

Effective Partners in Disaster Relief: the Red Cross and the Local Church

By Anita Salzberg

WITHIN HOURS of the tragic construction crane collapse on the east side of Manhattan on a Saturday afternoon in March 2008, responders from the American Red Cross in Greater New York (ARC/GNY) opened a reception center/shelter at a nearby high school. There they provided people evacuated from their homes and apartments with compassionate care—food and beverages, mental health counseling, and safe, overnight shelter.

With the school set to reopen on Monday, ARC/GNY needed to find a new location. St. Peter's Lutheran Church at 54th Street and Lexington Avenue, just blocks from the accident site, stepped up and offered the Red Cross the use of its facilities.

For the next five days St. Peter's remained open from 9 a.m. to 9 p.m., housing a reception center (the shelter facility was no longer needed) in the street-level section of the building. The reception center—now run by New York City and staffed by agencies, including the Office of Emergency Management, FDNY, NYPD, the Department of Buildings (DOB) and ARC/GNY volunteers and employees—functioned as an information hub for the families of missing persons and for residents of seventeen buildings who were barred from their homes.

One evening later that week, St. Peter's also hosted a town hall meeting in its sanctuary. At the meeting, representatives of ARC/GNY and city agencies addressed the concerns of approximately 200 neighborhood residents displaced by the accident.

"It was wonderful working with the Red Cross," says St. Peter's senior pastor Amandus J. Derr. "Years earlier, we had decided that St. Peter's would be available for any emergency. This is what the church does—it responds to community needs, and the crane collapse was just two and a half blocks from here."

Red Cross responders were equally appreciative of working with St. Peter's. "There was a sense of comfort and spirituality that was soothing for those of us who worked with and counseled displaced residents there," says Diane Ryan, ARC/GNY Director of Mental Health. "We didn't realize it at first, but as time went on we began to reflect on the benefit of having the reception center in a place with such calming energy."

Pastor Derr points out that during the response, which coincided with Holy Week, St. Peter's was able to hold its full schedule of events—their senior center programs, their morning program for homeless people, and their evening program for people with HIV-AIDS. "And we

held services every day and every night of the week. It was a very busy place."

He adds, "There was never a conflict, or a point at which we felt we were in each other's way. Everybody did what needed to be done to accommodate each other."

After the crane collapse response, the cordial relationship between the Greater New York Chapter and St. Peter's continued. As a thank you, Pastor Derr invited Red Cross representatives to the church's Easter service and acknowledged ARC/GNY during the sermon. Pastor Derr also gave the invocation at an ARC/GNY fundraising breakfast held in May.

"I hope the collaboration will continue," he says. "It's foolish to think that any city will not have times when there are emergencies that have to be responded to. It's what we do and what the Red Cross does. It was a positive experience in every sense. There was no downside."

RED CROSS AND GRACE COMMUNITY CHURCH

"Churches are a truly important thread in the disaster-response fabric of our society," says Olivier Szlos, ARC/GNY Senior Director of Community Development. "They are where people come for comfort, peace of mind, reassurance and normalcy. When the Greater New York Chapter and

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churches work together, we become powerful agents for good.”

“As an organization, the Red Cross is non-denominational and nondiscriminatory,” says David Dunn, ARC/GNY Director, Disaster Staffing and Partner Groups. “Partnering with churches and other faith-based organizations is an instrument to help us reach and serve every possible segment of our community.”

Churches often offer their facilities for use as Red Cross reception centers or shelters during natural disasters—hurricanes, floods and tornadoes—and human-caused emergencies like blackouts and building collapses. They do so either on a spontaneous basis, as a shelter run by the congregation or community members and possibly supported by Red Cross with material resources, or as pre-designated shelter within the National Shelter System that is approved and operated by the Red Cross.

In spring 2007, Grace Community Church in Washingtonville, New York partnered with the Red Cross in establishing a spontaneous shelter to help the victims of the devastating April 15, 2007 nor’easter that caused massive flooding in Orange County, New York. At the time, Grace’s pastors had no idea they were beginning what would become a continuing partnership with the Red Cross to help their community during disasters.

THE START OF A LONG-TERM RELATIONSHIP

Two days after the storm, the Greater New York Chapter, which had been housing residents displaced from their homes at a local elementary school, needed a new location so school could reopen. Grace, a 37,000-square-foot church that actively ministers to 1,200 congregants, opened its doors to the Chapter and to those flooded out of their homes in Washingtonville.

According to Mark Lingerman, Grace’s pastor of administration, opening Grace Church to the Red Cross relief effort was an easy choice. “It was already in our DNA—

part of who we are. And part of the vision of the folks who founded the church 27 years ago is that we would eventually have facilities that would serve our community in a time of crisis.”

