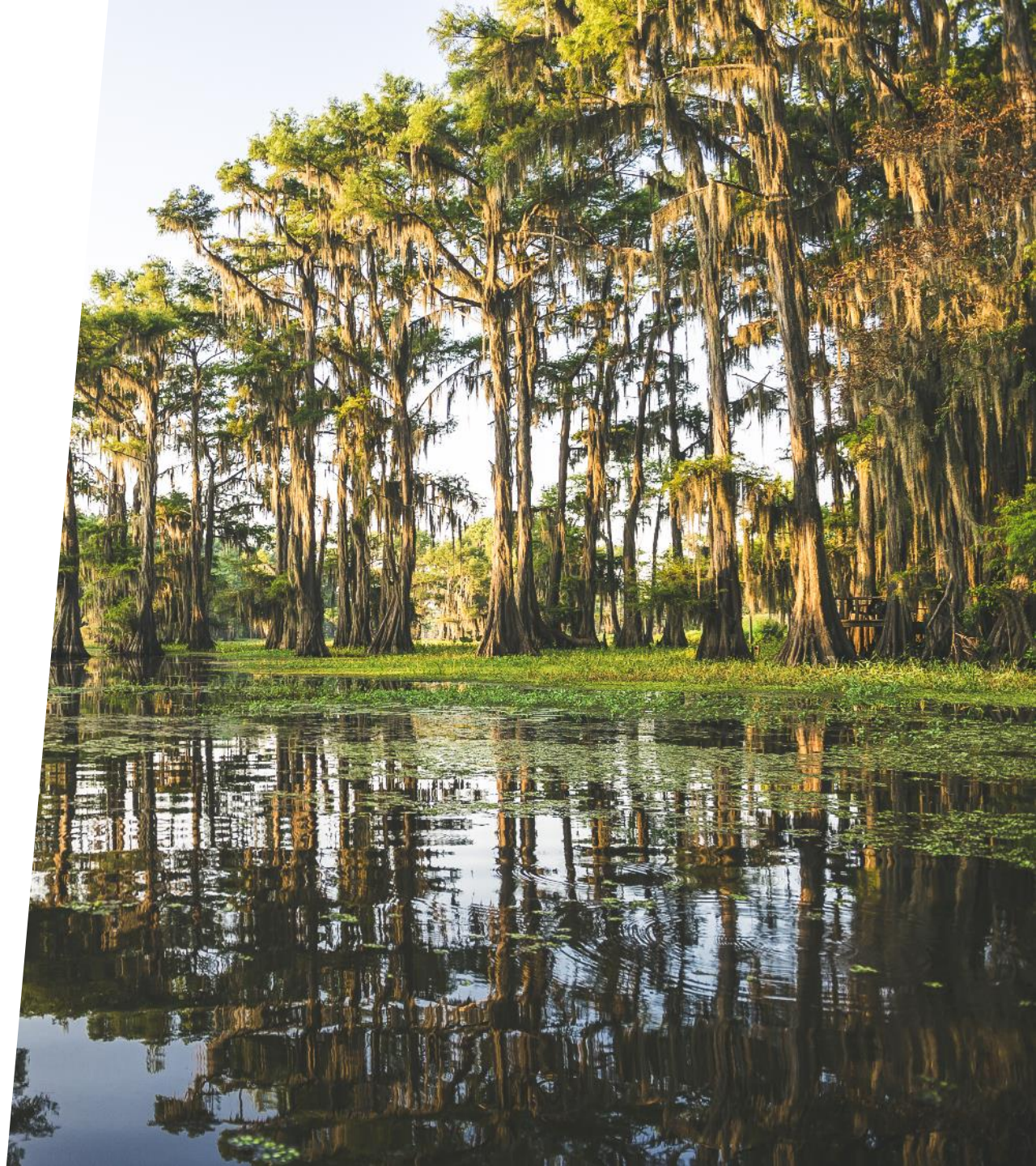
Be comfortable giving faith communities the resources to engage on other environmental issues if they're interested.

## Let Faith Communities Speak for Themselves

Whenever possible provide information or an experience that members of the community can respond to in their own language.

## Listen

Listen to what the leaders you work with want and need and try your best to provide that.



# HOW FAITH VOICES SPEAK AND WHY THAT MATTERS

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Decision makers listen when faith leaders speak.

We have done in-district meetings, sign on letters and lobbying with faith leaders.

Congregations listen when their leaders speak.

Leaders often pair a presentation from me on restoration with a related sermon.

You can create systemic interest in environmental issues by engaging the top of the leadership structure.

