

How Your Church Can Help After a Disaster

A disaster can devastate a community and cause it to lose its spirit. But it can also bring people together in a profound way.

Many church leaders wonder how their congregation can best contribute to recovery and rebuilding efforts after a disaster. The Rev. Stephen Harding, the Diocesan Disaster Response Coordinator for the Diocese of New York, says, “The best thing churches can do is pre-plan and develop relationships with other houses of worship in the community, and with local first responding agencies.”

Get to know your neighbors (and your roster)

Stephen recommends that church leaders go through their rosters and identify at-risk parishioners, such as “shut-ins, elderly people, and families with small children,” as well as marginalized people, such as the poor and undocumented, and those who might be “geographically at risk.” That might include people who live in a flood zone, in low-lying areas, or near water.

Having a roster of those at risk will enable church leaders or clergy to help those folks plan in advance of a disaster, as well as check in with them during and after a disaster to make sure they have what they need – “Enough medications? Warm bedding? Flashlights?” and so on.

Stephen recognizes that this level of outreach is unrealistic for clergy to undertake alone and recommends that congregations set up a committee or enlist existing ministry leaders to help.

He also suggests that churches look beyond the borders of their own communities. “The church’s role is weaving together the community strands so the community as a whole will not only survive, but do well,” Stephen says.

“If there isn’t an interfaith group in your community, start one,” he says. He also advises that congregations build relationships with local law enforcement, their fire department, and emergency medical services. Citing recent violent events, he says that all parishes should contact their local first responders to perform a safety assessment.

By building relationships ahead of time, others can be there for you, should a disaster occur. And, conversely, you can be there for them, too. “If those relationships already exist, it’s so much easier to pick up the phone and say, ‘How can I help?’” he says.

Leverage existing programs

Many organizations already have community outreach programs that they run or support. For instance, Stephen notes, “A church may have people who know how to prepare large quantities of food for others. After a disaster, they can serve meals to the community, in addition to the population they regularly reach,” he says.

This kind of program can be extremely valuable in situations where a great proportion of homes in an area have been damaged. “During Hurricane Sandy, feeding programs on Staten Island were important because so many people’s kitchens were unusable,” Stephen says.

Pastoral care visiting teams can also be leveraged to contact or visit vulnerable parishioners.

Practical considerations

Stephen says that what most churches have to offer is “space and people”—but there is much a church needs to consider before opening up buildings for shelter. “How long will the shelter be needed? Do you have enough food to offer? Bathrooms? Showers? If you are providing shelter, do you put families together or separate by gender?” Considering these questions prior to a disaster can reduce stress and conflict in the long run.

“Parishes can strengthen the community simply by responding to local need and calling for mutual aid if it’s beyond what they can actually do,” Stephen says. “**Episcopal Relief & Development** comes in there.”

It is important to remember that recovery efforts require “marathon endurance” and not to expect a “quick sprint of results,” he says. “Churches can do something in every phase of the disaster, but the most important phase is planning ahead.”