



Disaster Response – In Their Words

Housing Volunteers at Church

Hurricane Katrina in 2005 was one of the costliest storms in U.S. history, causing over \$110 billion and affecting 275,000 homes. Following the disaster, Louisiana received support in the form of financial and material donations and volunteers from all over the country and the world. St. Augustine's Episcopal Church in Metairie, part of the New Orleans Metropolitan Area, hosted many of these volunteer groups in their church.

A TRANSFORMATIONAL EXPERIENCE

Our church was spared from significant damage during Hurricane Katrina but that was not true for most of our neighbors. As we looked around and saw what others were dealing with, we wanted to do our part to help our community. Because we're an older population, we didn't have the people to go out and gut homes, but we did have a building that wasn't really being used.

After the storm there was this tragic-euphoric wave of people who wanted to help. The diocese was getting calls from people around the country, and the world, wanting to come down to Louisiana and pitch in. The diocese knew that St. Augustine's had space and that we weren't using it for our usual parish programming. They called us to ask if we would be willing to house volunteers.

I am not sure we would have come up with the idea ourselves, but after having offered this ministry it is something I would strongly encourage other churches to consider.

Far from stagnant, this ministry changed over time. The first wave of people on the scene just showed up with their sleeping bags. They slept everywhere, in classrooms, the choir room, the parish hall, the hallways—wherever they could find a spot. At that point we didn't yet have shower facilities, so we teamed up with the local YMCA to make sure we could meet that need.

At the peak of our relief efforts, we had groups coming every week of the month, usually staying three to seven days. Most of the groups were church



Biography



The Rev. A.J. 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.



youth groups; we also had some adult groups and even some businesses who came down. It was a lot of people coming and going, and to some degree we just had to trust them in the space. We designated a “welcoming committee” whose names visitors would be given to call and coordinate details. We also got a combination lock box for the church gate so that people could let themselves in whenever they arrived.

Life in community inevitably leads to conflict and there are definitely those moments where it can be a hassle to share space. You have to shuffle rooms, deal with occasional messes, and accommodate for a range of needs. For example, every single group bought mustard, ketchup and mayo; eventually the church had 30 open jars crowding the fridge, making it tough for church programs to find any space. But if half your city – your neighbors – are sleeping without sheetrock on their walls, it is hard to complain over the little things.

Far more than difficult moments, there was a lot of joy. It is amazing seeing people of good faith come in energized to help—it re-energized us to do good work too. There was a cloud of despair over the whole community sometimes, and these volunteers were a constant reminder that people hadn’t forgotten about us. Those volunteer groups were doing awful, hard work but they were filled with joy doing it, and it affected us to see that. Without the hurricane we might not have been moved to do

this, and I am glad that we did.

But, as time went forward there was a moment when it became clear that we needed our whole space back to start full programming again and to grow as a church. We ran our volunteer housing ministry until Dec. of 2009 –about four years –then we celebrated it and closed it down. As I look back, the biggest thing I feel is the joy of how our congregation was transformed by this ministry. We were given an opportunity to cultivate relationships with people who returned year after year. My wife and I just ran into volunteers from Chicago who had once stayed at the church; only this time they were in town working on coastal erosion! They still come down, all these years later, because of relationships they formed doing service.

It’s in experiences like this that you see what “Anglican Community” means. You see that we’re really an international church. For me, it cleared some of the acrimony that was still in the air from the big split that had taken place; it was very healing to see what we DO agree on.

After Katrina a lot of people rediscovered the joy of service. We learned that through service, walls come down and lives are changed. These interactions provided a way of knowing each other that we never would have had otherwise. It was a little glimpse into the Kingdom of God.

Donations:



- People who came to work with us early on were really impacted by their experiences and wanted to help the ministry by improving the space for future groups of volunteers. Several groups went home and raised money to improve our facilities. A group from the Diocese of Alabama donated hot water heaters and showers to our church, and another group donated washers and dryers, which was a huge help for folks working construction for long hours in the heat.
- Somewhere between 9-15 months after the hurricane, resources from the Office of Disaster Response became available, as did donations from the national and international church. We were able to get army cots and foam mats so that our volunteers would be more comfortable.

Additional Resources



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

- “How To: Use Your Church to House Volunteer Groups”
- “How To: Volunteer Orientation”

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