



Disaster Response – Success Stories

Assisting Neighbors Through Cold Drinks and Laundry

On September 11, 2008, residents of the City of Shoreacres in La Porte, Texas were told to evacuate because the Hurricane Ike storm surge was predicted to reach above the roofs of their homes. Most residents did evacuate, and when they returned, 575 of the town's 650 homes were deemed uninhabitable. The Rev. Michael Besson, rector of St. John's Episcopal Church "The Beloved by the Bay," his staff and a group of volunteers from the congregation provided support to fellow parishioners and neighbors.

Once residents began to return, Besson wanted to do something to help his community.

"I could just be with them, so that's what I did."

To this end he took his truck, and drove around to visit his parishioners.

"We were trying to figure out what people needed most and what we could do for them."

Through these visits, he learned that that what they wanted most was relief from the hot and humid Texas summer with a nice cold drink.

For the next couple of weeks, Besson and his wife, Ellen, loaded his truck with coolers of cold drinks and set out to visit their affected parishioners. It took three days to visit all of their parishioners, and as they met more people on their rounds the list of names grew. Eventually, they were visiting people all day every day for several weeks.

During these visits they came to realize that while agencies like the Salvation Army and Red Cross had feeding stations spread out around the Houston area, many people were either too busy cleaning, too nervous to leave their homes or too far from the stations to receive these meals. To address these needs, they began to deliver lunches. The members from a church in nearby Tomball bought groceries, as did Besson and his parishioners. For a few hours every morning teams of volunteers would meet in the undamaged church conference room to make sandwiches and bag lunches.



Biography



The Rev. Michael Besson was rector at St. John's Episcopal Church in Shoreacres during Hurricane Ike. He is now rector at St. Catherine's of Sienna in Missouri City. Photo: Carol Barnwell – Texas Episcopalian 3/09



Fast Facts



CONGREGATION:
St. John's Episcopal Church
CONGREGATION SIZE: 150

LOCATION:
Shoreacres – La Porte, Texas
POPULATION: 1,500

DISASTER TYPE: Hurricane
AFFECTED HOMES: 575

DISASTER RESPONSE:
Drink and meal distribution,
clothes laundering and home
reconstruction



These volunteers included both parishioners who were unaffected as well as those that were – the bottom line was that they wanted to help.

They also heard from residents that their wet clothing and belongings were beginning to mold. They had no way to clean them. So St. John's created a system where residents could bring their clothes in plastic bags to the church. Volunteer parishioners would take those clothes, wash them at home and then bring them back to the church for pick up. There's no way of knowing how many tons of clothes were washed in those first few weeks after the storm, but it was a need within the community the church could easily help with.

Around Christmas, Besson met with the mayor and they held a town hall meeting to find out what people still needed. This time, what they needed was help rebuilding, specifically with labor. With support from the Diocese of Texas and Episcopal Relief & Development, they set up Mission on the Bay, named after the program in Mississippi where they had volunteered before Ike. This organization used volunteer labor to help rebuild and repair homes in the area. Many times they did major jobs to save people money on their limited insurance claims.

By the end of 2010, they had helped rebuild and repair 75 homes.

One person Mission on the Bay personnel met was a homeowner named Precious. They rebuilt her home, and in the process she grew closer to the congregation of St. John's. By the time her home was finished, she had made the decision to become a confirmed member of the Episcopal Church and is now an active parishioner at St. John's.

The congregation at St. John's was lucky because their church building wasn't damaged by the storm, but a majority of their parishioners were. According to Sherry Burns, Parish Administrator, "We had trouble getting parishioners to take help. So many times it wasn't parishioners who we helped; it was others in the community." In the end, most of the homes they rebuilt were for their neighbors, not their members.

The key to St. John's successful response was the ties they had to the community. They were able to help their neighbors because they knew who those people were and could ask what they needed. Besson said that what brought him out in his truck, day after day, were the relationships he had with his community.

"I just cared. I had been in their homes for holidays and house blessings – I was very connected to the people there."

Lessons Learned:



- It is the responsibility of a church on the coast to do everything possible to get people to evacuate when the need arises
- Make sure you have a current list of every parishioner's contact information and a way to contact them once they've evacuated
- Make sure all your parishioners are OK. Call them or visit them regularly – that contact will be a blessing in troubled times
- As the church people will come to you because other organizations have so many requirements and are difficult to work with – you have to be ready to respond
- The beverage that most of my parishioners asked for: cold beer. I got the ice and the beer at convenience stores outside of town that still had electricity.

Additional Resources



For more information on responding after a hurricane and providing pastoral care, please see the following online resources:

- "How To: Street Ministry"
- "How To: Providing Pastoral Care to Immigrant Workers"

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