THE IMPACT OF HURRICANE INIKI ON THE LIFE OF AN ISLAND AND ITS PEOPLE

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The house is eerily quiet except for the slowly rising wail of the wind. The minutes pass, ever so slowly, and the wind now begins to release its strength against the house itself, hitting against it like a child stomps the ground in frustration. Now the ceiling creaks and the walls begin to rock. The house begins to shake, at first just a vibration, then a shudder and then, finally with the feeling of a swelling force about to burst the windows. There is a growing feeling of uncertainty: Will the house stand, or will our shelter be ripped apart and will we be sucked out into the dark, wet howling wind?

We sit in the darkness punctuated by the beam of flashlight. It is the only room in the house with no windows: a storage closet with no doorknob. The door is held closed by a rope pushed through a hastily-drilled hole and tied into a knot. Hopefully it will withstand the force of the wind that will follow if the roof blows off. The room itself was an afterthought, just a way to use an open area left under the stairway during construction of our home. Instead of leaving the space closed in, we placed a small door in the garage wall so we could store boxes. We would soon say grateful prayers in recognition that our “afterthought” was heaven-guided preparation for things to come.

The room contains the three of us: my wife, our dog Moki and myself. Only an hour earlier this six-by-six foot space, four feet high, strained to hold our food storage and many boxes of Diane’s beautiful Christmas decorations, carried from around the world to our Hawaii home. Faced with the arrival of what was already known to be the fiercest hurricane ever to enter Hawaiian waters, the precious decorations quickly joined the rest of the boxes that filled our garage, replaced by flashlights, candles, scriptures, family photos and our version of a 72-hour emergency kit.

The roads are all empty save the cars of those foolhardy enough to ignore the civil defense officials, all but emergency services have been asked to stay off the streets. The unthinkable was about to happen: the second of two major hurricanes was about to make a direct hit on Kauai, only ten years after the first! Most of the Island had less than six hours notice that this was no false alarm. An organized panic followed as thousands of tourists tried to leave the island, and tens of thousands of residents tried to stock up on essentials for hurricane survival.

As the winds begin to shake the house, we retreat to the safety of our little closet to await the anticipated eight-hour siege of Hurricane Iniki. The wait in our hiding place is increasingly difficult, but our curiosity to see the source and effects of the noises of destruction that surround us retreats in the face of common sense, and we stay. But then these softly spoken words from my wife make the fear of the wind pale: “Honey, there is a pain in my chest, and it won’t go away.” For years my wife has had a heart condition, and I immediately realize that I cannot take her to the hospital. We will remain in this little closet until the hurricane passes or takes our lives. With a silent prayer that I may speak the words Heavenly Father would have
me say, I prepare to bless my wife. Then as soon as I place my hands on her head, the sweetest peace I have ever felt sweeps over me. I know immediately that whatever happens will be the will of my Heavenly Father. We will be in His hands. Live or die, we are ready for whatever is to come. I quietly speak the words that come to my heart, and the immediate crisis passes.

The following hours would see the total destruction of much of the natural beauty of the "Garden Island." Miraculously, only three people will lose their lives to this terrible wind. Kauai, believed by many to be heaven's most beautiful garden, will never be the same, at least not in our lifetime. Ancient trees, beautiful valleys hung with ferns and flowers and millions of bright-hues blossoms have been obliterated, ripped from the rich earth. They disappeared, to be replaced only by the slow passage of time, a forgiving earth, the restoring rains and incredible human effort. Thousands of buildings placed by man, including many of our neighbors' homes, have been crushed, and most, including our own, have been heavily damaged. Suffering is everywhere, yet tales of selflessness and heroism abound. There is no water, no electricity, no television, no news--no nothing!

It has been wisely said, "It is an ill wind that blows no good." Hurricane Iniki was a terrible wind, but much good has arisen from the rubble that was Kauai in the aftermath of Iniki. September 12, 1992 is a day that will live forever in the memories of those old enough to remember the events of that fateful day. "Iniki" means "a sharp piercing wind" in the Japanese language from which its name was taken. Iniki lived up to its name, and more, leaving a thunderous destructive path on the land and in the minds and lives of all who were on Kauai to feel its fury. But even as the winds blew and homes were crashing around us, individual lives were changed and acts of selfless service and even heroism demonstrated that love and faith will survive all obstacles that life sends our way.

