

**Hope Crisis Response Network, Inc.**

**Disaster Planning for Churches**



A Manual for Preparing Your Staff and Congregation  
(Revised 2009)

## **Gather information**

Begin working on your disaster plan, by determining your current needs and goals. The following checklists will give you an idea of the strengths and weaknesses of your preparedness plan.

### **Do you have a church preparedness checklist?**

- ✓ Are emergency phone numbers posted at telephone locations?
- ✓ Do you regularly check smoke alarms and fire extinguishers?
- ✓ Are several well-stocked first aid kits available and clearly visible?
- ✓ Do you have an evacuation plan in case of an emergency?
- ✓ Do you have someone trained in first aid and CPR, and can you identify them quickly?
- ✓ Is your church “barrier free” for disabled persons, including installation of wheelchair ramps?
- ✓ Do you know the special needs of people who need to be assisted or prepared for special evacuation procedures when disaster strikes?
- ✓ Are your ushers prepared to respond to an emergency? (Heart attack, fire, etc.)
- ✓ Have you reviewed your insurance policy in the last six months?

### **Is your church property protected?**

- ✓ Do you have duplicate computer data files, important papers, and records safely stored?
- ✓ What disasters are most likely to affect your area?
- ✓ Does your church have an evacuation map in each classroom and office showing how to get out of the building in case of fire or where to go in case of a tornado?
- ✓ Do you have a reciprocal agreement with another church or facility as a place to meet if your church sustains major damage? You may want to include food, shelter and clothing if necessary.
- ✓ Are you aware of local disaster response agencies like the American Red Cross, Salvation Army, HCRN, VOAD, and other faith groups that will respond in disasters?
- ✓ Do you have someone who is responsible to respond in protecting your office equipment; audio-visual equipment and special church furniture if time permits?
- ✓ Have you developed a plan for securing doors, pictures, and other loose items; taping large glass windows; turning off utilities?
- ✓ Could you fill the baptistery and sinks with water for emergency use?
- ✓ Have you video taped all your assets for insurance claims?
- ✓ Have you reviewed your current policy to make sure you have adequate coverage?
- ✓ Do you have flood, sewer back up, and other necessary insurance policies in place? If you live in area near water, we recommend that you always maintain flood insurance. For more information on flood insurance, visit [www.fema.gov](http://www.fema.gov) or talk with your insurance agent.
- ✓ Do you know where to shut off utility service?
- ✓ Do you have a back up generator? Has it been well maintained?
- ✓ Have you invited your local fire and police departments in for a walk through of your building so that they can identify exits and egresses, especially if your church is used as a shelter?

### **Preparing to help members of your congregation**

- ✓ Have you established a map of your congregation and where they live? This allows you to determine who might be impacted by a local disaster.
- ✓ Do you have home bound people, elderly, people without transportation, people without relatives or place to go, and/or very low-income families without support?
- ✓ Have you rotated your water and food supplies?

## STEPS TO PREPARE YOUR PLANS

### Establish a Leadership Team

When choosing a leadership team it is important to remember the many skills needed in times of disaster. Keep in mind, you may need to use your building as a shelter, you might need to make some purchases and you may need to offer counseling. The following people could fill some of these roles:

- Trustee who knows the building.
- Someone on the finance committee.
- Mental health counselor.
- Former or retired pastor who is skilled in counseling.
- Someone who is well connected in the community.

(We urge you to not appoint the pastor as the head of this committee. The pastor will have great responsibilities if a disaster should affect your community, protect him and guard his time).

### Leadership Team Job Description

- The team will determine the areas of strengths that can be utilized in times of disaster.
- Establish the leadership for each area of church involvement.
- Assist and support the Coordinator in disaster response.
- Be available for decision-making during disaster response.

### Select a Disaster Response Coordinator

- The coordinator must be an understanding person that can work well under pressure.
- The coordinator must be willing to put forth a measured amount of effort.
- The coordinator must be able to communicate and make decisions.
- Most importantly, the coordinator **must** have a desire to help people in need.

### Responsibilities of the Disaster Response Coordinator

- Coordinate the possible use of church facilities as a training center, crisis counseling, ministry, temporary shelter, and supply or distribution center during disaster response.
- Inform governing bodies of the disaster response needs and activities.
- Organize a “Buddy System” for those needing special care and assistance.
- Educate and promote personal and family emergency preparedness.
- Establish a church disaster response inventory for human and material resources.
- Develop an evacuation route.
- Create maps of the church and where the appropriate shelter is located. (Response to a dangerous situation requires different actions. For instance, basements are appropriate shelters for tornadoes but not for flooding or fire.) Make sure that these maps are located in every room and are reviewed with the staff and Sunday school teachers.
- Put together a directory of all church members, which should include mapping, contact info, number in household and individuals who need special care and number of pets.
- Create relationships with in the community. Get to know the local emergency manager and other organization that provide services such as: Red Cross, Salvation Army, local food banks, town trustee
- Develop a donations and volunteer management program.

