



How To: Use Your Church to House Volunteer Groups

CASE STUDY

In response to Hurricane Katrina in 2005, there was an outpouring of support – volunteers, money and supplies came in from around the country and the world. The Episcopal Diocese of Louisiana knew that many parishes in affected areas would not be running usual parish programming for some time, and they also knew that many volunteer groups were looking for places to stay. Sensing a match, they called key churches in the region and encouraged them to open their doors to house these volunteers.

St. Augustine’s Episcopal Church in Metairie, LA, heeded this call to action. Many parishioners were not able to help with the physical recovery work, but they could participate in a ministry of hospitality. For four years the church provided housing for individuals and groups coming to do volunteer work in Louisiana. The Rev. A.J. Heine became Rector at St. Augustine’s just after the church had begun to provide volunteer housing. He witnessed the growth and development of this program. When asked what compelled the church to run this ministry for such a long time, Heine said, “Our motivation came from a sense of gratitude. Our church was spared so much damage. This ministry was a way to reach out and do our part in making things better in our community.”

GETTING STARTED...

- **Decide if your church has the capacity:** Consider the space and its many uses. Is your church an appropriate match for this ministry? If not, consider partnering with another church in the area whose space may be more suitable for housing volunteers. The most important step in this process is understanding what your church and congregation can realistically provide.



Biography



The Rev. AJ Heine is the Rector of St. Augustine’s Episcopal Church in Metairie, Louisiana.



Fast Facts



CONGREGATION:
St. Augustine’s Episcopal Church
CONGREGATION SIZE: 900

LOCATION: Metairie, Louisiana
POPULATION: 19,970

DISASTER TYPE: Hurricane
PERCENTAGE OF COMMUNITY
AFFECTED: 75%

DISASTER RELIEF:
Providing housing for visiting
volunteer groups.



- **Welcoming Committee:** Designate a committee who can take charge of contact with groups before arrival, and during their stay. This committee should be able to answer questions including building concerns and information about local hospitals, grocery stores and restaurants. Create “welcome packets” to distribute to group leaders both before the visit and again upon arrival.
- **Keys/Building Access:** Groups using the space might arrive at anytime of day or night. If you will be hosting groups regularly, consider installing a combination lock box (like the ones used by realtors) on one of the church doors; this avoids having to have somebody at the church to hand out keys. Send the pin-code out to groups ahead of time so they can arrive at their leisure.
- **Beds:** Decide what type of bedding you will provide. Are you simply providing floor space? If not, check in with local and national disaster relief agencies to find out if they will help your church acquire cots. Consider how many people you are willing to house at one time. If you will be housing co-ed youth groups, make the necessary arrangements for *Safe Church* policies.
- **Linens:** Consider asking volunteers to bring their own sheets and towels. If you plan to provide linens, create a laundering system—perhaps parishioners would like to volunteer for a laundry ministry.
- **Bathrooms:** Will the volunteer guests be using the same bathrooms that serve the congregation/daily church activities? How will the cleaning of these bathrooms be attended to? Post a bathroom cleaning checklist and leave supplies for the volunteer work crews to do a bathroom cleaning once each day.
- **Showers:** While many churches are equipped with bathrooms, I would assume few have the number of showers needed to host groups of overnight guests. If your church is unable to accommodate this need, check with local YMCAs, campgrounds, universities, or even local hotels that might be interested in partnering to fill this need. If you are planning to host volunteers on a longer term or ongoing basis, consider the possibility of building or borrowing shower trailers. These mobile shower units can be used later in other locations.
- **Kitchen/Cooking Space:** Groups on a modest budget will want to cook meals instead of eating out. What will your policy be on the use of the church kitchen? What do you need to acquire for the kitchen so that groups can cook (pots, pans, cutting boards, dish soap, sponges, etc.)? Designate areas of the refrigerator for your visitors. Create a cleaning check-list and post it visibly.
- **Space Sharing:** Consider whether volunteers will be sharing the space with regularly scheduled groups, meetings, classes, office space or worship services. Having conversations with these groups ahead of time can help prepare everyone for the presence of volunteers and their accompanying gear.

Things to Think About:



- **Added Expenses:** If you are housing volunteers, it is likely that your water, heat and electricity usage will increase. Being prepared for these extra expenses is an important part of readying the congregation for receiving volunteers.
- **Charging Groups to Stay:** If your congregation is unable to absorb the extra costs that come with hosting, consider asking visiting groups to pitch in. Some churches charge a small fee to ensure this cost is covered (\$10 per person, per night for example). Others try to educate groups about these costs and ask for a donation at the end of their stay. Whatever decision you land on, it is a conversation worth having ahead of time with your congregation and with the volunteers.

Additional Resources



For more information on volunteer management please see the following online resources:

- “Housing Volunteers at Church”
- “How To: Volunteer Orientation”

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