

Getting Through Crisis: Care and Ministry or How Small Group Ministry Helped Us Through Katrina

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Here on the north side of Lake Pontchartrain in southeast Louisiana, we support a small congregation and define ourselves as a regional church. We started our small group ministry program in 2003, and very deliberately set up the structure. This included a governing council, a facilitator training and support program, lots of information beforehand to the congregation, a kick off sample session, and a series of 4 sessions before we settled into groups. We started six groups incorporating nearly 70% of our congregation. We called our groups chalice circles and included two interest groups (one for visual journaling and one for writers).

We needed that strong start to keep us afloat after Hurricane Katrina hit our area in August 2005. We experienced all the drama of lost homes, possessions, jobs, members, families, and neighbors. Our church and lovely gardens suffered some damage, but perhaps the biggest loss was when our full-time minister decided to discontinue his ministry after allegations of misconduct in early 2006.

Within a few weeks of the storm, those who could gathered for services. Our small groups were a manageable way to keep track of our congregation. As electricity and phone lines were restored, small group facilitators were able to report back through email the whereabouts of the rest of our flock. We compiled a list of those in need and kept in touch with those still out of town.

Without a minister, we gathered every Wednesday evening. The potluck meal was offered to anyone who needed food and a big hug. This was often sponsored by a different chalice circle to share the burden of organizing food, setting up, cleaning up afterwards, and facilitating the sharing conversations. The Wednesday evening sharing circle became a lifeline for many who needed to tell their stories in order to make sense of the surrounding chaos. We ministered to each other in very meaningful and spiritual ways. People were able to share and in that sharing, heal, because we had already learned through our chalice circles how to speak from the heart, how to listen deeply, and how to acknowledge that sharing.

Later, as we worked through the trauma of the minister's abrupt departure in our circles with session content focused to promote discussion and healing, our chalice circles became a very effective way of taking the pulse and feeling the heartbeat of our congregation. The facilitators reported back to the chalice council and the board of trustees about the concerns and needs of our members. The two interim ministers that followed sat in on our facilitators meetings, heard those concerns, and worked with us to devise ways to reach out.

In a very real way, our chalice circles were the glue that held the church together. We modeled deep sharing and listening that fostered real friendships and compassionate ministry. The facilitators became another layer of leadership when the storm and missing members made normal modes of communication difficult. And we were able to keep the church business going during traumatic times.

We made it through the storm and the tough times afterwards and can now look back at the progress we made. We stayed together, strengthened our church community, and nurtured our leaders. Our chalice circles are still going strong (although we have fewer groups), and we have

now incorporated several new members. We continued the Wednesday evening potluck gatherings for 2½ years and occasionally host visiting volunteers helping in the rebuilding effort. We are a more caring congregation and look to the future with confidence and trust.