## **Identify your Resources**

- What facilities do you have? kitchen, fellowship hall, day care facilities, food bank/pantry, areas for counseling victims or areas that could be used for temporary shelters, large bathrooms with showers, computer/internet availability, or a quiet place where victims can find a quiet place to pray.
- If your facility meets shelter specifications, have you thought about contacting the Red Cross to see if you can offer your building as an official Red Cross Shelter?
- Is your church equipped with a generator for power outages?
- Do you have a church van to shuttle volunteers or survivors?
- Parking lot that could be a staging area for response groups, or an out-building that could be used as a volunteer center?
- Distribute a resource inventory form to every adult in your congregation to be filled out and returned to the church office and the Disaster Response Coordinator. Focus on these two areas: (1) Human resources and (2) material resources. Emphasize that you are not asking for volunteers, but establishing a bank of resources.
- Establish a file system for the completed inventory forms.
- In the event of an emergency, names and resources can be obtained from the files to assist during the time of disaster response and recovery.
- Routinely maintain files and review every six months.

## **Establishing Congregational Support**

- Will you be able to assist with an initial damage assessment of your congregation or church property? This would consist of identifying humanitarian and personal property. (HCRN is glad to provide training, if needed.)
- Could you provide food, clothing, shelter, medical care, counseling, or whatever the need may be?
- Are there volunteers who could clean up or assist with repairs or rebuild damaged structures?
- Spiritual and Emotional care.
- Volunteer team leaders, host and hostess.

## **Donations Management**

- Be selective in receiving and requesting donated goods. Only accept what you can use or properly store.
- Try to avoid collecting donated clothing. Many organizations collect clothing and it requires space and sorting to make the clothing useful to disaster victims.
- Cash is always the best donation. Set up a disaster fund so that you can meet the needs as they arrive. Don't be in a hurry to give away your funds. Disasters are a marathon not a sprint. Your community could have needs for several months, if not years.
- Remember, disasters move in phases, so when accepting items be sure to know the types of needs that are current. Don't accept furniture when you need food and water.
- Keep good records of all donations and be sure to receipt and send thank you notes.
- Be careful not to accept prepared foods from people you do not know. You may accept graciously and then dispose of it properly. Safety first. Local health department rules likely prohibit you from passing along homemade foods.
- Call upon the resources that you have found available in your congregation from the resource inventory.

## **Volunteer Management**

- Volunteer management is harder than it looks. If you are not experienced in this area you may consider not taking the lead role.
- FEMA, state and local governments are cracking down on the unaffiliated volunteer. Get affiliated. You can either coordinate with your local Emergency Management Director, the local Red Cross or the Salvation Army to plan your affiliation. You can also coordinate through HCRN.
- If you do respond, make sure that your team is well trained and is familiar in all areas of disaster response.

Safety first. For training and more information, contact HCRN.

- Can you house and feed volunteers? Do you have a place for them to sleep and shower? Remember: you will likely have both men and women. You may also need a kitchen to provide meals?

### **Community Response and Recovery**

- It is very appropriate to respond in your community providing that you are well prepared.
- Communicate with the local emergency management in your county and request to be a part of their response plan. Remember: it is important to build these relationships before a disaster.
- Never try and be something you are not. If you are known for feeding, then feed. Use the gifts that you have developed in your community.
- In the aftermath of a disaster you will see recovery groups start to form. We encourage you to join the local Long Term Recovery Program so that your church will have a voice in the recovery efforts.
- HCRN is known as a Recovery Specialist Organization. If your community is struggling to form a recovery plan, please notify our offices and we will be glad to assist your community.

## **PRE/POST STORM CHECKLIST**

### **Before the Storm:**

Stay informed. In the event of severe weather keep your radio or television tuned to your locals stations.

### **Identify vulnerable church members**

- Senior citizens, disabled, widowed, single mothers and those living alone. This is a critical piece to manage. It is this group that is the most vulnerable and needs to be handled with great integrity.
- Families living in trailers
- Families living in areas prone to disaster
- When a warning is issued, contact vulnerable members in order to insure that they are in safe areas.
- If your church or school is considered safe, offer it to members as a “shelter” until the danger has passed.
- Those who come to the church or school should be prepared, whenever possible, to bring their own sleeping bags, toiletries, food/water rations, medicines, etc. These should already be in your 72-hour kit. If you don’t have a kit assembled you can go to our website at [www.hcrn.info](http://www.hcrn.info) to find out how to build one.
- A designated person will be assigned to supervise the “church/school shelter.” Make sure that you have followed your church protocols, such as background checks for adult workers.
- Check status of emergency lighting, electric, gas or propane, generators, and food supplies.

