

Preparation Made the Difference: Hurricane Irma

The meteorological models for Hurricane Irma forecasted a storm that would bring devastation to everyone and everything in its path. They also provided a lot of advanced warning for the communities that would be affected.

Anne Vickers, Chief Financial Officer and Canon for Finance and Administration for the Episcopal Diocese of Southwest Florida, helped the parishes in her diocese prepare for the storm and pick up the pieces in its aftermath. Together, they did a great job.

“Out of 77 churches in our diocese, we had 22 insurance claims. All of them were relatively minor and did not affect their functioning as congregations,” Anne says. She describes this as a “miracle to us.”

The only exception was the diocesan office. The physical location experienced flooding due to sewage back-up. “We lost the walls, floors, furniture, doors – all of that – completely.” They moved back in two months later – after a whirlwind of construction – on November 15.

Saved by preparation

How did the parishes escape total devastation? Preparation played a large role.

“The work we did with **Episcopal Relief & Development** <http://www.episcopalrelief.org> in the week before the storm was the key,” Anne says. Because there was so much warning time, the parishes were able to follow disaster preparedness plans to the letter. “Everyone did what they were supposed to do. They put up shutters, they wrapped altars in plastic, they brought in items from their yards, and they installed sandbags. That is why we had minimal damage.”

Anne says that one big takeaway from Hurricane Irma was understanding disaster preparedness as it plays out in reality, not just in theory: “Everyone now has a customized view of what they need to do in their own church.”

This is not to say that disaster preparedness can eliminate every heartache and headache caused by severe weather. “Marco Island and the southern portion of the mainland are still very much affected,” Anne says. It will take a long while for the debris to be cleared and for everything to be rebuilt. But for many, it can mean the difference between simple damage and a disaster.

Helping the community

Two Episcopal parishes in the Diocese of Southwest Florida were approached by the Red Cross to be shelters immediately following the storm. And, St. Mark’s Episcopal Church on Marco Island acted as a base for community organizers.

St. Marks also worked with Our Daily Bread Food Pantry to distribute food to community members in need. They also opened their doors during certain hours to allow volunteer crews to use their showers.

Function even without form

Despite the diocesan office incurring so much damage, Anne says that they were able to remain functional. “In fact, we did much more than usual because we had to provide support through the storm. We were able to communicate with each other because of established systems like Alert Media and email.” And, they didn’t lose any data because of cloud storage.

“People think about the buildings and items that get destroyed in a storm, but what really matters is your ability to function,” she says.

The effects of Hurricane Irma left Anne – and all of the parishes that are a part of the diocese – with greater appreciation for the value of disaster planning and preparedness. If you would like to learn more about how to prepare for disasters that may affect your parish or diocese, you can access Episcopal Relief & Development’s preparedness site **here:** episcopalrelief.org/preparedness.