

Florence recovery efforts continue for Church

The Diocese of Raleigh covers 54 counties in central and eastern North Carolina, over an area of 32,000 square miles, on the coast of the Atlantic Ocean. This location means the diocese is a prime target for hurricanes. Hurricane Florence devastated the region in September of this year, and the recovery in many areas is ongoing.

The storm made landfall on the North Carolina coastline on Sept. 14, with winds hitting nearly 90 mph. Torrential rains caused massive flooding across the region, affecting homes and businesses, roads and farms alike.

On Sept. 27 the North Carolina Coastal Federation said that residents should avoid ocean and intracoastal waters, as they had elevated levels of potentially harmful bacteria due to massive stormwater runoff from the hurricane. Even before the storm hit, there were concerns about drinking water potentially being contaminated by the overflowing of manure pits, coal ash pits, water treatment plants and more.

Time of need

The response by the Catholic Church has been swift and effective. Bishop Luis R. Zarama of Raleigh issued a statement urging prayer “for those who have lost their lives, those who have been injured, and for those who have lost homes and possessions. I also ask for prayers for the brave first responders who have been so helpful in the rescue and relief,” Bishop Zarama wrote. “This is a time for our Catholic community to come together and to assist our neighbors in North Carolina who are in most need.”

Ways to Help

On Oct. 2, Cardinal Daniel N. DiNardo of Galveston-Houston, president of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, requested that dioceses across the country take up an emergency collection on behalf of those devastated by Hurricane Florence, as well as any forthcoming natural disasters this year.

Financial donations can also be made directly at:

- ▶ catholiccharitiesraleigh.org/giveflorence

To purchase specific supplies for those in need, visit:

- ▶ catholiccharitiesraleigh.org/florencesupplies

Catholic Charities of the Diocese of Raleigh has been leading the recovery effort. A note of update on the website of the diocese states that “Hurricane Florence devastated our community, but together as a community we are recovering!”

Thousands of homes and businesses were damaged in the storm, and hundreds of thousands were without power. At least 27 churches or parish facilities in the Diocese of Raleigh were damaged. Thirty-seven of the 48 people killed as a result of the storm were in North Carolina. This is vast devastation, and recovery efforts continue unabated.

Because of the level of devastation, the demand for certain services following the storm has limited the availability of such services. Residents report having trouble finding available businesses to help in clean-up efforts at their homes; in many places, Catholic Charities, the Knights of Columbus and other Catholic organizations are pitching in to help pick up the slack.

“We were out assisting families in the Wilmington area, which is where the eye of the storm came over, as rain still continued to fall from the storm,” said Daniel Altenau, director of communications and disaster services for Catholic Charities of the Diocese of Raleigh. “As soon as it was safe for staff to get out there, they got to their box truck and

got volunteers gathered, filled it with diapers and started distributing diapers to help families that had been impacted by the storm. So we have been out in front of the storm trying to help since the very beginning.”

Not a fleeting matter

At this point, Catholic Charities is working on distributing in-kind donations of cleaning supplies, baby items, diapers and formula, hygiene kits, and food and water.

“We are trying to get those survival items to families right now as they are in this emergency phase of the recovery,” said Altenau.

The items get distributed in the most efficient way possible, given the context of the area and the needs. Through a combination of setting up points of distribution, advertising to the community that a box truck will be parked somewhere and traveling directly into the impacted communities, all sorts of resources and supplies are given out to those impacted by the storm.

Catholic Charities’ focus is on helping individuals and families in the diocese. For those parishes and schools affected, the diocese has taken a parish-to-parish, school-to-school approach, wherein parishes and schools in non-impacted areas reach out and support those who have been impacted. For example, Our Lady of Lourdes in Raleigh organized a fill-the-truck drive where they filled a box truck with supplies and then drove it to St. Paul’s Catholic Church in the community of New Bern.

Altenau said that it is important to remember that this will not be a fleeting matter. “Before the storm hit, two years after Hurricane Matthew, we were still working with families impacted by Hurricane Matthew. So we expect to be working with the families that had been hurt by Hurricane Matthew and were

also impacted by Hurricane Florence – we’re not going to forget about those families.” Altenau anticipates working with families impacted by Hurricane Florence for many years to come, as well.

In situations such as this, people often want to know what they can do to help. In many cases, people are eager to drop everything and race to the affected area to volunteer their time in assisting the cleanup effort. Altenau observed that the diocese does not have the capacity to house spontaneous volunteers from out of state at this time. However, donations are greatly appreciated and exceedingly helpful.

Financial and material

There are two ways to donate. The first is financial donations.

“These are important because disasters are ever-changing events,” Altenau said, “and the needs of today may be different from the needs of tomorrow, so financial donations allow us the flexibility to adapt with those needs.”

Many families and individuals like to know exactly what they are giving, Altenau said, so there is also a website that facilitates specific in-kind donations, which allows people to purchase specific supplies that are needed, which are then shipped to the affected areas. This helps to streamline coordination of the supplies. (See sidebar above.)

Catholics believe that prayer is not only good, but also efficacious. With that in mind, the diocese also asks that people pray for those affected by the storm.

Paul Senz writes from Oregon.