### **After the Storm:**

- Ascertain, by phone or by a visit, the status of members most affected by the storm.
- Ultimately, in the case of a large-scale disaster, a follow-up of the entire congregation should be done. Church members should be encouraged to notify the church regarding their whereabouts, if possible.
- Contact your Church Denominational Headquarters or Hope Crisis Response Network (866-909-4673) immediately to report the disaster and give a status report.
- Put your plan into action.

## **SPIRITUAL PREPARATION FOR VOLUNTEERS**

Disaster response volunteers can rebuild and repair homes. They can also replace physical losses. More important though, volunteers are challenged to meet the spiritual needs of survivors and their communities. Disaster response is ultimately a spiritual matter – helping people accept their losses and positively begin life anew.

As Christians, we offer hope, help and healing in the name of our Lord.

I John 3:17-18 “If anyone has material possessions and sees his brother in need but has no pity on him, how can the love of God be in him? Dear children let us not love with words or tongue but with actions and in truth.”

### **Emotional Care**

- Emotional support that offers encouragement.
- Personal one on one...listen...listen...listen.
- Help them to know where our hope comes from.
- Don't make promises you can't keep.
- Don't use clichés.
- Don't force yourself into the conversation. Sometimes all they want to do is tell their story.
- Remember you are not a psychologist. Keep to what you know and, if necessary, referral the individual to the appropriate facility or doctor.

We highly recommend training before attempting to provide emotional care. Training can be arranged for your church through National Organization for Victims Assistance.

### **Spiritual Care**

- Be a real friend...they may have lost everything they value.
- Counselor...they may have lost a loved one.
- Help them find meaning in the events that have occurred.
- Help them discover the redemptive possibilities present in the experience.
- Help them find peace, new meaning for life, and concrete symbols of hope.
- Ask if you can pray with them. Don't be offended if they say no. Sometimes we have to build a relationship first.

### **Dealing with the Hard Questions**

- Disaster can bring undue stress on the victims.
- Be aware that this “undue stress” can have a ripple affect on volunteers as well. Care for the caregiver. Reactions can vary widely from one day to the next. Talk and listen to one another each day. This is called debriefing and is used in quite frequently in disaster.
- Here are some typical questions; “Why us?” “Why is God doing this to us?” “Why is there evil in the world?” “Why does God permit this?”

It is appropriate for people of faith to struggle with the hard questions of good and evil in the world, along with questions about God's love. Spiritual caregivers should not seek to answer all the difficult questions, but to feel the struggle and the pain of the survivors.

The Church has a very special role in disaster response. People who suffer loss begin to question faith or some lose hope for tomorrow. The body of Christ is one of compassion and can help the disaster victim to understand their feelings. Hope, help and healing are the primary needs of those who have faced a traumatic experience. The church should be the most qualified to respond to these needs.

For more information please contact:

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866-909-HOPE (4673)  
www.hcrn.info  
[info@hcrn.info](mailto:info@hcrn.info)

\* This document was created by a collaboration of Church Denominations and the Hope Crisis Response Network. You do not need permission to duplicate. Its intended purpose is to assist churches in preparing a disaster plan.

## **ETHICAL GUIDELINES FOR DISASTER RESPONSE WORKERS**

1. Disaster response workers are representing a church organization; therefore, their attitudes and actions should be in keeping with the teachings of Christ.
2. Disaster response workers should understand and accept the reality that their actions and attitudes reflect on all other workers.
3. Disaster response workers should be sensitive to people and should take time to listen to persons affected by the disaster. (To listen requires an understanding heart as well as a listening ear.) Do not be judgmental.
4. Disaster response workers are committed to assist the disaster-affected person within the limits of their training and abilities.
5. Disaster response workers should respect all the belongings of the disaster-affected persons, and therefore should be especially careful to salvage irreplaceable personal items such as family pictures, legal documents, wedding albums, etc., for the persons being helped. Remember it may appear to be junk to you, but it is someone's treasures.
6. Disaster response workers should not accept damaged items from the disaster victims nor attempt to salvage items from the disaster area for their personal use.
7. Disaster response workers should not accept cash contributions from persons being assisted. Persons wishing to make contributions should be encouraged to send contributions to the local church.
8. Disaster response workers should not engage in religious exploitation of the disaster victim. However, sharing of one's faith when asked, "why are you here?" is always appropriate. The work should be seen as putting one's faith into action and thus is a form of sharing the "good news."
9. Disaster response workers should respect personal information obtained from any disaster victim. Sharing of financial and or personal matters by naming specific persons should not be done. Sharing experience in a general way, as illustrative of work done and persons served, is acceptable.
10. Disaster workers must be sensitive to cultural difference and lifestyles.
11. Disaster response workers should be sensitive to persons' feelings when taking pictures of individuals or damaged/destroyed property. Permission should always be obtained before taking pictures of individuals. Permission from property owners should always be obtained before taking pictures of damaged property if at all possible.