This paper will examine several areas of significance from a human and historical perspective, trying to derive some benefit from the lessons of surviving Hurricane Iniki.

I. GENERAL FACTS

The hurricane arrived on the 12th of September, 1992, after being variously predicted to miss Hawaii altogether, then to pass between Oahu and Kauai, and finally to be a direct hit along the southeast side of this island. The worst of the storm arrived about mid-day, and lasted for 6-1/2 hours, with much of the destruction coming at the very end of the storm after the passing of the eye of the hurricane, when the winds reversed direction, and tore at the weakened remains of buildings ravaged by the earlier winds. Iniki carried sustained winds of 165-175 mph, with gusts over 220 mph, a record for Hawaii.

When the dust settled, nearly 10% of the island's homes were destroyed, and another 30-40% were left with major structural damage. Fewer than 10% were spared entirely. Thousands of utility poles were snapped like toothpicks, broken off at the ground. Roads and highways were blocked by litter of the downed poles, and power was lost to the entire island. Water also was cut off to virtually all areas, and what water was left was usually contaminated. Telephone service was eliminated, with a few inexplicable exceptional lines that remained connected to the Mainland, but not Oahu. Much of the outside world was in the dark about conditions on Kauai for several days, until military relief flights began to touch down on Kauai.

Kauai's power generating facilities are located at Elelele, some twenty miles from the center of population, state and county government facilities, principal medical facilities and the airport. The entire power grid from Elelele to Lihue had to be restored before critical services could be reconnected. Power was restored in
small areas at a time, with the first major restorations occurring at the airport, Wilcox Hospital, then the electric company's engineering department, which became the nerve center of hurricane recovery on Kauai. Power, water, and telephones were restored slowly, over the next 90-180 days to the majority of the island's families.

The physical damage to Kauai translated immediately into an unemployment nightmare. Tourism, directly or indirectly responsible for nearly 75% of the employment on the island, was wiped out. The single largest employer on Kauai was the hotels. Only one hotel, the Hilton, sustained little enough damage to remain open, but it was immediately taken over by “FEMA,” the Federal Emergency Management Association, which controlled federal relief efforts. A year later only five hotels had reopened, and there was not even a firm estimate of when some of the others would reopen. Some properties were restored but not reopened, because there was insufficient tourist trade.

Able-bodied men and few women obtained immediate jobs in construction, which began in earnest about six weeks after the hurricane. Much recovery work was delayed in early months by the sheer lack of materials.

II. RESPONSES TO THE DISASTER

Many public and private agencies and organizations responded promptly to the disaster. Immediate problems were encountered in the County-run management of the crisis. Experienced professionals were hamstrung by the county's apparent insistence on running almost everything in the early stages. Some groups left in frustration, others left when mobilized manpower had nothing to do. The Red Cross, the Salvation Army and the Food Bank of Hawaii were notable exceptions; they remained active on Kauai for many months. In terms of physical reconstruction, however, the Church excelled. When the group called Habitat for Humanity announced the completion of its first home, we had already either rebuilt or repaired over 20 homes with major damage or destruction. The restoration work has continued for many months, and will continue until the level of work diminishes to the point that crews cannot be kept busy.

A. Response from the Church in Salt Lake City. The first commercial flights to Kauai commenced four to five days after the hurricane. Members of the Area Presidency and the Welfare Department, as well as the Regional Representative and the Mission President were on board, and viewed the condition of the Church buildings and the membership in general. Expenditures for emergency supplies were authorized, a chain of communication was established and the needs of members were assessed. Regular reports to Salt Lake City were made by both the Kauai Stake and Regional leaders of the Church in Honolulu.

