Refugee Turns Relief Coordinator after Hurricane Sandy

A man serving as an RCA church's key coordinator of Hurricane Sandy relief understands what it's like not to be able to go home.

His name is Harry Pangemanan, and Reformed Church of Highland Park (RCHP), the New Jersey church he now serves as outreach coordinator, provided sanctuary for him to prevent his deportation in 2012.

Pangemanan and his wife, Yana, fled religious persecution in their home country of Indonesia in 1993.

When Sandy hit in October 2012, Harry and seven of his friends, also Indonesian refugees, were living inside the church 24/7 to avoid being detained by immigration authorities. (The federal government has since revised their status and in February the men finally were able to return to their homes.)

"We used our time to help in any way we could in responding to Sandy," he says.

The first three months

Pangemanan says that following the hurricane, RCHP was without power for nine days. After that they ran a generator and were able to provide a hot meal for about 120 people a day.

Once the power was back on, RCHP began serving as a drop-off center for relief supplies, with donations coming from as far away as Texas. "Our church was full of food, clothes, baby needs, and cleaning supplies," says Harry, adding that even the sanctuary was full of supplies.

The men organized supplies and sent many of them to Community Church of Keyport, which is located closer to the shore and has been using its building as a distribution center for relief supplies. Keyport's pastor, Dawn Seaman, had been a student intern minister at RCHP and she has worked closely with RCHP from the beginning of the Sandy disaster.

RCHP also sent donations to other area churches, a borough hall, two fire departments, and several food pantries.

In all, Pangemanan says, "we sent more than 65 van loads full of goods--about $80,000 worth of supplies--to the Jersey shore." In addition, people from the Highland Park community came to the church and received goods, cash, and gift cards.

"Also we helped Metuchen Reformed Church prepare Thanksgiving meals for homeless people on Staten Island," says Pangemanan. "We cooked 15 turkeys and purchased 25 pies."

All this happened in the first three months after Sandy hit.

Also in those first three months, RCHP hosted six World Renew rapid response groups and coordinated 35 Saturday work groups. Many of the groups were from the local faith community: RCHP, First and Second

Fourteen RCA churches have sent Sandy relief work groups to serve in the area near Reformed Church of Highland Park:

- Brunswick Reformed Church in Brunswick, Ohio
- Calvary Reformed Church in Ripon, California
- Cedar Hills Community Church in Cedar Rapids, Iowa
- Christ Community Church in Clifton Park, New York
- Community Church of Glen Rock in New Jersey
- Fair Haven Ministries in Hudsonville, Michigan
- Faith Church in Dyer, Indiana
- First Reformed Church in Zeeland, Michigan
- Hager Park Reformed Church in Jenison, Michigan
- Immanuel Community Reformed Church in Lansing, Michigan
- North & Southampton Reformed Church in Churchville, Pennsylvania
- Second Reformed Church in Grand Haven, Michigan
- Spring Valley Community Church in
Reformed Churches in New Brunswick, Reformed Church of Metuchen, Six Mile Run Reformed Church, First Reformed Church in Pompton Plains, North Branch Reformed Church, Middletown Reformed Church, the Jewish community in Highland Park, Indonesian churches in Middlesex County, and a Presbyterian church in Metuchen. Others came from Rutgers University and Middlesex College. A local business owner volunteered along with his employees.

Pangemanan praises RCHP copastors Seth and Stephanie Kaper-Dale, who have pitched in wherever they could while fulfilling family and ministry responsibilities, including overseeing the church's housing, justice, and immigration ministries. In the first month after Sandy, Pangemanan and Seth did all of the relief coordination. Since then many others have stepped in to help, including Emilee Walker-Cornetta and Amos Caley, interns from Princeton University, who help coordinate showers and meals for the work groups.

Longer-term response

Over the spring and summer, RCHP has also hosted Sandy relief work groups from 14 churches across the RCA and from Central College in Pella, Iowa. The workers stay at the church. "We can hold more than 50 people," says Pangemanan. "If more than that come, other RCA churches will host as well. The Reformed churches in Metuchen and Brielle have each hosted three groups."

The groups sleep in the church basement. There is only one shower, so when large groups come, members who live near the church open their homes for volunteers to shower. Several members of the church and the Highland Park community prepare breakfast and dinner for the volunteers. After breakfast everyone gathers to pray and in the evening they have a short Bible study and share the day's experiences. The workers often eat lunch at Community Church of Keyport's soup kitchen.

New Brunswick Theological Seminary also supports the volunteers. They've hosted many Wednesday night dinners and allow volunteers to shower at the seminary.

In July, Mike Van Kampen, pastor of Second Reformed Church in Grand Haven, Michigan, led 17 people from his congregation to New Jersey to help with Sandy relief.

"We did a lot of tear-out and some dry walling and insulation work. We put a very small dent in what needs to be done.

"Hundreds and hundreds of houses are still damaged and uninhabitable. Because insurance has run out, many people have no way to move forward with living in their homes. They are living in families' and friends' homes.

"One homeowner asked, 'Why did you folks drive all the way from Michigan to help?' I told her, 'We're part of a church family, and Jesus tells us to get our hands dirty and our feet on the ground.'"

Van Kampen says he loved watching the team coming together and relationships deepening. "Any time we can deepen relationships it's God at work and lays groundwork for spiritual depth as well," he says.

When they returned home one of the men got up at church and told about his work group experience. "He said it was the best thing he's ever done in his walk with God."

The need going forward

Pangemanan encourages more churches to come to serve in New Jersey. It's estimated it will be five to seven years before life along the Jersey shore returns to normal.

"If they can bring at least one highly skilled worker, that would help a great deal," he says. "It will make the time shorter for when people can go back and live a normal life in their homes."

For a list of disaster response volunteer opportunities, visit www.rca.org/volunteer.

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