



One Sunday afternoon two weeks after the flood receded, around 30 volunteers gathered with Jones at the church, many bringing their children. Jones told the volunteers that they would be divided into teams of 4, and each team needed one team captain. These teams were responsible for handing out cards to specific addresses on the city list, as well as any other people they might find working at homes within their assigned area. In case the volunteers encountered anyone with needs bigger than a gift card or a listening ear could solve, Jones gave the volunteers the phone number for an organization that had been set up to provide referrals to assist with specific needs. Finally, each team captain signed for the cards they were to distribute (each card was numbered for better tracking), and the teams set out.

As teams walked through the neighborhoods they saw the devastation, and as volunteer Marie Gambetta described, were met with an overwhelming odor of mold, mildew and rot. They were invited into homes, they saw what was lost and what was saved, and lent support as people grieved the loss of pictures and memories. For Gambetta, a mother of two, a very poignant story for her was of entering the home of a woman who was devastated when she realized she had lost all the Christmas decorations she had collected through the years.

The program took place on a Sunday, in the hopes that it would be the best time to find people cleaning their homes. Though they wanted to reach as many people as possible, volunteers were initially nervous about simply showing up in these devastated communities. It worried them how individuals would respond to groups of volunteers who had suffered nothing, offering a paltry \$50 to people who had suffered huge losses. But time and again, volunteers only saw how thankful people were.

People seemed so thankful to have someone just to talk to and cry with, thankful that there was so much goodness around them, and thankful because “God was good.”

At the end of the day, the volunteers all met back at the church to discuss what they had seen and heard, what they felt and how it had changed them. Jones knows that for the 30 parishioners who participated, the project was life-changing. These volunteers had been nervous going in and were transformed. Jones and Gambetta both believe that if the congregation were ever asked to do something like this again, they would do so “without hesitation.”

Follow Up!



Most of the 247 cards were handed out that first Sunday, but a few people from the city list weren't home. For those families, a second distribution was planned within the following two weeks.

A year later the congregation invited card recipients to the church to share their stories with them. Five families participated in the event, and this was a meaningful activity for volunteers as well as a great opportunity for them to share their experience with the rest of the congregation.

If the Rev. Jones were to do this project again, he would like to make sure follow-up was done sooner – within the first three months after the distribution. He also thinks it's key that the original volunteers involved in the distribution should be involved in whatever kind of follow-up you decide on.

Additional Resources



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

- “Flooding in Pontiac, IL – Helping the Most Vulnerable”
- “Community Crisis Canvassing Project: Distributing Gift Cards in Munster”

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