



Week of Compassion

Life Abundant in the Broken Places

By: Virginia White, WoC Contributor

With the floods in South Asia, the earthquake in Mexico, and the hurricanes in the United States and the Caribbean, this has been a particularly frightening and heartbreaking month to turn on the news and witness the havoc our planet is wreaking on neighbors near and far. For Week of Compassion, the relief and recovery ministry of our church, which is charged with bringing Christ's comfort, power, and hope to all those suffering from these devastating events, it has been a particularly challenging, and yet, grace-filled, month.

This week our General Minister and President, Rev. Terri Hord Owens, joined Rev. Caroline Hamilton-Arnold (Associate Director, Week of Compassion) and Josh Baird (Director, Disciples Volunteering), along with other Southwest Region leadership, in South Texas to be present with the communities impacted by Hurricane Harvey.

There they met Disciples like Pastor Hector Velasquez of Iglesia Cristiana El Redentor who have lost much in the storm. Water seeped in through the exterior walls at

Pastor Velasquez's church, leaving major, costly damage, and he and his wife's home was severely flooded. Nevertheless, in the face of these challenges he and his congregation "felt the embrace of the Church" and found strength in that embrace. Both, his family and his congregation received support from Week of Compassion and other ministries: supplies, offers for labor and other assistance from many churches across the country.



The Velasquez home in Houston

Others, like Pastor David Dear and lay members at First Christian Church Aransas Pass, suffered only minor damage to their church building, yet nevertheless, decided to fully commit to becoming involved in the broader community recovery efforts. Knowing that "to do nothing would certainly be sinful", David and lay leaders from FCC Aransas Pass organized to provide assistance to their neighbors.

Revs. Owens, Hamilton-Arnold and Baird also met a family from First Christian Church Katy who had been evacuated from their rapidly flooding home by "three random guys in a bass boat." As they waited for over two-weeks for the water to recede from their home, in partnership with their church, they chose to serve their neighbors in need. They sorted donations and welcomed other families seeking shelter. They also delivered supplies in the neighborhood and cleaned out homes as they became accessible. Through it all, they did not let their suffering stop them from responding to the suffering of others.

As the congregation of FCC Katy went deeply into serving their community, they also made new connections with neighbors previously unaffiliated with their congregation. People came into their church to volunteer with the congregation's recovery programs. In the weeks since the storm, congregation members report seeing some of these new faces in worship.

In each of these stories, God's abundant ability to empower, heal, and offer life anew, even in the face of overwhelming devastation, is evident; as is our always present power and our gift, as God's children, to serve and help our neighbors in need.

One woman, recalling the crews that went out from churches to clean out flooded homes concluded: "I just don't know what people do without a community like a church, without a group of people to come and help."

Her statement underscores just how vital our words and our actions as the Church-as those who are committed to bringing the good news of resurrection to places of destruction and death-are, especially after disasters. In the short-run we are there to provide shelter, prayer, and sustenance; in the long-run we are there to stand with communities as they rebuild and reimagine their livelihoods and lives together, providing supplies, labor, and ongoing encouragement.



Member Angela Wright shows Rev. Owens damage at University Christian in Houston along with Pastor Darnell Fennell



Pastor Bruce Frogge shows how high the water got in Cypress Creek Christian in Spring, TX

Yet, with so many disasters happening, seemingly constantly, it is easy to become discouraged.

As I write this, we know that Hurricane Maria has devastated Puerto Rico, where power has been knocked out for 3.5 million people, and is expected to remain out for 3 to 6 months. We do not yet know the numbers of lives that have been lost; and the situation continues to develop. Maria continues to strengthen over warm water, endangering other low-lying islands. We know that over 200 lives were lost in Mexico City earlier this week, while more remain injured in hospitals, and entire neighborhoods have been destroyed. We know that earlier this month, in the aftermath of Hurricane Irma, millions in Florida suffered from heat, darkness, and hunger, and hundreds of thousands of homes were destroyed. We are right to mourn for these pains and losses, even as we also take solace in the fact that we are present there, and can continue to be present there, mending and healing, through Week of Compassion.

As Rev. Owens has encountered families impacted by Harvey in Houston, she has drawn from the wisdom of the Psalms. She says, "We see in the Psalms an affirmation of our full range of human emotions. We can cry, and yell, and shake our fists and ask God, 'how long, O Lord?' Yet, at the end of the Psalms David releases his fist in praise--affirming that God is who God says God is, that God is with us." We know that God is with us, and God is who God says God is, when we experience God's presence even in the midst of our suffering. Sometimes this looks like a helping hand, sometimes it looks like a check from Week of Compassion, sometimes it looks like a phone call, checking-in, offering help.

Just as it is currently in south Texas, Week of Compassion has been in contact with our partners in Mexico and Florida, assessing the damage, and offering assistance as needs are identified. Currently, Week of Compassion is seeking contact with partners in Puerto Rico and will be providing assistance there in the months and years of recovery ahead.

Inspired by God's enduring, loving, presence, Week of Compassion, and by extension, ourselves, will remain in these places for the long-haul. Though the obstacles we face are immense, if we choose to act together in hope, inspired by God's abundant love, and to give of ourselves and resources graciously, then we need not despair, but will find life even in the most broken places. Thanks be to God.

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