

Congregations will do well to plan ahead for disasters

There's a real concern for donor fatigue as weather disasters come more often and stay longer.

BY RONALD E. KEENER

JUST WHAT IS A DISASTER?

A disaster is an unplanned, unwanted, and often unpredicted event that disrupts daily routines for anywhere from a few weeks to a few years and overwhelms the recovery resources of those affected.

Already this year disasters have come in many forms: heat, fire, flood, wind, tornado, hurricane, earthquake — you name it, this country has had it. But two observers of disasters hitting the U.S. believe we aren't having more than the usual. "Thanks to technology and engineering, we have more people living in more vulnerable places. Our infrastructure is aging and more vulner-

able," they say.

Kathryn M. Haueisen and Carol H. Flores also identify still another vulnerability—donor fatigue. "People can only stay revved up about rounding up cash, supplies, and volunteers for so long. This is a good year to have some congregational conversations on two topics:

- "What do we need to do at our congregation to minimize the potential losses from a disaster (then go do those things), and

- "What do we believe and teach about God's role in this? It's a good time to do some reading on the theology of your denomination and examine how it applies to times of tribulation.

Don't overlook the scriptures. They're full of references to plagues, famine, floods, etc."

Two years ago Haueisen and Flores published a book with Alban Institute they called *A Ready Hope: Effective Disaster Ministry for Congregations*. Haueisen is a retired ELCA Lutheran pastor who consults with congregations on stewardship and capital campaigns when she's not writing. She lives in Houston, TX and learned about faith-based disaster response following Hurricanes Katrina, Rita and Ike.

Flores was on staff for Lutheran Social Services Disaster Response for five years, working out of Houston, TX.



GETTING READY TO HELP

How should a congregation proceed if it wants to do more in advance, in aiding future disaster sites — other than sending money to the denomination or Red Cross? Author Carol Flores responds:

Stash cash. When a disaster hits usual means of purchasing things may not work for a few days. Cash is always handy. Stock up on gift cards to hardware type stores, food stores, and places that stock common household goods. Cards are easily sent, distributed, and stored.

Do an assessment of your own congregation. Generate a list of the vulnerable who may need extra help, note which church rooms could become temporary living quarters for disaster victims or recovery volunteers, identify which people in the congregation have specific potentially useful skills such as training in medicine, insurance, mass communications, construction, childcare, large scale food service, etc.

Sometimes disaster response means being open to simple things. One pastor shared with me the story of his congregation in the early days after Hurricane Ike. Their building had power and Internet. They knew how to make coffee. It dawned on them that this was a natural fit. So they made quick signs on plywood offering up the building as a place to charge computers and phones, check email and grab a cup of hot coffee. Two years later the members of the congregation still speak fondly of that experience. —CF

In that time she also worked on several projects that included children's recovery programs following Hurricanes Katrina and Rita.

They responded to questions from *Church Executive* about what congregations can do to be responsive to natural and other disasters:

Generally, is the church at large well prepared for disaster preparedness and response?

Churches are likely very well prepared to be a part of a disaster response, they just don't know that they are. The biggest challenge to most congregations would be to know how to plug in to any local response efforts. The best place to start locally is to be in touch with the local emergency management office. Every jurisdiction — city, county, etc. — has one. These people will know who's who in your community and help get you introduced.

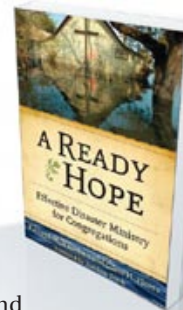
On a national level, many denominations have well organized disaster response agencies that work together through a network known as NVOAD (National Voluntary Organizations Active in Disaster). Local congregations wishing to know or do more about disas-

ters would do well to begin by getting acquainted with their national church disaster response organization and a local VOAD, if they can find one.

How is the church better prepared than, say, government agencies, to respond?

It's not a matter of being better able to respond as much as it is having unique gifts and roles to play. We need the government — they have a vital role to play and the resources and authority to manage the early response. But the government is not resourced (nor should they be) to do the case by case recovery, tending to the emotional and spiritual needs of people, or engaging with a community for the long-term to walk alongside and help heal. Churches and faith-based organizations are in the perfect position to meet these needs — and have a calling to do so.

The government and the church have equally important but vastly different roles. The government can mandate people to go and do specific >>



tasks with equipment already under the jurisdiction of the government. Churches operate almost entirely on a volunteer basis — but have thousands of volunteers to call upon and a built-in philosophy of helping one's neighbor in times of trouble.

With some 300,000 “retail outlets” (churches) in the country, shouldn't the church be well equipped to provide shelter and aid people than any other provider? In what way is the American church not fulfilling its capacity in disaster response?

Yes and no. Sheltering is not as easy as it sounds. Yes, churches have big spaces that can house a lot of people — but that comes with all the scrapes and scars and needs and fears of traumatized people. Also, people need to be fed, have showers and obtain privacy. Some may need mental health care or have significant physical health issues. Churches often want to throw open their doors, but to do so without their eyes wide open can set the church — and the public — up for disappointment and frustration.

Are there insurance and other issues when a church is used as a shelter that congregations should know?

Yes! Work with the experts and heed their guidance. Red Cross is the lead agency in every community to manage mass sheltering—they will work with you if you decide to go this route. Churches that are designated as Red Cross shelters will generally be covered under their liability insurance while in use as a shelter.

