

# THE PARISH PAPER

## IDEAS AND INSIGHTS FOR ACTIVE CONGREGATIONS

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### Disaster Relief: Congregations in the Eye of the Storm

An EF level-5 tornado ripped through Joplin, Missouri, killing 158 people, injuring 1,150 others, and causing nearly \$3 billion in damage. The storm leveled St. Paul's United Methodist Church worship center and severely damaged their family life center. Two of their members were among the dead and three members from another area congregation lost their lives. Hurricane Irene caused major destruction along the East Coast of the U.S. and record flooding took many inland communities by surprise. When the Schoharie Creek rose to historic levels, Prattsville and Schoharie, New York were among the most affected—90 percent of the village structures sustained major damage, including local churches.

Congregations in the eye of the storm suffer in multiple ways—church buildings may be damaged or destroyed, lives may be lost, members and neighbors may become homeless, and the community and its residents are never the same again. Still, the disaster is not the event—it is what happens afterward.

#### Immediate Relief vs. Long-Term Recovery

When a community disaster occurs, many agencies and groups swing into action. In the chaotic first few days, inaccurate information flows and media coverage can be intense. People around the country begin to contribute to relief organizations. In fact, 95 percent of all contributed funds are given during this first relief stage. However, the most difficult and expensive aspect of stitching the community back together comes from hard work in the following three to five years. After five years, work groups are *still* traveling to assist in areas affected by Hurricane Katrina. Both immediate relief and long-term assistance are needed after a natural disaster. Below are ways that your congregation can provide security and hope for a future beyond the storm's effects.

#### Immediate Relief Efforts by Churches

People of faith have great potential to lead and minister when the healing work begins.

**Donate smart.** Make a cash donation to a local church, long-term recovery group, or faith-based organization that already has relationships in the community. Consider giving to those doing the work of recovery because they need more funds and are less likely to receive them after public attention wanes. Look for opportunities to take part in matching grants where every gift is matched dollar for dollar. Above all, donate to an organization that you trust.

**Do not send supplies.** When disaster strikes, people want to *do* something! Yet sending desperately needed supplies is simply not practical. Someone in the community has to be set up to receive, organize, store, and then distribute these goods to victims. Often charities partner with companies to acquire what they need in donations such as bottled water, cleaning supplies, new clothing, and gift cards. Have a fund-raising event and then donate those funds to a trusted charity.

**Provide information and open your doors.** Church buildings and parking lots make good locations for the distribution of water, food, and supplies. Congregations can be a clearinghouse for information and



NEXT TIME, LET'S INSIST ON JUST THE CHURCH NAME.

space for volunteers and agency staff to meet with affected individuals and families. Church volunteers can gather information about food pantries and about households willing to provide temporary lodging, rentals or hotels with space, and other affordable housing. The church might have facilities to serve as a temporary shelter (this possibility becomes more realistic when mobile units with showers and washing machines are available). Congregations often coordinate community meals with other churches and nonprofits to host multiple feeding sites across the affected area. Finally, churches live out their core mission through opening their building for prayer and by participating in interfaith worship services.

### **Long-Term Recovery Efforts by Churches**

While the short-term efforts matter, what's more vital is the work toward long-term recovery.

**Organize volunteers.** Before traveling to a disaster site, make prior arrangements with a local church or agency so they can be ready to put your volunteers to work. All volunteers should arrive prepared to do the work that the local group asks them to do. This includes being appropriately dressed (wearing gloves, long sleeves, work clothes that can be ruined, masks) and bringing their own tools. If possible, volunteers should bring their own food/water. Car pooling or group transportation helps get the group in and out when there is limited road access. Affected areas always benefit from skilled labor but most jobs simply involve removing debris and cleaning up sites. If the disaster is local, congregations can host work groups by providing shelter, meals, or transportation.

What volunteers *do* is important but showing up and building relationships are equally important. Talking helps traumatized victims who have lost so much rediscover what brings their life meaning and dignity. When volunteers listen, they remind survivors that they are not alone and others care. Unfortunately, volunteers can believe they know what is best. A Schoharie pastor advises: "Come with a servant's heart." This means that volunteers should refrain from judging lifestyles or community methods. The volunteer's purpose is to assist, serve, and bring relief.

**Adopt a sister congregation.** Congregations can become long-term recovery partners with a disaster-affected church. Through prayer, sending work groups, and meeting specific requests for assistance, the adopted church feels supported and encouraged. Faith communities show strength in their regional and national community-based network of other denominational churches. Most denominations offer opportunities for service, such as Episcopal Relief

and Development, United Methodist Committee on Relief, Presbyterian Disaster Assistance, Southern Baptist Disaster Relief, Mennonite Disaster Service, Lutheran Disaster Response, and World Renew/Christian Reformed Church.

**Participate in a long-term recovery group.** Communities affected by disaster eventually organize one or more nonprofit group(s) to coordinate the rebuilding challenge. Homeowners, businesses, and agencies are typically represented. Congregations should be represented in these efforts as well because people of faith bring a commitment to justice and equitable assistance. Pastors and individual members can attend meetings, serve on committees and governing boards, and share information with the congregation.

**Prepare a church disaster plan.** Gather a team of four to six members and craft a comprehensive but short summary of what the church would need if (1) a local disaster caused damage to church facilities or to the homes of members, or (2) a disaster happened in the county or state. Encourage interested members to get disaster training offered by many denominations and relief organizations.<sup>1</sup>

### **A Ministry of Hope**

The most recognized work of Japanese art, a woodblock print, depicts a huge wave threatening three small boats. Why has this dramatic scene become an iconic image of impending disaster? At first glance, the fishermen seem doomed. Yet they do not look panicked. Instead, they grasp their oars with determined discipline and use their experience to cope with the flow of life. Although the wave exemplifies the violence of nature, the sun still shines, pointing to resiliency and hope.

Floods, fires, hurricanes, and tornadoes rip apart communities and present congregations with the opportunity to be a part of God's story of hope. In this turmoil, churches can do their best ministry—offer hope, form long-term partnerships, and build communities.

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1. Guides for churches ministering in disaster are available online. For examples see these websites: National Disaster Interfaith Network, *Be a Ready Congregation* and tip sheets about disaster ministry ([n-din.org](http://n-din.org)), North American Mission Board ([www.namb.net](http://www.namb.net)), *Church Preparedness for Disaster Relief* and *Disaster Preparedness and Response Plan*, Peace River Presbytery ([www.peaceriverpresbytery.org](http://www.peaceriverpresbytery.org)).