



Disaster Response – Success Stories

Preparing with Church Partnerships

Bill and Tammie Taylor were living in Houston when Hurricane Rita swept through the Gulf Coast in September 2005. They witnessed the highways packed with residents evacuating from Houston and Galveston, an island off the southeast coast of Texas. During the chaos of evacuation, Tammie’s family lost track of their elderly uncle who had been staying in a nursing home in Louisiana and evacuated before the storm. They worried about him for several days before they later discovered him in a town outside of Houston after he was recognized by friends who saw his interview with a local TV station.

When the Taylors moved to Galveston a few months later, one of the first things they did was join the congregation at St. Augustine of Hippo, the oldest African-American church in Texas, which has a long history in the community. With Hurricane Rita fresh in his mind, Taylor, who became Bishop’s Warden, started thinking about the next possible natural disaster and how it would affect his new parish home.

The first thing Taylor did was consider the congregation and its needs. Most of St. Augustine’s congregation is older – a population that may need help during evacuations. Often seniors, especially those that are living alone in their homes, don’t evacuate. They may have no where to go, or require handicap-accessible transportation, or be otherwise incapable of leaving their homes. This situation is especially dangerous if they’re dependent on equipment like breathing or dialysis machines, which fail when the power goes out. Taylor could see it was important that everyone in the congregation understand the importance of evacuating and was able to do so.

An additional concern would come after people evacuated, as it had for Tammie’s family: “If forced to evacuate, who can people call so we know they’re OK?”



Biography



Bill Taylor is Bishop’s Warden at St. Augustine’s on Galveston Island off the coast of Texas.



Fast Facts



CONGREGATION:

St. Augustine of Hippo
Episcopal Mission

CONGREGATION SIZE:

Approx. 50 members

LOCATION: Galveston, TX

POPULATION: 57,466

DISASTER TYPE: Hurricane

PEOPLE DISPLACED: 21,802

DISASTER RESPONSE:

Assisting parishioners with
evacuation



Austin, the inland capital of Texas, is the usual destination for hurricane evacuees. Taylor had gotten to know Ora Houston, a member of St. James in Austin, another predominantly African-American Episcopal church. Taylor called Houston with his idea:

“If there’s a natural disaster and my people have to evacuate, can we call you and leave numbers where we can be reached?”

Houston talked to her parish priest who thought it was a great idea.

Together they set up a system. At the beginning of each hurricane season the Taylors make laminated cards with the phone number and address for St. James. They instruct parishioners at St. Augustine’s to call St. James in case of evacuation, just to let someone know they are safe. St. James has an answering machine that will always be on and functioning, so parishioners know they can call and leave a message on this machine. Through the local media, St. James parishioners will know when evacuations are taking place and a group of previously identified volunteers will go to the church to staff the phones. They will make sure all messages reach Taylor and St. Augustine’s rector, The Rev. Chester J. Makowski.

The system was put to the test in the evacuation of Hurricane Ike in September 2008. It was a great success. St. Augustine’s parishioners called in to St. James and left messages with their whereabouts and contact information. Taylor then called each person to make sure they were OK – for larger congregations he suggests setting up a phone tree before a disaster.

As Taylor called around after Ike, he spoke to a St. Augustine’s family that had nowhere to go. This family of 16 – two sisters and an older aunt with their children and grandchildren – had to leave Galveston but had no family or friends to stay with and limited funds. Taylor put them in contact with the leadership at St. James. The Austin church provided motel rooms and gift cards to help the family through the following few weeks as they waited out the storm and were allowed back on Galveston Island.

Now St. Augustine’s is gearing up for the next hurricane season; the Taylors are printing up more cards, and reminding their congregation of the importance of preparedness. Three years after Hurricane Ike Taylor worries that people have forgotten. “People already pretend Ike didn’t happen.” But St. Augustine’s will try to do what it can for its congregation, and the parish preparedness plan is a first step.

“Parishioners know who to call and we know how to find them.”

Partnership Tips



- Find a church you have a connection with to make partnership. This could include churches of the same saint, churches with similar congregations, etc.
- If possible, choose a church in the same diocese as yours in an area that isn’t vulnerable to the same hazards you are. If that isn’t possible, look for a church outside your diocese.
- Make laminated cards with your partner church’s information.
- Distribute your laminated cards and review your disaster plan each year.

Additional Resources



For more information on disaster preparedness, please see the following online resources:

- “Preparedness Planning Guide for Congregations and Parishes”
- “Family Preparedness: Gold Level”
- “Family Preparedness: Silver Level”
- “Family Preparedness: Bronze Level”

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