B. Regional Response. Elder Donald L. Hallstrom, Regional Representative, was on the first commercial flight with leaders from Salt Lake City. After consulting with Stake leaders, he organized a food drive on Oahu, which supplied sufficient food for Kauai members' needs for several months, until a shipment from the Bishop's Storehouse in Colton, California, arrived. In regular communications with the Regional Representative, the needs and condition of the members were regularly assessed. The first assistance after the commencement of the food drive was the purchase of 12 generators, two for each of the six freezers on a rotating basis, allowing maintenance of stored foods for an extended period. They were also used to power washing machines, also on a rotating basis, allowing members to have clean clothing.

The Region also supplied hundreds of bright red T-shirts with “LDS Church Iniki Relief Team.” Each volunteer or member who helped in the relief effort

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received a shirt, and the missionaries each received two, as they were twice as active as the members in the recovery effort.

C. Hawaii Honolulu Mission’s Response. Hawaii received a new mission president, President and Sister Marlin A. Fairbourn, just a few weeks before the hurricane. We had not even met him when the hurricane hit. He was on the first flight with the General Authorities, and was very relieved to find all elders, sisters and the couple missionaries, safe and well. In the coming months, he did not lessen the missionary force due to the lack of teaching opportunities, but doubled it and put them to work rebuilding the homes and lives of members and nonmembers alike. Until the worst of the debris and confusion were removed they worked shoulder to shoulder with members, builders and other volunteers, teaching when occasion allowed, and bringing great good will for the Church and alleviating much suffering. The sister missionaries were removed for their safety and due to the lack of accommodations (damaged in the hurricane). The couple missionaries were asked to transfer, due to some health concerns and the lack of power, telephone, and water, but they “politely refused.” They knew their expertise was much needed in the operation of the Bishops Storehouse, described below. They served valiantly, and were a great example to those often less than a third their age.

D. Stake Response.

1. Immediate Needs. Assessment of food, medical and shelter needs was arranged in the first regular meetings between Stake leaders and Bishops. Priesthood brethren were assigned to contact every member of the Church and complete an assessment of the needs of the members. Within 72 hours there had been a relatively complete written survey of the entire stake. Plans were then formulated to meet all immediate needs.

One of the early projects was the establishment of a Bishops Storehouse. The Bishops Storehouse was created at the direction of the Church Welfare Department. There had never been a storehouse on Kauai. In setting up the storehouse, we found to our happy surprise that the Lihue Ward couple missionaries, Elder and Sister James Bridge, of Raymond, Alberta Canada, had their background in wholesale/retail grocery operations. In short order the storehouse operations were set up efficiently. Elder and Sister Bridge then “minded the store” with great skill. They also dispensed large doses of wisdom to the usually much younger and inexperienced stake leaders and ward members who came as volunteers and patrons to the storehouse. Each Saturday and often on Wednesdays our unit Relief Society Presidents and Melchizedek Priesthood representatives, would pick out one or two weeks worth of provisions for the families who received assistance. It took about two-and-a-half months to use up the food that was collected by the Oahu Stakes. The last goods were used about the time the Colton Storehouse goods arrived. Brother DeBusca in Honolulu Storehouse consulted with Brother Hjorten, who runs the Colton Storehouse, and devised a list of commodities that would be consistent with general local eating habits and needs, and they developed projections and prepared the necessary shipment. Brother DeBusca then came to Kauai and trained all bishops and Relief Society Presidents in the procedures form making needs assessments to taking orders to filling orders and distribution.

2. Reconstruction Program. Next we adopted a reconstruction program to help the members in greatest need, and a reconstruction effort began. A Stake Disaster Coordinator with construction and administrative skills was called, Brother Joe Blevins. We also set up a mechanism for each unit to appoint inspectors, estimators and general contractors. Forms were created for systematized inspection and reporting.
Our initial efforts were to those with no insurance and little or no money. Most of the people we were helping are those with no insurance. And, also for those who have some insurance, but have lost their jobs and can’t afford to continue eating and paying their electric bills and things like that. So the effort has been to help those who cannot help themselves. Those who are insured are assisted in getting their homes covered up and sealed with plastic, so that they don’t lose any more than they have. We have another 25% who have major damage, including structural damage to their homes. Of these, probably 15% have no insurance. So, we have a core of about 50 uninsured families who have major or total loss situations. Many more have significant damage. Our biggest problem has been getting material so that we could do the work. The off-island members who are coming are basically providing their own transportation. We pick them up. We house them. We feed them. And, we provide them with most of the tools. We encourage those with construction skills to bring those of their tools that can be shipped by air.

