

Overcoming Inertia to Plan for Disaster

Every congregation and diocese in the United States is at risk for some type of disaster. Yet many still do not have preparedness plans in place. Why?

Church leaders may feel overwhelmed at the prospect of disaster planning. They may believe that large-scale disasters couldn't happen in their regions, or they might think that they don't have the resources to create an adequate plan.

We interviewed three people who are involved with successful disaster planning at the diocesan level. They shared the obstacles they have faced, and how they overcame them.

Nicole Krug, Diocese of Arizona

Nicole is the Canon for Media and Communications and the Diocesan Disaster Coordinator for the Diocese of Arizona. She has found educating vestries to be a key component in motivating parishes to prepare for a disaster and often answers questions like these: How does disaster response go up the food chain from church to diocese to Episcopal Relief & Development? What does it mean to be a disaster coordinator? How do you build relationships that facilitate disaster response?

She estimates that about half of her diocese's churches "have either thought about disaster preparedness or are in the process of doing something about it." One of the largest barriers to preparedness in Arizona is the "blessing and curse of great weather," Nicole says. "We don't have hurricanes or blizzards, but it's important for churches to understand there is the potential for other crises."

An incident could be as simple as a fire, or something much larger, such as an ecological disaster. Last year, FEMA carried out a mass care exercise to determine and prepare for how a major earthquake event in California would affect Arizona as far as the massive influx of evacuees.

"I've never met with flat-out resistance," Nicole says, "but disaster preparedness can seem overwhelming. That's why it's great that Episcopal Relief & Development has **templates** people can use." To make planning easier for the people she works with, she fills in the diocesan contact information for them. "You have to get the rector or vicar involved because they're the point person, and the vestry has to buy into it because they'll educate the other parishioners."

Nicole has been kind enough to share the resources the Diocese of Arizona created, so others can use them as a jumping-off point in their own preparedness planning. **Take a look.**

Harry Kendrick, Diocese of Vermont

Harry is the Diocesan Disaster Preparedness Coordinator for the Diocese of Vermont. He got involved with disaster response and preparedness after the devastation Hurricane Irene brought to his region. He has remained vocal and active in this initiative ever since.

He has often found it difficult to enlist local parishes in disaster preparation. “We once organized a day-long seminar, including several noted disaster preparedness experts as speakers,” he says, “but we had to cancel it due to lack of sufficient interest.”

“Inertia is the biggest stumbling block,” Harry explains. “People realize preparation is necessary only after they’ve been hit by a disaster.” Yet he doesn’t let these challenges get him down. He continues to speak at events, and his committee had an exhibit at the Diocesan Convention. “We’ve put some good information and resources together, and we’ve gotten it out in various degrees to the parishes,” he says.

A member of his local Voluntary Organization Active in Disasters, Harry stays active in the disaster preparedness community in Vermont. This has helped him connect to state agencies, attend training sessions and meetings, and learn more about disaster preparedness. In turn, he continually shares the knowledge and resources he gains with other nonprofits and faith-based organizations. “It helps all of us understand what we need to be doing to prepare and what happens when something occurs,” he says.

The Rev. Canon Carl Andrews, Diocese of Colorado

The Rev. Canon Carl Andrews has been involved in a variety of disaster preparedness and response efforts throughout his career. When he was an officer with the United States Air Force with time as a military chaplain (post-seminary), part of his work involved going to places profoundly affected by disasters in order to counsel and provide assistance. Now, he volunteers in Partners in Response, a group coordinated by Episcopal Relief & Development, that provides short- and long-term recovery aid.

Six years ago, the Diocese of Colorado began to require that its parishes have a disaster plan. Carl has found that those that have faced disaster in the past are more eager to put plans in place. For example, “Colorado Springs had good plans because they had wild fires. Parishes in the plains had good plans because floods have affected them.” The plans the Diocese of Colorado uses come from the Episcopal Relief & Development site. **Read** about the type of plan your parish might need to have.

When it comes to disaster planning, Carl stresses the importance of being creative. “You can plan ahead and assess what needs to be done, but it goes beyond filling in the blanks on a piece of paper. Seek resources and help from local agencies so individual parishes don’t wind up making plans in isolation.” He also mentions that flexibility is key for a good disaster plan. “If you’re not flexible, you’re stuck.”

Nicole, Harry, and Carl all agree on one thing: disaster preparedness is essential. That’s why they all continue to encourage congregations to take the time to put plans into place. These plans need not be perfect or overly complicated. Having even a few protocols can dramatically lessen the impact of a disaster.