

Full Gospel Church Sees God Working in Superstorm Sandy

It wasn't a good day.

Pastor Peter Conforti and the members of Full Gospel Church (AG) of Island Park, N.Y., were left shocked, speechless—struck to the core. When Hurricane Sandy hit the Northeast late in October, damage was expected. But this—this was much more than anyone imagined.

With many of his congregants from the hard-hit areas of Island Park and Long Beach, Conforti suddenly found his church of 250 had almost instantly dwindled to 60 as some members had their homes totally destroyed or made at least temporarily uninhabitable. And unknown to them at the time, the area would mostly be without power—with the exception of generators—for the next three weeks or more.

The church building didn't escape the wrath of Hurricane Sandy either. Four feet of water sat in the parking lot with a foot of standing seawater inside the building. The parsonage (located in Long Beach) was also heavily damaged by the flooding.

"The church was on higher ground, so we never thought it would be flooded," Conforti says, a sense of disbelief still evident in his voice. "But the sanctuary, fellowship hall, kitchen, Christian education wing—all had water standing in them. When the water receded, we took out the carpet, pews—anything even remotely close to the floor was finished, because the sea water is so corrosive and full of bacteria, it made a mess of everything.

"One of the first things that hit me," Conforti continues, "was how inclusive the damage was—it was everybody, everybody [in the community] was underwater—basements, first floors and

even higher than that. Everyone was scrambling trying to find places to live, or to come back to. But for many, everything was gone.”

Even as things seemed to be going from bad to worse, as freezing temperatures and a snowstorm were expected to hit the area with power still out, God was already at work.

“Convoy of Hope was here within 24 hours,” Conforti says, “setting up a relief distribution center at a nearby elementary school. People also came down from the New York District office, including Chaplain Don Schneider, and churches came to help and show their support in a big way.”

Yet, as Convoy of Hope began distributing emergency relief supplies, Conforti says something odd began to happen.

“For some reason, people just started coming by the church and dropping off clothing and furniture for people in need,” Conforti says. “Within days, we were a clothing distribution center.”

As the community reeled, Conforti and Full Gospel Church became a constant. The community knew where to go for aid. After three weeks, power was restored, and the church unexpectedly transitioned again.

“When the power came back on, Samaritan’s Purse contacted us—they wanted to use our church for a staging area,” Conforti says, conveying his surprise. “I tried to explain that our church interior was nothing more than cement floors and exposed beams where the drywall had been ripped out. But they assured us that the church would be fine.”

And so it was.

Joining with Full Gospel Church and chaplains, Samaritan’s Purse brought in teams to go into homes, rip out the damaged drywall, dry out the home and then spray it for mold—at no

cost.

It wasn't long before word spread about what Samaritan's Purse and Full Gospel Church were doing. More and more people came to the church to sign up for a team to come to their homes.

"The sole purpose of the Samaritan's Purse outreach was to show people God's love in a tangible way," Conforti says. "We were there as well, with chaplains from the Billy Graham organization, helping people deal with the loss and frustrations they were experiencing."

As the teams ministered to people with their attitudes and physical labor, the spiritual doors began to open. "People were asking, 'Why are you here?'" Conforti says. "And we told them, 'We're here to help you and show you God loves you, knows what you're going through and to trust Him.'"

Conforti explains that prior to Hurricane Sandy, the church had many walls and stereotypes to overcome in order to reach the community. But following the storm, where the church and ministries displayed the love of Christ through being a servant to the community, people were suddenly more receptive and open.

"Our first week of services, we had about 60 people here," Conforti says. "The next, we had about 120."

However, since the beginning of the Samaritan's Purse outreach into homes, Conforti says about 80 people have accepted Christ as their Lord and Savior. The church is also running 250 again—but the congregation is made up of a lot of new faces as many of the original families have still been unable to return to their homes or have moved from the area.

Conforti doesn't believe the church could have ever made this kind of impact upon its community through evangelism, crusade meetings or programs.

“I don’t see how,” Conforti says. “Even if we went door-to-door in this community—half the doors would never be opened and those that did open, once they heard where we were from, they would never listen.”

He explains that once people come to realize the offer to help is legitimate and they aren’t asking for anything in return, attitudes change.

“Many have seen acts of love before,” Conforti observes, “but for a person to go down into a crawl space loaded with mold and scrape it out for a total stranger? That’s love. And people are responding to a demonstration of love they’ve never seen before!

We prayed as a church for many years to be a lighthouse to the community and to see people come to the Lord,” Conforti says. “Look at what God is doing! People know us and not in a negative way – ‘You’re the church that’s helping the community even though you have damage to your building.’ Only God can do that. He’s the One that’s changing hearts and minds—even when we still have concrete floor, blue tarps and wet drywall around us.”