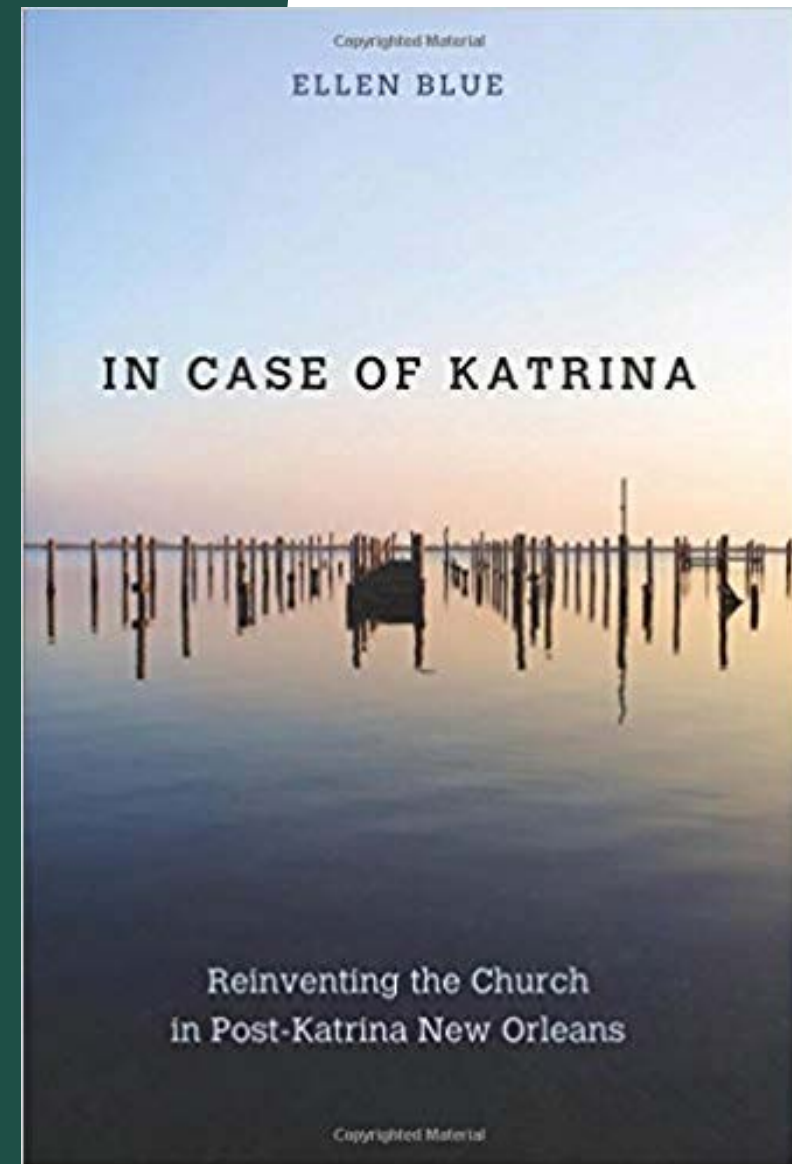
Due in part to our efforts the Episcopal Diocese of Louisiana has made this a priority for all congregations.



# FAITH VOICES ADD: A moral dimension to complex problems.

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“Our faith teaches us that it is our task to make the best informed and most ethical decisions we can... in the complicated situation where we find ourselves today, negative impacts on humans may be inevitable. **The question becomes which actions will benefit the most people and which actions will be the most beneficial for the generations that come after us.** We believe that considering everything, it is right for us to engage in this work of restoring and protecting the coast.”  
Rev. Ellen Blue



**RESTORE**  
THE MISSISSIPPI RIVER DELTA

# FAITH VOICES TELL: Our stories in a different language

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“A group of people were on a ship. One of them took a drill and started drilling underneath herself. The others said to her, "What are you sitting and doing?!" She replied, "What do you care. Is this not underneath my area that I am drilling?!" They said to her, "But the water will rise and flood us all on this ship!" The irony of using such a parable to discuss a flood-prone area aside, the meaning of this story is apparent. The particular needs and wants of individual industries – whether oil and gas, shipping, fishing, or shrimping – as well as the leveeing of the river to protect local communities and economic infrastructures, have all contributed to a problem which now threatens to engulf a wide swath of the state and region. Because no particular group or industry is eager to massively change their way of doing things, then the whole area will suffer from land loss and flooding...”

Rabbi Gabe Greenburg



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THE MISSISSIPPI RIVER DELTA

# FAITH VOICES SPEAK: Poetry to Science

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## Tree Planting in the Swamps

With sole on shovel I bowed with respect to the land and felt the web of grasses rip apart like a surgeon's knife exposing the lungs of the swamp which gasped a sucking final intake of air as the soil split open, water pooled in the gullet, oxygen laden bubbles danced for the new tree descending into the exposed earth in which the roots will weave a path into the marsh, bind it together against the rising water and storm, saving the coastline, and the creatures of the wild will soon awake and learn to adapt to their new environment of five hundred and sixty-four trees and more planted while they hibernated.

(C) Rev. Seamus P. Doyle.  
2/18/2018



**RESTORE**  
THE MISSISSIPPI RIVER DELTA





# HOW TO MEET FAITH LEADERS

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## Network First

We all know religious people, talk to them.

## Formal Groups

Denominational structures and interfaith groups.

## Ask for Recommendations

As you meet people, ask them who else to talk to.

## Cold Calls/Emails

It never hurts to make a big request and see what sticks.

# HOW TO ENGAGE FAITH LEADERS

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## One on One Meetings

Take the time to understand the leader and the community they are part of.

## Field Trips

There is nothing quite like seeing an environment to make people feel invested in caring for it.

## Workshops

Give your interested constituents the knowledge and tools to be the advocate you need them to be.

## Materials

Work with leaders to develop the tools they need to engage their community.





# HOW FAITH LEADERS ADVOCATE

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## Sign-On Letters

Don't write the letter yourself, ask a faith leader you trust to do it for you, and others will happily sign.

## Comment Letters

Public comment periods are a great way to call on faith leaders to take urgent action.

## Talk Their Congregation

Work with the faith leader to pair a presentation about your work with a sermon that supports that.

## Legislative Action

Bring your faith leaders to the legislature or arrange in-district meeting for them to talk about your issues.



# IN SUMMATION

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## Desire to Engage

Most importantly, find the leaders and communities that want to be involved in restoration and give them the tools they need to do it.

## Honesty and Integrity

Be honest with the people you work with about your own views on faith and treat their beliefs with respect.

## Let Leaders Speak

If you've done a good job educating leaders on your issues, they will be able to speak to their community in their language.



**Questions?**