

## **St. Matthew's Early Response Team**

Beginnings in the late 1980's and through the 1990's members of St. Matthew's were involved in various forms of hands on ministries. This included VIM trips to Grenada and Juarez, participating in the local Christmas in April operation, supporting our youth in an annual Youth Summer Service Project such as ASP or Camp Hope, sheltering the homeless or less fortunate, and feeding the hungry. After the September 11, 2001 affair there was a nationwide desire to mobilize to prepare for potential disasters be they from natural causes or other causes.

The United Methodist Committee on Relief (UMCOR) working through the local Annual Conferences began to help organize and train people to be prepared to assist when a disaster struck.

The Baltimore Washington Conference was no different than many and organized such an Early Response Team. Several members of our congregation joined this early effort and were provided training to prepare them for providing relief to disaster victims if called. This team had several meetings in late 2001 and early 2002. A trailer was purchased and outfitted by the Conference to provide a means for this team to carry the tools and support equipment needed to be self-sufficient at a disaster site.

The first opportunity for the ERT to put this training and the tools to use came in April 2002 when a tornado hit the City of La Plata in Charles County, Maryland. Eight members of the team deployed on the second day after the tornado hit and were used to perform Case Management and Information distribution functions for the first day. Then for several days the team was involved in sawing large trees, clearing lots and removing debris. The trailer proved very useful.

The team was housed at the Lakeside United Methodist Church in Waldorf, MD. As a result of this exercise some modifications to the interior of the trailer in form of shelving and specific tool storage was recommended and approved. The trailer has not had significant work done since that time.

The second deployment of the ERT came in September 2003 when Hurricane Isabel moved up the Chesapeake Bay and did major damage to Calvert and St. Mary's Counties in Southern Maryland. Again about eight members of the ERT were deployed and they performed mostly Case Management and Information Distribution work. It was difficult to perform much relief work in the early stages because the damage was the sort that required visits from the insurance companies, County inspectors and professional contractors. Two members of our church did work a few days in St. Mary's County where some relief work could be performed but again it was mostly Case Management.

After Isabel the trailer was moved around to various places in the Conference and used a tool shed. It eventually ended at the Conference Center where it was used for storage during the move to the new facility. In the late summer of 2004 a series of hurricanes hit southern Florida with Charlie being one of the worst. Our church organized a team of

eight to go work on relief efforts. This was not an “official Conference ERT” effort but it functioned as if it was.

In November 2004 we retrieved the trailer from the Conference Center with all of its tools and proceeded to drive to Arcadia, Florida. We stayed at the United Methodist Church in Arcadia and worked for a week trying to restore a little bit of normalcy to residents of that town. Upon our return we kept the trailer and have retained possession of it ever since.

The Conference ERT was last deployed in response to Hurricane Katrina. In September 2005 a team of nine was sent after a blessing from the Bishop to Laurel, Mississippi to help that city recover from the disaster. We stayed at the United Methodist Church in Laurel and worked under their guidance. We performed all sorts of tasks from Case Management, tree and debris removal, purchasing agents from the relief effort, food pantry management and last helping to establish a facility to handle the flow of needy and store the material to feed and equipment their recovery.

St. Matthew’s members have been active in each of these efforts, but the ERT has not been deployed since Laurel. Our congregation’s effort in this area has been to continue to support the effort to rehabilitate the Gulf Coast by sending VIM Teams on a regular basis and to beginning developing our own Disaster Response Program.

We are prepared to support the Baltimore Washington Conference should it ever want to focus again on building and maintaining an ERT. In the meantime, however, we maintain the Conference trailer and make it available to VIM Teams who need that level of support.