



Disaster Response — In Their Words

Finding a Church's Niche in the Ecumenical Rebuild

In June 2011 the Souris River flooded Minot, North Dakota with unprecedented ferocity. Residents had been told by their mortgage lenders that there was no need for flood insurance. Now water sat in their homes up to the eaves: water filled with debris, silt, sewage, and industrial and agricultural chemicals that would take weeks to drain away. About a quarter of the city's residents lost their homes.

Even before the flooding, there was an extreme need for additional housing. To the west, oil production had begun to take off. North Dakota had the nation's lowest unemployment rate, and one of the only housing booms in the country. People flowed into Minot from states with high unemployment. Oil companies housed workers in every motel in the city. People who had lost their homes to foreclosure heard the stories about truckers drawing \$100,000 salaries. They heard tell of fast food workers being lured with signing bonuses, health insurance, and \$15 per hour to start--and streets paved with gold.

Now, after the 2011 floods, the housing boom has turned into a housing crisis. People continue to come in search of work. Newcomers live in tents, campers and cars as they struggle to obtain apartments. Long-term Minot residents share horror stories about finding their rent doubled when it was time to renew their lease. Others are no longer even being offered a lease, only month-to-month agreements where rents could rise at any time. We at All Saints' Church bade farewell to one of our deacons, a disabled senior citizen who was NOT flooded, but whose rent rose beyond her means. She is now living in San Antonio with her children.

After the flood, people with disabilities, the elderly and others on fixed incomes really struggled.

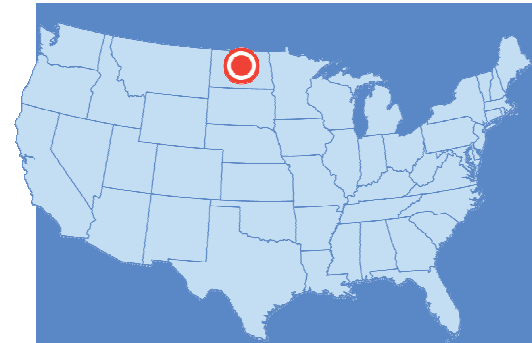
Before the flood, many had controlled costs by paying off their homes and living frugally; they were financially devastated when their homes were destroyed. HOPE Village, Minot's ecumenical long-term rebuilding organization, provided volunteers to help homeowners get back into their flooded homes. Many flooded homeowners have been eligible for grants from FEMA, community foundations have made additional funds available, and a number of organizations have been diligently helping homeowners get back on their feet.



Biography



The Rev. Mary Johnson is the missionary of All Saints Episcopal Church in Minot in the Diocese of North Dakota. She also serves as the Volunteer Coordinator for the rebuilding program.



Fast Facts



CONGREGATION:
All Saints Episcopal Church

LOCATION:
Minot, North Dakota

POPULATION:
42,485

DISASTER RELIEF:
Home Rehab



I accepted the call to Minot following a priest who chose to relocate to a different state rather than rebuild his flooded home. After I accepted that call, I was asked to take on the added task of coordinating volunteers under a grant from Episcopal Relief & Development. Arriving after the relief organizing had already begun, I had a lot to learn on the job! I spent hours each week in meetings with other staff and volunteers in the “flood recovery business”. It was disorienting and frustrating to be so clueless at the beginning. As I continued to listen and ask questions, the complex “alphabet soup” of organizations and assistance began to make more sense. This flood has cost Minot \$1 billion by conservative estimates, so the dollars that Episcopal Relief & Development enabled us to bring to the table were a very small portion of what was needed. Here in the Upper Midwest, the Lutherans are the biggest players in the faith-based recovery community. It felt intimidating at first.

Last winter, I sat on the Unmet Needs Committee of the Long Term Recovery organization, and I learned that there were fewer resources available to help people who had lost their mobile homes.

Some of the city’s largest mobile home parks were in a valley, and virtually all the mobile homes that couldn’t be hauled away by the time

of the mandatory evacuations were damaged so badly that they had to be demolished. I kept hearing the stories of flood victims whose mobile homes had been bulldozed. They were now living in FEMA’s Temporary Housing Units. Many people had no idea how they would ever afford to buy another trailer, and high rents made apartments out of the question.

I heard about a woman in her 70s who, in a panic after her flooded mobile home was bulldozed, purchased a 40-year-old mobile home in a park up on the hill. It was in her price range, but it needed a great deal of work to be safe and functional.

I heard about a disabled woman in her 50s who replaced her demolished trailer with another old mobile home. She bought it sight-unseen from across the state and had it transported to her lot in a park in a nearby town. Upon inspection, she found pieces of plywood covering missing skylights, problems with the plumbing and electrical systems, and a couple of windows broken. A corner of the roof was damaged in transit when the driver hit a tree. With little support for trailer recovery, this was what she could afford after the storm.

