

A Watery Crisis in a Dry Land

In June 2010, the Maple Creek area in southwest Saskatchewan was hit by heavy rains. Flooding made the national news.

The region is typically dry, as evidenced by cacti growing in the fields. But in the spring of 2010, conditions were unusually wet and the water table was high. When June rains poured, the town and surrounding communities saw more water than anyone could remember. A wall of water from the nearby Cypress Hills hit the lowlands hard. Many seniors had seen other weather disasters in their lifetimes, but in June 2010 they saw water move things that they had always thought to be secure.

THE FLOODS CAME

Rain came so fast, reservoirs and creeks overflowed. Bridges collapsed. Highways and train tracks washed out. Fields turned into lakes. Corrals disappeared. Town streets became rivers. Trailer-court trailers floated like boats. Basements filled and sewers backed up. A campground was submerged.

The town of Maple Creek experienced the most damage in the region; in some places the water rose seven feet. The town's emergency measures plan was thoroughly tested and thankfully no one was killed. There was a shortage of pumps and people struggled to divert water with sandbags. Families, businesses and hospitals were evacuated. People navigated in fishing boats, canoes, jet-skis and pickups.

TROUBLES SET IN

An imminent wedding had its anxious moments. The bride was in Maple Creek. The groom and over half of the wedding party were in Cypress Hills Park, 20 miles south. The road between them was blocked by a ten-foot hole and water. After many moments of trying to decide what to do, the bride and her attendants took a three hour detour to get to the ceremony.

Surface flood water in Maple Creek's town-site was mostly gone in less than 24 hours, but difficulties both in and out of town were just beginning. Some homes were completely lost and about half were condemned due to caving basements and other structural damages. Furnaces, water heaters, appliances, furniture and other items were destroyed. Some businesses flooded, farmers lost fields and barns, and ranchers lost fencing and water tanks. Families found themselves living in hotels for extended periods. And for many months after, people were struggling to fix or obtain furnaces in time for the oncoming winter.

Insurance didn't cover damage if there was no sewer backup. It meant that many homeowners weren't insured, leaving them to struggle with both mortgages and rent; most couldn't pay for both. Long after the event people were severely challenged by the wait – waiting for potential provincial disaster funds to come through and waiting for contractors to come and put their houses back together.

In 2010, eighty-eight Saskatchewan communities needed public assistance to deal with weather disasters. Governments and insurances offices were stretched to their limits. In some cases, the provincial disaster insurance program kicked in to help where personal insurances didn't. The challenge was to know if there was coverage and if so, what for. The city of Yorkton was hit by torrential rains a few weeks after Maple Creek. The government used Maple Creek's program revisions as a model for Yorkton.

THE BLESSINGS

It is always heart-warming to hear about people helping people. Maple Creek and community experienced helping hands from near and far, including neighbours, local churches, distant churches, distant volunteers, non-profit organizations and governments. "In this time of crisis" said Pastor Martens, "people became servants and united. They responded in kindness, love and generosity."

"We watched people helping each other" recalled Captain Dean. "Not one person slept in a shelter that first night because every person in need was billeted in a home or a church. People, young and old sandbagged, shoulder to shoulder. One man lost his trailer park (his livelihood). I remember him going around, offering to set up his pump, to anyone who needed it. Folks from nearby Huderrite colonies and First Nation reserves arrived, offering supplies. Ranchers, whose lands were also being flooded, showed up in town. Their comment? 'We'll get past this one!'"

Not surprisingly, the disaster took its toll on citizens. All pastors from all churches offered emotional and spiritual care and helped with referrals for those who needed extra support. Clergy opened their homes for extended periods to house displaced town-folk.

The church was involved from the beginning. They walked the streets with their neighbours, giving what they could. And their neighbours gave back, coming into pastors' homes, helping to pull out damaged carpet, drywall and insulation. The blessings were in the helping. Friendship and evangelism blended, as did the spiritual and emotional. Parishioners took bottles of water and knocked on doors to offer help and find out how friends and neighbours were doing. Many were working at demolition in soggy basements. The knock at the door offered a welcoming break and a bottle of water represented a simple expression of the love of Christ.

The church rallied to look for the 'gaps' and the urgent needs, and then did what they could to fill them. By the time the Red Cross arrived, help in many forms was already in place. Food was served within 10 hours of the disaster, and meals continued for two weeks after, offering three sittings a day to anyone who needed it. Ranchers and farmers were offered bundles of replacement fence posts, critical to their livelihoods. A make-shift reception

centre was organized to hand out clothing and cleaning supplies (brooms, mops, chemicals, mask, gloves – whatever was needed). From July to October a furniture and appliance bank was set up to accommodate requests, donations and exchanges.

THANKFULLNESS

Maple Creek town-folk will be forever grateful for all the help that came their way. A local family offered its own, touching perspective on it all. “A month or so before the flood, their son was in Afghanistan”, recalled Pastor Martens. A bomb blew up four feet from him and he was badly injured. But he lived and we prayed for him. He was taken to Edmonton for treatment and he now has his sight back and is able to walk. That family’s home was flooded while they were visiting their son in Edmonton. We helped to clean it up when they came back. Half way through carrying stuff out, I asked the mom how they were all doing. She said ‘this is just stuff. I have my son. He’s alive. I am deeply thankful and grateful in the midst of this loss.’”.

“Our world is shaking,” mused Pastor Martens. “People are less confident than they were before in what’s going to happen. In the midst of this, there is such opportunity - even though it may not be obvious in the moment - to reach out to people and show them Jesus.”

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