

## Being the Church: Disciples Respond to Hurricane Laura



Pastor Jarrett Banks with Pamala Mckay of God's Unchanging Hands Feeding Ministry

Following Hurricane Laura, more than 70,000 people remain without power; several areas are under curfew because of debris, downed power lines, and lack of water and sewer. Now, there is a heat advisory for much of the affected area-- even as people begin working on clean-up with no electricity and limited access to water. The state of Louisiana has received a federal disaster declaration for public assistance, and six parishes (Louisiana counties) qualify for individual household assistance. Damage assessments are still in the early stages.

Beyond the New Orleans area, several Disciples congregations were directly affected by Hurricane Laura. Week of Compassion remains in touch with pastors and leaders, and we continue to learn more about the needs while supporting those churches and members that sustained damage to their church buildings and homes.

Many Disciples have yet to return to the area. The highest areas of impact were predominantly rural communities, which means they likely will not get the national attention and support that would normally accompany an event of this magnitude.

The further complications posed by the pandemic--and Louisiana's recent spike in infection rates-- make this an especially challenging situation. Traditional shelters have been deemed unsafe due to COVID-19. To limit the need for congregate shelters, more than 15,000 people have been evacuated to hotels in Louisiana and Texas. That number doesn't include those that evacuated on their own or are staying with friends and family.

Many of those evacuated are staying in New Orleans area hotels. These evacuees include primarily families with children, elderly folks, and low income households.

Pastor Jarrett Banks and the people of **Just Love Your Neighbor - Northshore Disciples** were already involved in their community before the storm. When they heard that the evacuees in nearby hotels were in need of things like baby formula and adult diapers, they were able to connect with local officials and neighbors. With support from Week of Compassion, Just Love organized to meet the need quickly.

Back in January, Pastor Banks moved to the area to start a new faith community. He was spending much of his time in local coffee shops, meeting neighbors who might be

interested in a new church expression that would be entirely missional, never meeting for traditional worship in a building. Shortly after Pastor Banks began connecting people with this new vision, the pandemic meant an end to those coffee shop conversations --and all other in-person gatherings. The newly forming community had to be even more creative about how to serve their neighbors. Through a local nonprofit, the group got involved in preparing hot meals for low income elderly people, serving twice a week and providing around 500 meals. Now, in the aftermath of the hurricane, they are expanding that ministry to provide sandwiches and other food on additional days.

The relationships formed through that ministry created the foundation for their hurricane response. "When you start delivering meals, you build relationships with people living in poverty," said Pastor Banks. "You find that they have other needs; sometimes you just sit and visit."

Just Love had about 6 participants in March; they now have more than 25 on a planning committee to launch the church on Christmas Day. In spite of the challenges of a pandemic and a hurricane, Banks says "It's been a good year to start a new church expression... especially one that is all about worshipping through service."

Just Love will continue to work to meet the needs of the evacuees in their community-- including a growing need for baby items. As one new member recently said: "I wanted to GO to church; but now I'm being the church."

We give thanks for communities like Just Love, who are truly living out their mission to be the hands and feet of Christ, at work in the world.

*Response to Hurricane Laura has been complicated by COVID-19. In fact, response to all disasters has been impacted by the pandemic, where social distancing and other conditions make recovery even more challenging. All of our Week of Compassion partners are incorporating COVID-19 considerations as they respond to immediate, critical needs, so COVID-19 response is integrated into the breadth of our work. Your support for the ongoing offering to COVID-19 relief enables us to respond to these and other disasters-- even in the midst of a pandemic. As needs continue to grow, we invite you to "Grow Your Compassion." To give, text **WoC** to **71777**; or, visit our **website for resources** to promote an offering in your congregation. Thank you for your prayers and for your continued generous support!*

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Responses Since August 25



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Storm Relief



California,  
COVID-19 Relief



Louisiana,  
Hurricane Laura Relief



Florida,  
COVID-19 Relief



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