Each unit in the stake appointed a Ward Disaster Coordinator, plus inspectors, assessors and estimators. These people worked together with the Stake Disaster Coordinator, Brother Blevins, and the bishops met regularly to coordinate and reassess the needs of the stake. Member contractors and laborers from all over Hawaii and even the West Coast provided the manpower for reconstruction. The Bishops were the key to the success of the program, and regular correlation allowed a usually efficient construction program. Some stakes used fast offering funds, which members state-wide were encouraged to give, to pay airfare for workers who could not afford to fly back and forth. Generally the members who received the help would feed the workers two meals per day, and the unit provided lodging, ranging from sleeping bags on the ground to empty hotel rooms.

As those with the greatest needs were helped, we added additional families to the list. Thousands of man-days of labor were volunteered. We expect it will be two years before the planned reconstruction efforts are completed.

3. Use of Church Facilities. Each chapel in Kauai was used in relief efforts, even when they were damaged. Shortly after the hurricane, the Church was approached to serve as a distribution arm for a non-profit foundation, called AmeriCares. It was organized to obtain new manufactured goods to distribute after natural disasters across the world. Food, medicines, and dry goods were shipped into Kauai by the truckload and stored in the cultural hall of the Stake Center in Lihue.

Chapels and cultural halls in Hanalei, Kapaa, Lihue, Kalaheo and Kekaha were used as distribution centers for everything from ice to baby food and clothing. FEMA set up a medical center in the small Hanalei Branch Building, as well as a feeding center in the cultural hall, staffed for the most part by Branch members. Hundreds of residents of the far north shore of Kauai were provided food and medical care that would have otherwise been unavailable.

E. Individual Responses. The response of individuals to Iniki varied enormously. Responses depended in great part on the individual’s connections to the island. Most people born or raised on Kauai took the Hurricane in stride. A few who were devastated by both Iwa in 1982 and Iniki in 1992 simply collected their insurance and left. The great majority considered themselves lucky to be alive, and covered up what was left of their homes, then helped their neighbors do the same. Military personnel who flew over the island on the morning after the Hurricane were surprised to see hundreds of people on roofs with tarps, clearing away debris and even beginning the rebuilding of homes. They had been in Florida after Hurricane Andrew, and were amazed at the immediate self-help efforts, instead of
waiting for government help as many in Florida had done.

As examples of the different responses to the devastation, consider the reactions of two women located a few miles from each other on the north shore. The first was a woman found the morning after the Hurricane, sifting through the rubble of what was once her home. Almost nothing was left, and she had no insurance on the old family home. When asked how she felt, she said: “Today is the happiest day of my life! My husband and children are alive and well, I have everything I need.”

On the same day, just a few miles to the south, a different story emerged. A woman exited the remains of the once-beautiful home on her “gentlemen’s estate.” As she surveyed the devastation, the loss was more than she could bear. She had canceled her homeowner’s insurance just weeks before the Hurricane, and the financial loss was enormous. She returned inside her home, found a gun, and took her life. The material trappings of her life has assumed such an important role in her life that she could not live without them.

Then there is the story of a man who is part of the stake family. After many years of hard work and having obtained a lot on Hawaiian home land, he took off nearly a year of work, surviving on the funds his wife could earn in a small flower shop, to build a family home. He was within days of completion (which was required to be able to obtain insurance) when the Hurricane hit. All that was left when the Hurricane passed was a pile of rubble and lumber, most of which was not recoverable. With no funds and no prospects, he was asked, “What are you going to do?” After a short pause, a smile and a shrug of his shoulders, he said, “We will start again.” Through the help of many members of the Church who volunteered labor and donated supplies, a smaller house is being built near the site of the old home. Family life is being rebuilt along with the family home for this wonderful family. Their story has been an inspiration to us all.

