Success Stories: Creating Respite Space in a Winter Storm

During the 2014-2015 winter, the Boston area was pelted with more than 110” of snow, which crippled the public transportation system and kept people from attending work and school. Many school districts had as many as eight snow days in the space of a month. Travel bans prevented people from leaving their homes for days. Fuses were short and kids were antsy.

In response, Christ Church in Waltham, Massachusetts, opened its doors on one of those snow days for activities, food and fun. Waltham, about 10 miles from Boston, is a suburb of about 62,000 filled with families with young children. Of Christ Church Waltham’s approximately 125 members, around 60 of them are children.

“I was watching my kids physically unable to sit still to eat their dinner when I realized that none of us could handle another day stuck inside – and that we didn’t have to,” said the Rev. Sara Irwin, rector of Christ Church.

School was cancelled, but the forecast for the next day was clear – it was just the snow cleanup that cancelled school. Irwin had the idea to open her parish to anyone in need of respite fun. She first posted her idea on Facebook and Twitter to gauge interest, and then took action. “I got on the phone and started texting the parish children’s ministries folks to find out if we could get a critical mass off the ground to welcome our community in for some respite fun. When it looked like a ‘go,’ I drafted an all-parish email and promoted on Facebook and Twitter that the church would be open for games, music and lunch.” After raiding the Sunday School rooms for craft supplies and pulling out some board games that had been previously donated to the church, they opened the doors. The food was donated by a parishioner who wanted to support the effort and had leftovers from a party over the weekend.

Throughout the day, 15-20 parents and kids came through, grateful for adult
conversation and a safer place for their kids to run around. The kids in her congregation were having fun, and the adults were able to exhale and rest for the first time in a week or so. The kids were able to burn the energy they had built up over the days of being stuck inside through games and activities with their peers. Seeing these results really encouraged Irwin, who says the experience encouraged her sense of adventure and ministry: “It wasn’t about articulating a dramatic vision and having an exhaustive checklist, but instead it was ‘let’s just do this.’”

Irwin utilized social media to help spread the word among her congregation. She promoted the event through both her personal and her church’s Facebook and Twitter accounts. In addition, they posted a sign board on the sidewalk to invite people inside.

“It wasn’t initially intended just to be for families, but they were the people who seemed most in need of the community time.”

She also stressed the importance of responding to your context and being within your community, both of which helped her to respond to the unmet needs of the area.

Social Media played a big part in spreading the idea to other local congregations. Because Irwin is friends with other local clergy on Facebook and Twitter, they were able to see her idea and implement it within their own parishes.

Having structures already in place enabled them to launch the day quickly. The parish uses an email listserv (MailChimp), so they only needed to edit an existing template. Because the culture of leadership within the parish is informal and experimental, they were able to adopt a casual “Sure, let’s try it,” approach.

This flexibility and spirit of openness helped them many times during that particularly harsh winter. The week after the Snow Day, another blizzard was slated for Sunday morning. With email and a few phone calls, they were able to hold church at 4:00 Saturday afternoon instead. Because they had well-established networks, they were able to adapt quickly to the unforeseen circumstances and to respond accordingly.

Lessons Learned

- Have some rainy day supplies at the ready; if not in the children’s education area, then tucked in a closet somewhere. Things like games, juice boxes, ample paper and crayons go a long way.

- Have communication plans in place that are easily replicable. Because the parish already communicated through social media and email often, the parishioners knew to check for church communications that way.

- Think ahead to how the event will be shared and what can be done quickly. Make a simple .jpg virtual “flier” that can be shared from person to person on social media easily.

Additional Resources

For more information on creating respite space, please see the following online resources:

“How To: Host a Respite Space for Young Families”

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