

## U.S. Disaster Program

### Disaster Response – In Their Words

# Offering food, calm and support in a potentially violent police standoff

When a Baltimore-area man barricaded himself in his house after threatening other occupants, nearby St. Thomas' Episcopal Church in Towson, MD, found itself the staging area for the police response. In the hours that followed, the church also became a location for the man's family and friends to gather, as well as a place where parishioners could offer compassionate presence to those involved. The daylong crisis on Dec. 18, 2013, ended without violence after the man turned himself over to police.

Sharon Tillman, diocesan disaster coordinator for the Diocese of Maryland, described St. Thomas' response as "an example of being open and available when something happens in your neighborhood, not necessarily something you plan for."

"The staff of the church was in a position to have their space utilized in an emergency situation," she said. "The offering of hospitality to those involved – victims, police, emergency workers – is sometimes all that is needed in response to a crisis, but means so much to those involved."

The Rev. Loree Penner, rector of St. Thomas' Episcopal Church, described it as "quite a day."

"I am very thankful that we were able to offer hospitality and the ministry of presence to both the family and the police," she said.

The day after the incident, Penner shared with parishioners her first-hand account of how St. Thomas' responded.

### OFFERING HOSPITALITY: "THE GIFT OF GOD'S LOVE AND WELCOME"

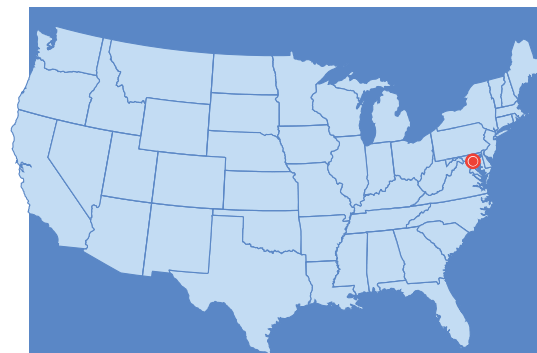
Yesterday I was on my way to a graveside service at Druid Hill for someone tangentially related to St. Thomas'. As I sat in the hearse on Interstate 695, I received a message from our parish administrator. She told me that our parking lot was full of police cars, a SWAT vehicle, and ambulances. She had opened the fellowship hall for the police and rescue personnel, and the Fire Department auxiliary was serving hot food and drinks.

There was a man who had barricaded himself into his house on Gypsy Lane. Before he did that, he had attacked his mother. She and the landlady, who lived upstairs, were rescued by the police and brought to St. Thomas'.



### Biography

The Rev. Loree Penner is rector of St. Thomas' Episcopal Church in Towson, MD.



### Fast Facts



**CONGREGATION**  
St. Thomas Episcopal Church

**CONGREGATION SIZE**  
300 Members

**LOCATION**  
Towson, MD

**DISASTER**  
A police stand-off at a nearby home

**RESPONSE**  
Hospitality and the use of church space



**Police blocked off part of the neighborhood around St. Thomas Episcopal Church in Towson, MD, when a neighbor barricaded himself in a nearby home Dec. 18, 2013.**

By the time I got here, the siege had been going for a few hours. The parish administrator and I remained in the Fellowship Hall the rest of the day until the evening. There were five family members and friends of the young man, including his rescued mother and landlady, stuck here until the situation was over.

**Police came and went as they got hamburgers for their coworkers who were staked out in the woods between here and the house, or for those who were stopping traffic on Providence Road and Hampton Lane.**

John Windsor, our lay pastoral associate, came by to see if we were okay, and ended up staying here, talking with the family and running errands for them.

Those who were negotiating with the young man needed a place to go that was private, so they went to my office – the only warm place in the building that was available. They were there until about 5:00 or 5:30 when the young man finally gave up and came out.

**We sat with the family giving thanks for the peaceful solution to what could have ended in a terrible way.**

The family was here, and then at our lay pastoral associate's house, until about 8:00, when they were finally able to go home and get some things, including the family dog.

If you were to have been here about 6:00 last night, you would have seen nearly 50 police officers in the Fellowship Hall, some of them part of the SWAT and K-9 units. They came, ate, had coffee, and relaxed a bit before heading home after a very long and tense day.

St. Thomas' ended up being the hub of a very different kind of ministry than we do on Sunday mornings, but ministry all the same. Whether it is offering communion on Sundays or hamburgers and hot dogs to hungry, tired policemen, we are offering hospitality – the gift of God's love, and welcome to strangers. I count it a privilege that God entrusted us with such an event.

## The ingredients of an effective church response

The Rev. Loree Penner says St. Thomas' Episcopal Church has a few unique assets that helped it to respond to the crisis – from relationships in the community to lots of parking spaces.

- Penner said that Parish Administrator Dawn Pahl was the biggest factor in the congregation's response. Pahl and her husband volunteer with a local fire department. "When she saw the police and ambulances pull in, she didn't hesitate to go and find out what was going on," Penner said. "She then called and made sure the Fire Department's Auxiliary would come with food and coffee for all who were there, and opened up our Fellowship Hall to serve food and give a place for people to take a break."
- The parish's lay pastoral associate, John Windsor, arrived and provided pastoral support to the family members who had been evacuated from the crime scene. "He gave the family prayer shawls to keep them warmer, and sat with them throughout the crisis," Penner said.
- Finally, St. Thomas' has a large parking lot that made it a good location for responders to gather and set up a staging area for the response.

## Additional Resources



For other "In Their Words" accounts see the following online resources at [www.episcopalrelief.org/resourcelibrary](http://www.episcopalrelief.org/resourcelibrary):

- [Housing Volunteers at Church](#)
- [How Disaster Chaplaincy Changed My Life](#)
- [Finding a Church's Niche in an Ecumenical Rebuild](#)
- [Serving by Asking](#)

For more information on the US Disaster Program visit:

[www.episcopalrelief.org/usdisaster](http://www.episcopalrelief.org/usdisaster)