

## Report to the 230<sup>th</sup> Annual Diocesan Convention Disaster Recovery

One year ago, the Diocese of New Jersey had little experience with natural disasters. We do now! From the onset of Superstorm Sandy, our congregations opened our buildings and hearts to our neighbors; providing food, shelter, clothing, and spiritual support in unprecedented ways. We rediscovered the importance of community, and the very real presence of the church at its center. We witnessed first hand the transformative power of becoming the hands and feet of Christ.

Now as we continue our long term recovery, we are building upon the lessons learned. Like St. Paul, we are able to boast of our weakness; for out of that weakness is growing strength. Relationships have grown between our congregations, the diocese, and the community. Out of these relationships come very real opportunities to serve our neighbors, not only in times of disaster but everyday. We are recognizing that everyday is a disaster for someone in our community...a lost job, sudden homelessness, sickness. As we have come together in response to Sandy, we are rediscovering the value of community. Through the generosity of Episcopal Relief and Development we have received over \$400,000.00 this year. Partnering with many faith-based and non-profit organizations, we work with fourteen Long Term Recovery Groups throughout the diocese from Cape May to Elizabeth, rebuilding homes and lives. This partnering ranges from providing facilities and personnel for disaster case management, fiscal agency, volunteer support and housing, to providing construction materials. As a part of the NJ State and National Voluntary Organizations Active in Disaster (VOAD) and Church World Services, we assist Long Term Recovery Groups with expertise, training, and coordination. We are training in disaster preparedness and response to increase our capacity for future disasters. We have trained thirty-five clergy as Disaster Chaplains. Our congregations are preparing preparedness plans. We have prepared thousands of hot meals, filled hundreds of bags in our food pantry's, and clothed many; and we are doubling our efforts to make these programs sustainable.

Over one year post disaster, over 250, 000 survivors of the storm have still not returned to their homes. Thousands more await critical answers about rebuilding from insurance companies, state and federal programs, and local officials. Temporary housing assistance programs are expiring. Gentrification of our beloved Jersey Shore, already in progress before the storm, has intensified. Always a commodity in short supply, affordable housing opportunities are diminishing. As in all disasters, those most vulnerable among us...the poor, the uneducated, the homeless...are hurt disproportionately. The people and congregations of the Diocese of New Jersey are challenged in the aftermath of Sandy to increase our efforts to serve as outspoken and effective advocates for the vulnerable; to comfort those suffering in body, mind and spirit; and to feed those hungry for physical and spiritual food. Emotions run from the hopelessness and despair of those still awaiting help, to the guilt of those who were untouched by the storm.

Most importantly we have learned the meaning of the word "with". It has been ventured that the word "with" is the most important in scripture. John's gospel tells us, "The Word was with God". From the beginning, God was with us. In the gospel of Matthew, Jesus tells us "behold, I am with you always". To the end, God is with us. Not for us, like a stranger doing nice things or giving us random handouts. Not giving us everything we ever want, or protecting us from illness or hard times, but with us! When things go well and when they fall apart, in joy and in sadness, with us! In the aftermath of Sandy, we have learned what it is to be vulnerable. We have learned the very real difference between being there "for" our communities and being "with" our community. In the midst of a terrible storm or on a fine summer day on the Jersey Shore, God is with us, and we are with God.

Respectfully submitted,  
Keith R. Adams  
Disaster Recovery Coordinator - 2014