How has the provision of material aid changed over the years at times of disaster?

People have come to expect more and more that it is the role of the government to provide for material needs after a disaster. The government, be it local, state or federal, is very well prepared and will indeed respond immediately following a disaster, but this does not alleviate the need for people to be prepared to care for themselves. In our own area, our denomination has launched a “72 Hour Lutheran” campaign — reminding people that it is good stewardship and our

REBUILDING IN FAITH: GALVESTON CHURCH OPENS FOR WORSHIP AFTER THREE-YEAR RESTORATION

Black storm clouds gathered. Intense non-stop winds began to blow. Sea birds disappeared. A blinding rain rolled over Galveston Island in Texas. Locals had seen this before — or so they thought.

Everyone knew that a big hurricane was brewing just off the coast, but no one knew how nasty this fellow would prove to be. This was to be the big one that old timers had predicted was someday coming. On Friday, September 13, 2008, the big one finally hit Galveston. Its name was Ike. Hurricane Ike.

The I-45 North causeway linking Galveston Island to the mainland was nearly empty. Well over half of the Galveston population had already fled the island by Friday afternoon, but those who stayed would have Hurricane Ike stories to last a lifetime.

The hurricane aftermath was worse than could have been imagined. The Rev. David Green, pastor of Galveston's First Presbyterian Church, and several church members, braved fallen trees and debris to check the church after the storm. The church was a waterlogged mess.

Restored sanctuary

Flash forward nearly three years. First Presbyterian held its first Sunday service in its beautifully restored church sanctuary May 22, 2011. Through the power of faith and a will to fight long odds, the church had been restored.

“Galveston's historic church shines now as never before. The journey from Ike to restoration has been a long one,” Green said in the first sermon in the newly restored building. “Many of our talented members volunteered countless hours to supervise the work of architectural specialists.”

In the year after the storm, members of First Presbyterian worshipped at a local Methodist church. Once the fellowship hall was repaired, the Presbyterians held worship there until the rest of the church was reopened.

First Presbyterian of Galveston was established in January 1840. It is the island's first church and one of the oldest Presbyterian churches in Texas. The sanctuary was completed in 1890 and is home to three Tiffany stained glass windows. The church has been described as an architectural gem of Galveston, a city filled with lovely buildings. Many Galvestonians call the church Galveston's historic church.

Thus, the church's restoration task force — five committed members strong — faced many challenges. Car-

ing craftsmen had to be selected to make sure that the original beauty and design would shine again, even after unspeakable damage.

Giant jigsaw puzzle

As work began, century-old wood paneling was removed piece by piece, individually numbered, cleaned or restored and reinstalled like a giant jigsaw puzzle.

“Through hard work and diligent scholarship, an interior color and stenciling plan was crafted to make the colors of the stained glass windows



“Christ Knocking at the Door,” Tiffany, 1917-1918

and the pipe organ pipes make design sense,” said Bruce Frasier, a task force member.

The breathtaking ceiling had lost nearly all detail and was hand-painted and stenciled by specialists. The original black and white marble floors in the church narthex — long ago replaced with red-painted concrete — were restored based on old photos. Old vinyl tile beneath church pews was replaced with oak hardwood flooring. Custom woven carpeting was selected to compliment the original design scheme.

“Our goal was to return our sanctuary to the original glory and we feel that we have met that goal. We again have a historic church that all of Galveston can be proud of,” Green says.

— Joe Trum is an elder at First Presbyterian Church in Galveston. Special to Presbyterian News Service.

personal responsibility to be prepared to care for ourselves and your families for at least 72 hours following any disaster. Only then are we in a position to help those who cannot help themselves.

What do you mean about helping us “understand the predictable phases of disaster recovery at both the individual and community level”?

Communities and individuals go through phases of recovery from a trauma. The cycles are predictable, but not to the point that one can track or time them. However, usually we see alternating moods of optimism and a “we can do this” spirit mingled with bouts of discouragement and “what’s the point” defeatism. Anger is common and normal. Blaming others is normal and sometimes vicious. Determination is mingled with despair.

What is a comprehensive congregational plan for preparing for a disaster and organizing volunteers to respond after a disaster?

There is no one-size-fits-all answer

here, but essentially, care for yourself so you can care for others. For a congregation, that might mean identifying the vulnerable in your church community, making sure you have adequate back up storage of vital records, that all appropriate risk-management measures have been taken (insurance, etc.) and



People have come to expect more and more that it is the role of the government to provide for material needs after a disaster

that there is a clear process for who can make which decisions about the building, finances, etc. There are several different interfaith organizations who offer workshops on disaster planning for congregations. Or check with your

national denomination to find out what resources they have available.

Are there examples of congregations that have done a good job at organizing a disaster preparedness team?

One of the prime examples here in Houston is Lakewood Church (Joel Osteen’s congregation). They have done extensive work in preparing their own leadership for a disaster as well as try to identify their role in the community following a disaster. Christ the Servant (ELCA Lutheran) Church in Houston has developed a plan that was the prototype for the factious example used in the book.

The Seventh Day Adventists and Methodists in particular have programs that specifically focus on preparedness at the clergy and congregational level.

What do you say to a congregation who may feel that putting together a preparedness plan is “an inappropriate use of time and energy”?

It’s nice to have an umbrella before it starts raining. CE

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