

US Disaster Program

Tips & Lessons — Post-Disaster Advice for Clergy

Disaster Advice for Clergy

In 2005, Hurricane Katrina made landfall, becoming one of the most devastating storms in US history. Bill Terry was Rector of St. Anna's Episcopal Church in New Orleans at that time. After the storm, Bill found himself working to support the spiritual and physical needs of his community. Clothing, water, and immediate medical aid were dispensed regularly. Response efforts included: ESL classes for skilled laborers, a mobile medical mission, a mission to local musicians and much more.

The recovery process has been a long, multi-year commitment, but the ministries that emerged in response to Hurricane Katrina have re-energized his church and made St. Anna's a community hub.

Reflecting on his experience with both immediate relief and long-term recovery, Bill offers his advice to clergy who serve in communities affected by disaster.

General

- No one knows what they are doing at first.
- It will unfold. Be patient, alert, listen, clarify, and communicate.
- Disasters impact the financial stability of everyone in the community. Private, public and informal labor sectors (day laborers, childcare providers, migrant workers, etc.).
- All disasters are unique and different.
- Don't compare your disaster to anyone else's.
- You will establish a disaster routine.
- A "new normal" eventually asserts itself. It takes time. Months; maybe years.
- One day all of the trucks and cameras will be gone, and the real work continues. It will be hard work.
- Your town will never be the same; this is a defining, community event. It can move a town forward.
- You will probably underestimate the time it takes to fix things. That is okay. Try not to be discouraged.

Pastoral Care

- Everyone is affected in some way. No one is immune. Emotions will run the gamut.
- Remember that people are exhausted. Everyone responds to crisis according to temperament.
- Media will generally overestimate damages and casualties; that is what sells news. Most statistics will come down.
- Empower people because they feel so disempowered at the moment.
- People must remain connected. They will tend to isolate themselves. Try



Biography



The Rev. Bill Terry is Rector of St. Anna's Episcopal Church in New Orleans, LA. He was serving at St. Anna's during Hurricane Katrina.



Fast Facts



CONGREGATION:
St. Anna's Episcopal Church

CONGREGATION SIZE:
About 250 members. Due to recovery activity, St. Anna's averaged 30% growth per year after the storm

LOCATION:
New Orleans, LA

AREA POPULATION:
378,715 (2013)

DISASTER:
Hurricane Katrina



to call on and keep touch with survivors.

- People you least expect will need tender loving care. Give it to them.
- Often needs manifest much later, even weeks or years later. Be available. Listen.
- It is very important to listen to people tell their stories. Healing is in the telling and listening.
- Remember, Christ is as much in the recovery as in the disaster. Jesus accompanies all, always.
- Avoid any theology of retribution ... no one did anything wrong. No one is being punished.
- Try not to ask “why?” That is chasing the wind. What, when, where, how, who questions can be answered.
- Remember, there may be survivor guilt. Help people process their feelings and connect to their hurting neighbors.
- Don't be afraid to share your interior dispositions. If you are angry or sad or frustrated about the disaster, someone else in your community is too. It is helpful to know that you are not alone.

Self Care

- The hours are overwhelming and all caregivers must have a place to process their feelings.
- Adrenaline is a powerful chemical, and it is what you need to get through ... and it taxes the body.
- Pray, eat, rest, drink water, write, exercise ... try to stay as normal in your routine as possible.
- Listen to your body. It has wisdom.
- You must have a safe place to rant and rave. Do not bottle up your feelings.
- You cannot fix everyone or everything, but you can fix some things well. That is okay. Do what you can.

Church Life

- This isn't a time to start any “new initiatives” in a congregation.
- Keep liturgies as usual. Nothing groovy. Nothing sensational. Be predictable.
- To avoid unintended omissions, keep names to a minimum in Prayers of the People. Be generic.

Response and Donation Management

- How you engage the larger community will say volumes about your church. This is a time to work to together.
- Service delivery systems are often not great. They change dates, times, places and people.
- People do not like charity. Often people will resist help at first. Let them know that they can revisit decisions later.
- Do not “think too much” about giving money out ... give it out. People need not wait.
- Do not analyze the person's respectability or deservedness; look at need.
- Do not have disaster donations flow through the Rector's discretionary fund.
- Consider distributing gift cards to local grocery stores, Target, Lowes, Home Depot, etc. Cash bank cards are best.

Response Efforts



St. Anna's Episcopal Church in New Orleans became a recovery hub after Hurricane Katrina.

The church's Mobile Medical Mission was the principle subject of a Harvard University study that demonstrated a 50:1 ROI in downstream medical savings.

For three years, St. Anna's was the hottest jazz venue in the city. The church opened its doors to the city's musicians, offering them a place to showcase their art.

The first anniversary of the storm, the congregation helped organize an interfaith pet memorial service for those who had lost beloved animals.

Read more about St. Anna's community outreach at: <http://www.stannanola.org/church-life/st-annas-history/>

Additional Resources



For more information on ministering after a disaster, please see the following online resources:

Tips & Lessons: Liturgy after a Disaster

Comprehensive Preparedness Planning Guide for Congregations

How To: Building Relationships for Response

Tips & Lessons: Advocacy

Ministering to Adults After Disaster

Ministering to Teens After a Disaster

Ministering to Youth After a Disaster

Ministering to Children After a Disaster

For more information about Episcopal Relief & Development's US Disaster Program visit www.episcopalrelief.org