

Ministry of Presence – “not so flashy”

Following multiple tornadoes in the Lancaster/Dallas area of Texas April 3, 2012, National Response Team members were requested and went to offer assistance in Grace Presbytery. Following is an excerpt from Sue Renault following one of her days in the field.

“Yesterday we were allowed into neighborhoods impacted by the tornadoes. It really is amazing that nobody was killed. As I walked along looking at torn off roofs and collapsed walls, I grieved for the families who face the long road to repair and recovery. One house had been pretty much "sucked apart," leaving a couple of interior walls. We learned that the mother there heard the sirens, and -- while there were two possible bathrooms in which to huddle -- she decided on the one where some of the kids' bathtub toys were. (They would keep the kids entertained, perhaps). She made the choice, rushed her kids into the bathroom, and waited out the storm around her. They finally emerged to find ALL the rest of the house, including the other bathroom, completely destroyed.



Photo by NRT member Karen Smith

At the emergency distribution/staging area set up in a huge field house, we gathered with Muslims, Buddhists, Baptists, Jews, Methodists; Red Cross, Salvation Army, National Guard, Boy Scouts, NAACP, and you-name-it. The collective spirit of neighbor helping neighbor was palpable. Even the park and rec department deployed a recreation specialist to hang out with the little kids while the bigger ones played "miniature football" on the really cool astroturf.

My PDA team members and I worked quietly. Not much flash to asking if someone needed a chair or a bottle of water. Not much fanfare in saying hello and listening to stories of loss. In PDA it's called the "ministry of presence."

Again, in the not-so-flashy line of work, we spent a few hours on the phone checking in with folks from the area churches who completed Red Cross/PDA counseling program a couple years ago to let them know where/how they might be needed.

Yesterday afternoon we visited an impacted neighborhood where volunteers from the Presbyterian Church in Arlington wielded their rakes and chain saws, methodically clearing out one yard after another. The piles of debris along the roadside grew huge. The streets grew narrower. The homeowners shook their heads to see people they didn't even know, cutting down trees that lay atop garages and patios and hauling roof shingles and bent lawn furniture. Their houses, that couldn't even be seen from the street that morning because of the fallen branches, could now be assessed for damage; and they had a clearing through which to haul what could be salvaged from their homes.”



A local volunteer from First Presbyterian Church in Arlington.
Photo by Sue Renault