

US DISASTER PROGRAM

How To: Street Ministry



Disaster Response – Follow in Their Footsteps

CASE STUDY

Soon after Hurricane Katrina hit New Orleans, the city received an influx of volunteers who came to help residents with cleaning out belongings and doing much needed demolition work on homes. This process was difficult for homeowners, and many times was also quite difficult for empathetic volunteers. Deacon Elaine Clements saw the potential for a ministry, to provide the option of pastoral care both for homeowners as they worked to heal after disaster and volunteers as they helped reconstruct the city. She drove out to different work sites to talk with anyone who might need someone to listen.

A year and a half later, when a tornado hit her neighborhood in New Orleans, Deacon Clements once again set out to offer her services to anyone who needed them. Her piece of advice when disaster hits: nothing compares to “boots on the ground.” When something happens, you have to get out there and talk to people.

START YOUR OWN STREET MINISTRY PROJECT

- When a disaster hits, go to the affected area; make yourself available to people who need you. Go out into the community and identify yourself as someone who will listen. Engage people in a conversation – there’s no substitute for getting out and walking. If it was a slow day on site and I didn’t have many volunteers that needed to talk, I would walk up and down the street where the site was and knock on doors or look for people out, working on their homes.
- A hook is always good to break the ice. The first question I needed to answer was how to make the volunteers come to me. So I put the water cooler next to me and got as close to the work area as possible. Since people had to hydrate, they had to talk to me. Also, if I saw someone seemingly upset or standing around idle, I would call them over or go up to them.
- Having a place to sit can make a difference. It’s important to have a comfortable space that is as private as the situation allows. I was greatly helped in this ministry by having a pick up truck. When I put the tailgate down, I had a place to put the cooler, a place to sit and room to invite someone to join me. Two folding chairs under an umbrella would also work. The idea is to create as hospitable a space as is possible under the circumstances so as to invite people to “come and sit a spell.”



BIOGRAPHY

Elaine Clements is a deacon in the Diocese of Louisiana and is currently assigned to Episcopal Community Services of Louisiana.

FAST FACTS

DIOCESE: Louisiana

DIOCESE SIZE: 18,000

LOCATION: New Orleans, Louisiana

POPULATION: 336,644

DISASTER TYPE: Hurricane

DISPLACED PEOPLE: 362,000

DISASTER RELIEF:

Pastoral care for homeowners volunteers after Hurricane Katrina.

- Deal with your stuff first. Make sure you've taken the time to process what has happened and how it is affecting your own life. You can't let yourself get in the way of the conversation. It is important to understand that you yourself are affected and the need to deal with that. Look at and mourn what you've lost, find any opportunities or blessings the event brought with it and work to make your peace. In other words, let the grief bless you and then let it go. Recognize what you need and work to take care of yourself. Only then will you be able to be completely present during pastoral conversations.
- Don't be afraid of the conversation or to talk about the things that happened. When talking with victims of a disaster, they usually really want to talk about what happened to them. Don't be afraid to broach the subject. Don't worry that your experience is different or that your loss is different – people still need your sympathetic ear, someone to talk to and to cry with.

DON'T FORGET, VOLUNTEERS WILL ALSO NEED TO TALK.

Volunteers also needed pastoral care because the work was very emotional. We were cleaning out a person's possessions – everything they owned and sometimes seeing things that no one was ever really meant to see. Think of things in the bottom of your nightstand drawer or in your most secret places. We found it all, and volunteers identified. So for example, one woman came out of a house in tears. I patted my tailgate, inviting her to sit. I asked what had happened. She was going along fine, mucking out belongings and she opened a closet door. Inside were stacks and stacks of great books of literature. She herself was an English teacher and suddenly this anonymous house became peopled with homeowners just like her. It could have been her own home, and she wept.

Another group was gutting out a house and got to the children's bedrooms. On one wall was a growth chart, actually painted on the wall, marking their height at each birthday since their years as toddlers up through their now "advanced" years of 8 and 10. The volunteers left the wall intact. They simply couldn't bring themselves to tear it down.

So that was the common theme: the humanity, the shared lives, shared with people you would never know, not recognize if you passed them, but so much like ourselves. "It could be me," they thought. And it became real. And it wasn't really different talking to the volunteers than to the homeowners. The conversation was a witness to sorrow, no matter who I was with – the context was simply a little different. Of course, the volunteers' resources were a bit different, and at the end of the day they could leave. Funny, but that also was the subject of quite a few conversations – a survivor's guilt of sorts. They could leave and go back to normal intact lives while we could never go back again to the day before Katrina struck.

REMEMBER!:

Take care of yourself first, before you try to help others. Immediately after the storm I was depressed. My house and neighborhood were fine, but most of us lost our city and our futures as we envisioned them. We lost our friends too because many people left. There's nothing "post" about a disaster, we go through the loss again every day. Eventually though, my thinking flipped and I realized I had the opportunity to live a meaningful life and make a change.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

For more information on pastoral care please see the following online resources:

- "How To: Providing Pastoral Care to Immigrant Workers"
- "Assisting Neighbors Through Cold Drinks and Laundry"

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