



When I Reached Out, I Touched My Heart

Program for Service

By Marilyn Fiddmont

PURPOSE:

To help women to identify service opportunities in daily activities.

Suggestions for the Leader:

1. Help women identify and celebrate simple ways in which they have provided spiritual, physical, emotional, or moral support to someone in need.
2. In light of the recent natural disasters that plagued the United States, discuss the role of the faith community in responding to such crisis.
3. Is the faith community prepared or unprepared to deal with overwhelming disasters? What did we learn from the disasters such as Hurricane Katrina?
4. Is there such a thing as “compassion fatigue” and how do we continue to minister when feeling overwhelmed?

A Call to Serve:

Scripture for reflection, Matthew 25: 35 ...for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me...

We watched the breaking news of the local newscasters in the waning hours of August 31, 2005. The old Houston Astrodome and Reliant Center had been prepared to receive thousands of evacuees from the New Orleans Superdome but the buses that seemed to stretch for blocks and blocks had been halted. Apparently, the Harris County fire marshal had determined that the facilities were already at capacity. The number was far less than what had been reported that the facilities could accommodate. The initial report was that the buses would be turned away and weary travelers were going to have to travel another 200 miles to San Antonio. The drivers of the chartered buses had already logged their legal driving time and would have to be replaced if that order held.

In a little more than an hour, city and county officials came to an agreement, and the buses began to unload passengers. Bewildered, many sick and frail, most just grateful to be in a place of safety, they began the long process of being admitted to the facilities

that would be home for the next several weeks.

The process was repeated all Thursday and into Friday. The generosity of the Houstonians, surrounding communities, and across the globe was mind-boggling. Endless lines of trucks, cars, vans loaded with supplies caused organized chaos around the mammoth facilities. Those who responded seemed to be just as overwhelmed as those who had endured the wrath of the storm.

Mid-day on Friday, what Houston needed least to occur began, a light but steady drizzle. Without anyone to coordinate some drop-off points, people had begun to leave donations of clothing, food, medical and other supplies on the parking lot. If the rain continued, many of those donations would have been ruined. The newscaster made a plea around noon on Friday, if there were any Houstonians who could come to the facilities, please come. We did.

Out of the Waters

When my friend, a licensed minister at our congregation and I decided to assist in the efforts, we realized that there was much we didn't know but we tried to prepare ourselves with as much as seemed reasonable. Cell phones, in case people wanted to make calls, rubber gloves, a few cleaning supplies. Mostly, as we drove, I told her the best thing that we could do was listen. There would be those who wanted to tell their stories, and others who would be still in a state of shock.

After going through the volunteer orientation, we found our way to a food and beverage station. What was humbling was the number of people who had already thanked us, and anyone else they thought was there to help. Literally, with tears they thanked us for caring for rescuing them from the waters of the storm. Stories did come, and not all were easy to hear. Success was measured in knowing where all of ones relatives were at that time. Unfortunately, there were the ones who said, "we saw the water take 'em." Too many cried and made the statement that it was "like they left us there to die". Our response was you're safe now; we'll do the best we can.

People apologized for their condition, having been in the flood waters and the same clothes for days. Many of the elderly needed a willing person to run a small errand. Others still clutched their meager possessions in fear that some of those with bad intentions may try to take advantage of them. Sometimes, there was the smell of human waste from the infirmed who could not make their way across the cavernous facility to restrooms. There were those who seemed to think that they would be reprimanded if they reached for a

bottle of water or sandwich. Many had to be urged to accept what we offered and understand that we didn't want anything from them in return.

My friend and I realized that one of the things that we wished we had brought with us were massive amounts of plastic bags. A grocery bag was a luxury because for most people, their worldly possessions had been reduced to what they could carry in their hands. What we offered seem like nothing in comparison to the need, and we knew that when we completed our time that we would drive across Houston to the sanctuary of our homes. The evacuees would settle in for yet another night of organized chaos, under the safety of the domed stadium.

Questions for Reflection

If you were to volunteer to work with individuals in a shelter environment, what would be most challenging for you personally?

What words of hope or encouragement would you offer to those who were there long term?

How would you maintain your spiritual and physical health in such an environment?

What do you imagine the long term impact of the experience would be for you?

Finding the Small Corner

The pianist of our congregation noted that there was an apartment complex close to her home (Northwest Houston) that had already offered housing to those who had fled Louisiana before the storm hit. Most thought that they would be returning to New Orleans and surrounding areas after a few days. The devastation of the storm thwarted that process. The owner/manager of the complex had decided to wave all the normal deposits and applications processes and allow those who had very found jobs to move into the complex. The problem was, they had nothing else. She brought this to the attention of the congregation. Over the next several weeks, people brought anything that they thought would be of use in setting-up an apartment. While this was far from the eye of the media, it was a story that was repeated throughout Houston by many congregations.

Questions for Reflection

What does your congregation do consistently for outreach (food pantries, social service agencies, etc.)? What would you like to see expanded?

Have you ever "inventoried" what you own and considered what could be used to restore someone else's life?

What would you find most difficult to do in service or outreach ministry?

New Ways of Giving

In the last several years, there has been an alternative Christmas list for the congregation. Instead of giving gifts to one another, members are encouraged to make a contribution to one or all of the ministries listed. They include Week of Compassion, Northwest Assistance Ministries, The Good Samaritan Ministry of the Southwest Region, Disciples Rice, Pension Fund for Ministerial Relief, and two scholarship funds. In addition, the congregation has bought animals through Heifer International during the Christmas season.

An eighty-two year old member of the congregation announced that she was going to do what many had discussed, make a contribution in the names of her children and grandchildren who would celebrate birthdays from Thanksgiving through Christmas. She calculated that what she would spend for gifts would total the cost of a water buffalo with Heifer International. With that as a challenge, several decided that the goal of a second water buffalo was in order. The pair was spontaneously named "Peaches" and "Cream". Additional funds have gone into an account with the hopes of purchasing the "Ark" from Heifer International in the next two to three years. To her surprise, the children and grandchildren were honored that a gift that will serve communities was purchased in their honor.

Questions for Reflection

How have the natural disasters of the last two years impacted your gift giving?

What lessons have you been able to teach your children, grandchildren, or youngsters of your congregation in terms of giving or receiving gifts.

How do you determine when gift giving has become too extravagant?

WORSHIP

Call to Worship:

Leader: O God, you are present in the splendor of creation, in the wonders of the universe, your power and glory is made manifest.

People: And you are present in the storm and in the aftermath of brokenness and stench of human suffering. When hands and hearts reach out to one another, a life has been touched by you.

Leader: O God, you are present in the liturgy, the hymns and the prayers of our sanctuaries.

People: And you are present in hovels, the shelters and the alleys where moans and groans are mingled with the pleas for help.

Leader: O God, you are present when two or three gather in your name

ALL: And you are present with all your people and your grace abounds to all.
Amen.

HYMN (Optional, "There Is a Balm in Gilead" #501 Chalice Hymnal)

Meditation:

The leader may want to invite participants to think of their responses or how someone has responded to them during extreme crisis. Stories can be told as the group feels comfortable. Invite those who tell their story to place pennies or coins in the offering basket as a sign of thanksgiving.

Offering:

Let these gifts of simplicity that are made from the heart, be extending to lives that are torn, lonely, and fractured by conditions that they do not understand. May we always be reminded that the storms come to all of us in different ways but are just as destructive. Allow us to be the cup of cold water and the bread of life for those in need. Amen.

CWF Benediction (if appropriate)

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