



Disaster Response – Success Stories

Community Crisis Canvassing Project: Distributing Gift Cards in Munster

On September 14, when heavy rains brought flood waters within half a mile of their church, the members of St. Paul's Episcopal Church in Munster, Indiana were anxious to figure out how they could best help their neighbors. Within the first two days, their rector, the Rev. Bennett Jones, started making calls to people with experience in flood relief for advice on what to do. They gave him all kinds of suggestions on what sorts of assistance St. Paul's could distribute to the community: flood kits (a bucket with a mop, rags, etc.), food and/or clothes.

However, after much reflection and conversations with congregants and vestry members, the church decided that the important question to answer was *who* to help rather than *what* to give.

Munster is a middle-income town on the outskirts of Chicago. It's not a particularly low-lying area, and the 2008 flood was completely unexpected. St. Paul's is a small church of about 70 members, with everyone from small children to grandparents. Despite their small size, the congregation has strong ties to the community, and through a parishioner Jones found a city employee who was able to give him a list of names and addresses of people who needed extra help, beyond what the government could give. Because Jones and the church members wanted to allow recipients the freedom to determine *what* they needed, they decided to hand out \$50 gift cards from a local all-in-one store to be used as the person felt best.

The next step was to find volunteers to canvass the neighborhoods and hand out the gift cards. Jones called each family in the parish and invited them to participate. He made sure to alleviate any fears they might have: he clarified what he was asking them to do, specified that they would be working in teams and would not be alone, and assured them that they would be trained before setting out and that each person would have an official name badge.



The Bishop Little and a representative of St. Paul's distributing cards— photo courtesy of the Rev. Bennett Jones



Fast Facts



CONGREGATION:

St. Paul's Episcopal Church
CONGREGATION SIZE: 75

LOCATION: Munster, Indiana
POPULATION: 22,500

DISASTER TYPE: Flood
AFFECTED HOMES: 18,000

DISASTER RELIEF:
Distributing gift cards to
persons in need



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.er-d.org