I heard about a senior citizen who was able to get her mobile home moved out before the evacuation last summer, but the costs of moving it back totally depleted her savings. She hoped for some assistance in getting skirting, plumbing and electrical hookups,

Bring a Volunteer Group to Minot!



Who can come and help? Anybody who is willing! We can accommodate both groups and individuals. People under age 18 need to bring a responsible adult along.

When can we come? At the moment, with two weeks’ notice, we can find meaningful work for anybody.

How long should we expect to stay? We believe you will have the best experience if you plan to stay a minimum of four days. If you are interested in a longer stay, we may be able to make arrangements.

What skills are you looking for? Our site coordinator, Paul Zaharia, says that we could really use people who know how to do plumbing and insulating to sheet rocking. He adds: “There may be some need for installing windows and doors. A lot of that has been done and those that haven’t are going to be waiting to see what next spring brings.”

What kind of work will we be doing? “Work will vary considerably,” says Paul, “from putting siding on, installing window, doors, installing insulation and sheet rock, to taping and texturing, to plumbing, installing carpet, trim work, painting, kitchen cabinets, and the list goes on.” You don’t need to be skilled, just willing, though there will be opportunities for people skilled in the building trades to use their special gifts.

What people will we be helping? Paul answers: “We are presently working from a list of people that we have gotten from RAFT, along with a list of church members that were flooded. And we are presently working with parishioners that were flooded. They come first. We had a total of 12 members that were flooded out.

What is a typical day’s schedule? You will meet each morning for breakfast and a check-in time with the Construction Coordinator. Generally, you’ll be on site from 8 am to about 5 pm, with a break for lunch.



and a deck and stairs to access her home. But since she saved her home from the flood she was not eligible for assistance from other organizations.

I heard about a woman had been the only person able to save her flooded mobile home in her entire mobile home park. She is a single grandmother and works at the local grocery store's deli counter. She used her life savings and her network of good and loyal friends to replace the subflooring on her unit, and to gut it down to the studs. Her case worker said that she wasn't eligible for assistance from other groups, and he wished he could find help for her.

I heard the stories and realized what our role as Episcopalians could be. The Mennonites, HOPE Village, and Lutheran Disaster Response had all chosen to focus on conventionally built homes. God knows there are plenty of houses to keep them busy! Their experienced workers don't like the flimsy construction of many of the older trailers, with their pressed-wood siding, their small door and window openings, thin particle board subflooring, tiny plumbing fixtures, and poor insulation. These materials often soak up water and lose their structural integrity. Generally some people think rehabbing a trailer is bad stewardship.

When Katie Mears, from Episcopal Relief & Development, visited our church, she emphasized that the grant they were providing could best be used to help folks that "fell through the cracks" of the larger relief organizations.

We were able to identify people with trailers as folks that "fell through the cracks."

We could use our funds to impact people made truly vulnerable by the storm and ensure they were not overlooked.

It has been a wonderful to be able to respond to these stories by saying "we will do what we can to help." Paul Zaharia, our construction coordinator, has lived in mobile homes. His mother and sister each lost a mobile home in the 2011 flood. Paul understands, and he has experience working on this type of housing. Volunteer teams have come to All Saints' from Colorado, Montana, and Wisconsin; and volunteers from Minot have put in almost as many hours helping people with their mobile homes.

We seem to have found our niche. We're getting a reputation. Whether you call them manufactured homes, mobile homes or trailers, we're the ones that will work with them. We have contributed electrical work, insulated, hung sheet rock, installed doors and cabinets and flooring, helped move items back from storage and have even done some weed-eating. Case workers and even folks from HOPE Village are contacting us with referrals. We still work on "stick-built" homes, and we still schedule our volunteers to work on HOPE Village projects. But we keep a special place in our hearts, our budget, and our schedules for folks with trailers.

Tips To Find Your Niche!

- EXPECT to feel confused and helpless at the beginning. It takes some time to learn how to help.
- LISTEN to the stories of disaster victims.
 - Perk up your ears when you hear someone say, "Our organization just can't help people in this situation." or "We wish we could help these folks, but they just don't fit our criteria for assistance." (In our case it has been "people in trailers".)
- ASK whose needs are unmet? Why are people falling through the cracks? Are there ways you can help?
- REMEMBER small is beautiful. A small organization can be flexible, less bureaucratic, and more personal.
- REMEMBER that you aren't the only servants of God. Everyone has a role to play. Find yours and together the community will rebuild.

Additional Resources



For more information on helping flood victims, please see the following online resources:

"Serving By Asking"

Share your own disaster response stories or tips to help a community in need at www.episcopalrelief.org.

Want To Help? Bring a volunteer group to Minot.

[Allsaintsminotrebuildaftertheflood.wordpress.com](http://allsaintsminotrebuildaftertheflood.wordpress.com)