



A Ten-Minute Informative Communication of the
International Association of Conference Center Administrators



Winter 2006

THE LESSONS OF HURRICANE CHARLEY—PART I

August 13, 2004 is a date Central Florida will long remember. After over 40 years without a major hurricane, Charley came storming into Orlando and the Central Florida area. The hurricane took everyone by surprise. First of all, the storm was predicted to make landfall at Tampa and not expected to enter the interior of the state. Second, Charley was a relatively weak Category 1 storm and was not expected to increase in strength. Most area residents were under the impression that by the time any hurricane reached the interior of Central Florida, it would be no stronger than a mild tropical storm. No one was prepared for what happened.

I was probably one of the most unprepared since I was out of town when the storm struck. Having been a resident of Orlando since 1964, I was not the least worried about leaving town for the weekend to visit my fiancé in Tuscaloosa, Alabama. In the Orlando area, we had never had a bad storm – even the hurricanes predicted to come our way never did. We were tired of stocking up on flashlight batteries, bottled water, canned goods, Hostess Twinkies, alcoholic beverages, and chain saws, carrying in our patio furniture, and boarding up our windows, only to find that the predicted killer storm had weakened or changed direction.

I had everything prepared for the employees of our center prior to leaving on Thursday, August 12. We had an interesting group scheduled to arrive on Saturday and staying until the following Wednesday. Summers are SLOW in the retreat business in Florida and this was a great rental. There were 37 people in the group, all from out of town. The group leader was from Tampa, Florida, and many group members were traveling from overseas. This group was unusual: they spoke Latin, not just in the Latin Mass, but all the participants of this retreat spoke Latin and only Latin to each other.

I soon realized my folly in underestimating the power of the storm and the direction it could take. I spent Thursday and Friday in Tuscaloosa glued alternately to the weather channel, CNN, & FOX Network. By Friday afternoon, I was calling for updates every five minutes. My daughter was deadly serious: “Mom, it’s coming up the I-4 corridor directly toward us!” or “Charley has strengthened to a Category 3 storm, Mom.” My son, on the other hand made repeated calls to me screeching: “Aunty Em, Aunty Em – it’s a twister,” and then laughing hysterically. Each time I phoned in for an update it seemed the strength of the hurricane had intensified. When I left Thursday afternoon, it was a category 1 storm scheduled to come ashore at Tampa Bay. By Friday afternoon Charley was a category 3 making landfall at Punta Gorda and charging inland towards Orlando.

Orlando got the worst of it after dark on Friday, August 13 2004. Trees were down all around the city, power was out, the airport was closed, and the town was full of people who had evacuated from the Tampa area to get out of the originally predicted path of the storm. The Orlando International Airport experienced heavy damage: planes were blown around, the ceilings caved in, and the airport was closed for several days.

The next day, Saturday, was the scheduled arrival date at the center for the group of Latin speakers. Some of the international guests had arrived early, before the storm hit. What a dilemma! We had people already at the center who had no place to go and people en route from distant lands. All the hotels I called to move them to were filled with Tampa evacuees. After getting reports about the devastation to the Central Florida area and the center, I was on the phone from Tuscaloosa early on Saturday morning with the group leader of the Latin speakers. I was trying to explain to him why he must cancel the retreat and shelter his participants elsewhere.

Meanwhile he is in Tampa – where they have escaped the storm COMPLETELY. I told him that there was no power at the center; in fact, there was no power in much of Orlando for at least the next ten days. He was simply not getting my drift and actually asked if I had called Florida Power to report the power outage at the center.

All of Central Florida at that point was without power. People were trapped in whole neighborhoods by fallen trees, and many people were without water as well as electricity. There were no traffic lights operating, a frightening prospect in a city the size of Orlando. Hotels were closed except for the large ones at Disney World with alternate power generators. No one had power.

The Latin Speakers group leader said they had no plans to cancel the retreat – participants were already there and more were on their way. It was really difficult to negotiate with him because we had no hurricane policy, no tidy addendum to our contracts stipulating automatic cancellation if a storm threatened or if there was no power and the city had been essentially shut down. We had live power lines on the ground and the roads into and inside the center were impassable with fallen trees. The heat index was about 120 degrees from some of the worst humidity anyone had ever experienced, and wallpaper literally fell off the walls in many houses while the power was out. But the Latin Speakers group leader was optimistic and forged ahead.

My wonderful staff got together and cleared the major trees that were blocking the interior roads at the center over the weekend before I could return home. Our caterers came in with emergency lights and candles and cooked for the Latin Speakers group. Our stoves and ovens were fueled by propane tanks, so we could at least prepare and serve meals. We even tried to keep the office open a few hours in the morning before the heat became unbearable.

The Latin Speaking group members were truly bizarre. They seemed to think that everything was fine, actually coming to the office and asking us to send faxes and make copies. They simply did not seem to get the notion that there was no power. It was the most incredible experience you can imagine. Sometimes the only thing that keeps you going in these circumstances is that everyone is in the same boat, there were people much worse off than we were. We had water, after all and no major damage other than massive tree loss on the conference side of our property. All the employees were dealing with destruction at their own homes and nevertheless coming into work to try to cope with the insanity of having a group at the center, in the sweltering heat and with no power. As for the Latin Speaking group? They were very pleased with their time at the center and asked to rebook the next year!

I learned from this experience that a back up disaster plan is mandatory for all retreat centers. I would recommend having something written into your contract and also making it completely understandable verbally to the groups renting your center what your policy is regarding unforeseen disasters. The staff also needs to be aware of the disaster plan and what is expected of them. I now make sure now that any group with a contract booked during hurricane season is aware of our policy. We do not charge any penalty for cancellations if a storm is predicted to hit Orlando. We are happy to wait until the last minute if a local group wants to see which way the wind is blowing, so to speak. We also accommodate groups planning to arrive from other states or countries who wish to cancel a few days earlier when it is unclear where a storm might come ashore. But under no circumstances do we allow guests at our center during a storm. If a storm is pending and they still wish to come on their retreat we let them know in advance that we do not have backup generators and that they must evacuate our property in the event of a major storm. If the schools and government offices close, so do we.

The bottom line: be prepared and make sure your guests are too!



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