Many good Church members were victims of the ravages of Hurricane Iniki. The scriptures teach us that the Lord causes the rain to fall on the just and the unjust alike. The scripture was borne out for us as well. Most resident began immediately to rebuild as circumstances allowed. But among the transient hotel workers, casual laborers and wanderers it was a different story. Many left the island as soon as they could get a flight, never to return.

III. WHAT DID WE LEARN?

When we think about living through a disaster, we really have no idea what we are talking about, compared to the reality of living through one. Nothing was as we had anticipated. As we think back on the discussions about hurricanes before Iniki, we remember various comments about the “plans” that people made in the wake of the last disaster. Talk, as we know, is cheap. Virtually nobody had a generator ready and standing by after Hurricane Iniki. The rest of us had to rely on a generous friend or relatives on the Mainland, or find a contractor or someone else with a spare unit to use for a few hours a day. Many stood in line for up to three days to pay up to $3,000 for a $600 generator. In less than 10 years many people forgot all of the lessons of surviving a Hurricane. When you consider that Iniki was nearly twice as powerful and many times more destructive than Iwa, there was really very little effective planning.

A. What characterizes a true disaster?
   i. There are little or no communications. You cannot pick-up the telephone. The police and fire department had no phones, the hospital had no phones. If you had a cellular phone on Kauai, it was useless sometime after the Hurricane, but cellular service was restored much sooner than normal telephone
service. Shortly after the storm the Church authorized obtaining cellular phones to allow communication. We obtained a dozen cellular telephones, allowing communication with all units in the stake. Our local company provided six phones without cost, and the others at a very reasonable cost.

2. Utilities. There are no utilities. Public utilities will frequently not be available. We had no power! We had no water! It took weeks to months to restore water; the same was true of power. Six months after the Hurricane, cable television was still unavailable in some areas. Our roads were closed from a few days to several months until the county crews and volunteer contractors cleared the roadways.

3. Personal Disasters. Thousands of people were made homeless. Many people became sick from bad water and bad food. Babies are born without even the possibility of getting to a hospital. Broken bones and heart attacks occurred in greater numbers than before the Hurricane. Three deaths were attributed directly to the Hurricane. The number could easily have been many times more than that. Some volunteers did more disservice than good when they tried to do things they were not qualified to do. One farmer who got on his tractor and tried to clear a road; in the process he cut off electricity, water and telephone to hundreds of people by simply clearing the road to his chicken coops.

B. Planning Challenges: Seeds for Disaster Planning.

We found we must learn to prepare our members to work with the civil authorities. Unless we are properly trained, none of us knows anything about dealing with roads or utilities, or to effectively establish mass feeding or medical treatment centers. We need to ask and then answer the question: If you can't drive, you can't call, and you can't cook, what do you do? The answer is that we must cooperate with civil authorities and support a church-based plan. Our plan must be clear, prayerfully discussed and practiced. It must be reviewed often, at least annually. Without a plan in place we will not survive a disaster well.

Our own lack of a plan was apparent from the outset of the recovery period after the Hurricane. It was worsened by the fact that the Stake President was totally isolated, twelve miles from the centers of population, government services and the Stake Center. He had no phone, no power, no water and no contact with the outside world. Correlation was poor. Three days after the Hurricane, we held our regularly-scheduled High Council Meeting. None of the High Council appeared. As they were individually contacted, many said they thought they should be taking care of their families and neighborhoods rather than attending meetings.

The usual isolation created by the loss of public services was lessened by pockets of services left available to some of our members. A telephone with Mainland connections in our home during the first weeks of hurricane recovery (until repair crews cut the line) allowed many members to contact Mainland families. It was several days after the Hurricane before we discovered that Salt Lake City didn't know what was going on here. In fact, even Honolulu didn't really know what was going on. The was discovered on a weekend evening when the offices of the Church were closed. We left messages with friends on the Mainland to pass on to Salt Lake City; there were no deaths or major injuries to members; the damage to our five buildings varied from very minor to significant, but not severe; the members were being provided for. Within a few days, we had General Authorities on-island.

