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Parishes, schools in Nashville serve flood victims

Theresa Laurence Andy Telli Catholic News Service | May. 19, 2010

NASHVILLE, Tenn. (CNS) -- Once Charlene Garrett got a close look at the flood damage that left so many of her neighbors surrounded by piles of ruined furniture and debris, she was determined to help.

So she organized a command center at St. Matthew Church in Franklin, where she serves as director of stewardship and development for the church and school, to help move volunteers and supplies to those in need after the unprecedented rainfall and flooding in middle Tennessee in early May.

"Now I have a new definition of what stewardship is," Garrett told the Tennessee Register, newspaper of the Nashville Diocese. "I really do."

Parishioners were stepping up and taking responsibility to help their neighbors, Garrett said. "It's just amazing for our parish."

The torrential rains created the worst natural disaster in the modern history of middle Tennessee, causing unprecedented flood damage, killing 23 people and leaving thousands displaced.

Professionals and volunteers alike will continue to be in high demand as the area recovers from the flood during the months ahead. Nashville Mayor Karl Dean has said the damage will easily exceed $1.5 billion.

A number of parishes have come to the rescue of flood victims. The situation has also given students at Catholic schools across the diocese the opportunity to put into action lessons about service and compassion as they have helped classmates, teachers and neighbors.

At St. Henry Church, which has a large percentage of parishioners affected by the flooding, a resource center has been set up on parish grounds. "Our effort is huge," said the parish's stewardship director, Linda Large, who is part of the team organizing the parish flood relief efforts.

Donations of food, clothing, toiletries, baby items, cleaning supplies and other household goods are set out on tables in the old parish chapel for anyone who needs them. While St. Henry has received plenty of donations of food and clothing, there is still a great need for gift cards to stores such as Kroger and Target, Large said.

St. Henry's Charitable Constructors ministry has been sending crews of volunteers every day into area neighborhoods that were decimated by the overflowing Harpeth River May 2. While the ministry has been established for some time, it is now working in overdrive, with seven teams of up to 30 people each working in some areas.

"The need is so massive right now," Large said.

Large added that St. Henry has been contacted by people used to disasters in areas such as New Orleans and Oklahoma who want to donate to flood relief efforts in Nashville.

"These people know what it's like," Large said. "It's incredible how generous people are."

Therese Williams, diocesan superintendent of schools, said she has been impressed with the schools' efforts to aid flood victims and added that six different dioceses have contacted her about raising money to help with flood relief.

No diocesan schools sustained serious flood damage. Some schools had to deal with water on the first floor or leaky roofs that threatened to damage library materials, computers and other resources. Other schools faced electrical, sewage and access issues.

At Pope John Paul II High School, the athletic fields were under as much as 15 feet of brown water, and for days, the school "was like a castle surrounded by a moat on three sides," said Faustin Weber, headmaster.

"Parents, administrators and volunteers have really done spectacular work" cleaning up the athletic facilities, Weber said. The school was still working on restoring electricity to the fields so that the lights and scoreboards will be in working order, he added.

Students, teachers, administrators and parents from Father Ryan High School were out in full force in the days following the flood to help others clean up their homes.

Approximately 30 percent of the school's families were affected by the flooding. Several faculty members, including Principal Paul Davis, lost their homes.

The school, which sustained only minor water damage from leaks to one building, was closed May 3-4 so students and faculty could clean up their own homes or volunteer to help others.

"I have seen students wading into rising waters to save strangers, families offering their homes as safe harbor," said Jim McIntyre, the school's president, in a letter to the Father Ryan community. Helping others in this time of crisis "is our mission as a school and Catholic community," he said.

Father Ryan senior Will Mix spent several days on the front lines of the flood. Mix was helping neighbors move furniture to higher ground May 2 when the water began to rise. "Then it started getting really bad. ... We had to swim people out on our backs," he said.

At Aquinas College, a flood relief fund has been established to help students, staff, faculty and their families recover. In the first few days, the college collected more than $1,200 and coordinated approximately 100 hours of manpower to help victims of the flood.

"We are edified by the compassion of our students, faculty and staff and the hard work they have undertaken to assist members of our Aquinas family during this difficult time," said Dominican Sister Mary Peter, the college's president.

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