



## Disaster Response – In Their Words

### Serving by Asking

On the morning of August 28, 2011, Hurricane Irene swept across the eastern coast of the U.S. Rains and a dam failure caused widespread flooding in the town of Tuxedo Park, New York. St. Mary's Episcopal Church reached out to neighbors affected by these floods, matching their specific needs to donations.

#### MATCHING NEEDS TO DONATIONS

Even though I knew Hurricane Irene was coming, I couldn't have imagined the amount of rain that fell that night. The power went out on Sunday morning and remained out for six days. I told the few people who had ventured out for church to go home and stay in. Without lights, the church was eerily dark. The rain was still falling, with high winds expected.

At around 10 a.m., I heard the sirens. St. Mary's is located directly across the highway from a predominantly working-class neighborhood known as the "East Village." When I heard the sirens, I walked to the road and watched as local firefighters, emergency medical personnel and police officers began the evacuation of the East Village using rafts and ropes. The dam holding back Echo Lake, just up the river from us, had broken sending an estimated 100,000 gallons of water cascading into the Ramapo River on whose banks the East Village rests. While the residents of the East Village were physically safe, the property damage was significant and the effects would be felt for some time.

*As Christians we are charged to love our neighbor as ourselves. How could St. Mary's love our neighbors in the recovery process that was to follow? What could we, as a parish, realistically do to help? I did not want us to fall in the trap of trying to be "Lady Bountiful," giving to make ourselves feel better.*

So often people start out thinking about what they want to give—approaching the question from the vantage point of giver, rather than the need of the receiver. We didn't want to distribute items we thought were needed and then go back to our lives without connecting to our neighbors' actual needs. In the



#### Biography



The Rev. Elizabeth McWhorter is rector of St. Mary's in Tuxedo Park in the Diocese of New York.



#### Fast Facts



CONGREGATION:  
St. Mary's Episcopal Church  
CONGREGATION SIZE: 450

LOCATION:  
Tuxedo Park, New York  
POPULATION: 750

DISASTER TYPE: Hurricane Irene flooding  
AFFECTED HOMES: 42  
DATE: August 28, 2011

DISASTER RELIEF:  
Community engagement



end our Church's baptismal vow – to respect the dignity of every human being – was our guiding principle. Our neighbors had experienced tremendous loss and devastation; we would work hard to honor their pride and dignity in our process of reaching out.

The priest at the Roman Catholic Church, Father Emmanuel, and I decided to work together, pooling our resources and connections to address community needs. The Red Cross, FEMA, and other state and federal officials were already on the scene helping residents in some ways, so it was important to find out what needs were NOT being met. This would be where we could be most useful to our neighbors.

Led by two dedicated volunteers, local volunteers went out to visit homes in the affected community and get a sense of the needs on the ground. But before venturing into the community we prepped our volunteers. We talked to them about the difficulties some people might face in asking for assistance, especially from strangers. Our volunteers were challenged to think about how they would feel in a similar scenario. Loving neighbor as self involves stepping into someone else's shoes. Though we sent the volunteers out with a "Needs Assessment" checklist for the families, the visits were primarily about making a connection and asking folks how they were doing.

When the volunteers returned that

night, they were energized by the interactions they had had with the community. They spoke about the courage and humility it took to knock on strangers' doors and say, "Hi. I am \_\_\_\_\_ from the community. I have come to check on you, to see what you might need.

Many "Needs Assessment" sheets were returned that night; but more importantly, the word was out in the East Village that there were fellow community members who wanted to help. Within days we had heard from 38 of the 42 homes that were severely impacted.

Once compiled, this information was used to match family needs with donated items. Volunteers delivered small items by hand and larger items, like furniture and appliances, were delivered that weekend in trucks loaned by the local gas station. Human pride and dignity were again a focus as each donated item was inspected and accepted only if it was in good shape. We encouraged volunteers to ask, "would this item be acceptable in your home?"

The following week East Village residents were invited to gather at St. Mary's to organize as a community for the long recovery process ahead. It was a night of neighbor meeting neighbor; our church simply offered a space for people to gather and connect. The message that emerged as people told stories about their losses and shared insights was, "We can do this...together." Indeed, we can and we must.

## Lessons Learned:



- **Assess Continually:** Expect the needs of the affected community to change over time. Keep checking in with impacted families and try to meet the needs of that particular moment. For us, the first week after the hurricane and the subsequent flooding was about helping our neighbors to clean up the water and sewage. A week later the concern was about getting people furniture and other items that had been lost. Now, with winter on the horizon, furnaces, hot water heaters and electrical panels are the focus.
- **Stay Long Term:** The attention span of the media is far shorter than the time it takes to meet the needs of the community. As a church we are called to stay even after the attention has shifted.

## Additional Resources



For more information on flood response, please see the following online resources.

- "Tips and Lessons: 10 Tips for Responding to a Disaster in your Community"
- "How To: Community Crisis Canvassing Project"

Share your own disaster response stories or tips to help a community in need at [www.episcopalrelief.org](http://www.episcopalrelief.org)