We cannot emphasize enough that our normal reporting procedures were not available to us. We had to develop alternatives. We adopted geographically-based alternatives. We assigned two high council members to each unit, and one counselor in the presidency to each half of the stake. In stakes where the members of the stake
presidency live close together, but the stake is large, there will be reporting problems unless alternate methods are adopted. Members tend to go to the bishop for advice and counsel in times of crisis. One third of our Bishops were isolated. Therefore, the disaster response program should include specific provisions for alternative provisions for alternative communication methods so that all members may contact a priesthood leader. This works best when neighborhood representatives gather information and it is then passed to the Bishop or designated quorum leader, who then reports to the Stake or other pre-assigned leader.

Do not expect that your bishops will be available. Two of our bishops had major damage to their homes. One home was totally destroyed and the bishop was gone to a temporary shelter. Half of the home teachers may have no communications. Their homes may be destroyed. Some of them may be dead. There must be an alternative reporting mechanism and more than one person in each organization must be aware of all of its members and general disaster assignments, so we can report or meet. The chain of reporting must be at least a dual system. We have the usual system for home teaching and visiting teaching districts. We suggest that this should be supplemented by a high council-based chain of reporting.

One valuable tool in a time of disaster is a ham radio. We had none because we had no plan. As regards ham radio in particular, few antennas were left standing after the Hurricane, but they were repairable. When we consider whether to train members in ham radio operation, it is critical to have multiple operators. For two years before the Hurricane, our stake members asked whether we had a ham radio program. Who was supposed to operate it? How long has it been since anybody saw it? What do we need to do to get one operating? Nobody knew, and that ignorance hurt us.

An area of great planning concern is where our people should go in time of disaster, whether hurricane, tsunami or earthquake. Our stake disaster plan requires each unit to determine the elevations of the various parts of their wards, and to locate state-designated civil defense shelters. Where we go depends on the type of disaster we anticipate, so all alternatives should be studied. Civil Defense guidelines outline the plan for the State and for each of the counties, identifying the inundation zones for tsunamis (tidal waves) and flood zones for heavy rainfall. We have lost several people as a result of flooding due to rainfall on Kauai during the last few years. We must realize that these disasters are real. Real people must be a part of the preparedness process, including volunteering for civil defense positions and knowing the condition of their homes, as well as the location of public facilities anticipated to be valuable in times of disaster.

It was also interesting to learn that some things never change, and the same challenges we face today have been faced before. President D. Arthur Haycock came to visit not long after the Hurricane and told us of his experiences after the great tidal wave in the late 1950's on Kauai. He charted a plane to Kauai to haul food and supplies, including frozen food from the bishops storehouse in Honolulu. He then headed to the north shore. The bridge over the Wailua River was out. He was ferried over the river by a boat carrying all his supplies with him. He found another car and went the rest of the way to Hanalei and met the needs of the people. As he was waiting to get back to the airport, he stopped at the county building in Lihue, having completed his mission. He found that people had been looking for him; the authorities summoned him to meet with administrative officers of the county, where the Red Cross and Salvation Army and Mayor and National Guard were there. They challenged him, basically saying, 'How dare you go out and render relief when we are the official agency for rendering relief.’ He responded, “While you were sitting
down trying to form a committee, we responded to the problem because we have a
program.” He explained it to them and they were not only in awe but asked him to
participate in assisting in their own organizational needs.

What we really want to convey in conclusion is how Iniki changed the lives of
the Saints, and many others on Kauai. We are different now. We have a much wider
view of life and the world. Like never before, we appreciate the simple blessings of
life. Our people have been devastated, but they have been cleansed of many of life’s
nagging doubts, petty weaknesses and half-hearted attempts to live the gospel. Like
the Nephites, we have repented.

There is a concept in the history of the gospel on earth that some things
“happen,” while other things “come to pass.” I know Hurricane Iniki “came to pass,”
it did not just “happen.” It was sent and it was sent for a purpose; that we might
learn. And, we are learning. We have learned to follow the teachings of the Apostle
Paul, that we may at last accept the chastisement of our mortal lives, and finally even
rejoice in our afflictions. We are a humbler and wiser people, and better fitted for
the last days. We hope our experiences may be of some benefit to those who have not
yet had such an experience, but may face it in the future.