Beginning April 17, Grace Church functioned as ARC/GNY’s forward command center for nor’easter operations in the Lower Hudson Valley. The first order of business, as it is for all Red Cross responses, was to conduct a walk-through of the church’s facilities. The inspection was conducted by Pastor Lingerman, other Grace Church pastors, and an ARC/GNY team headed by Cesar Rivera, Hudson Valley Director of Response.

The Red Cross found the location well suited for shelter and service center operations. It had large assembly areas suitable for dormitory use, a kitchen for food preparation, sit-down areas for serving people meals, a west wing that could be made available for client services and administrative support, private areas for ARC/GNY health and mental health interviews as well as chaplaincy interviews, which were conducted by Disaster Chaplaincy Services, an ARC/GNY partner group (www.disasterchaplaincy.org), ample on-site parking, and high-speed data service.

The Red Cross team, which would eventually consist of more than a dozen volunteers and employees, considered housing evacuees in the main worship area but eventually settled on a secondary area of approximately 3,000 square feet used for children’s services. They contracted with local vendors to provide meals, beverages, and snacks for evacuees sheltering at the church, for families who came in for individual Red Cross casework assistance or to pick up clean-up kits and for Red Cross volunteers and employees working around-the-clock.

ARC/GNY also set up an outdoor staging area for supplies, registration areas in the church’s main lobby, and a command post in another part of the building, away from shelter residents. Grace provided ARC/GNY responders with Internet

access, patching the Chapter’s equipment through its network.

The Red Cross shelter at Grace remained operational for about two days, until shelter residents found alternate housing. On Thursday, April 19, Red Cross transitioned the Grace shelter to a Disaster Assistance Service Center (DASC), where affected residents could talk face-to-face with federal, state, and city emergency management experts. The DASC operated for approximately one week, until Red Cross damage assessment activities and client casework concluded and the disaster

Summary

- Churches are a truly important thread in the disaster-response fabric of our society. Working with the Red Cross, which is nondenominational and nondiscriminatory, churches can provide a place of calm and comfort to those displaced by natural or man-made disasters.
- Several churches that opened their doors in times of need are cited in this article.
- The Red Cross often finds the locations of churches well suited for shelter and service center operations. Churches have been happy with the collaboration because the Red Cross has been very accommodating in addressing the needs of victims and the church.
- Churches can also host Red Cross community preparedness presentations to teach local residents how to be “Red Cross Ready” in order to keep loved ones safe and informed during a disaster. The church provides the space; the Red Cross presents the program.

Author

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response came to an end. During that time, Greater New York Chapter volunteers served more than 500 meals, distributed snacks and water, provided mental health counseling, and conducted local property damage assessments.

“We were really impressed,” said Pastor Lingerman. “There was a crisis. People were flooded out of their homes, but there was no crisis in our building—we had a sense of calm. ARC/GNY leaders knew exactly what to do; they were professional and unflappable. Even though we housed perhaps only twenty people, Red Cross was feeding many more people nonstop and getting them back on their feet.”

Grace Church was extremely satisfied with the collaboration. “It was easy—a gentlemanly relationship,” says Pastor Lingerman. “The Red Cross was very accommodating in addressing the needs of both the flood victims and the church. When we said the church needed to conduct services on Sunday they said, ‘No problem, we’ll figure it out.’”

AFTER THE RESPONSE

Scott Graham, ARC/GNY’s Chief Response Officer, who had been part of the relief effort, personally met with Pastor Lingerman afterward to assure the church that ARC/GNY would resupply the kitchen and be responsible for cleaning the building to get it back in shipshape. “Scott made sure we did not suffer a loss because we had worked in concert with the Red Cross,” says Pastor Lingerman. “I guess you could call it reverse hospitality. It left us with a good feeling about working together, and the idea that we should continue to explore and expand on the relationship.”

A CONTINUING PARTNERSHIP

Pastor Lingerman reports that Grace’s congregation was thrilled with the church’s role in the flood response. “Part of what Jesus commanded us to do is care for people. When a neighbor needs help, you can’t turn your back and say, ‘We have our corporate entity to worry about.’ You jump in and help. It was energizing for our church,” he said.

Chaplaincy Services Organization Also Partners with the Red Cross

Disaster Chaplaincy Services (DCS), a nonsectarian organization, partners with the American Red Cross in Greater New York (ARC/GNY) to provide spiritual and emotional care to New Yorkers during local emergencies. In spring 2007, a DCS chaplain offered spiritual comfort to flood victims at Grace Community Church. A year later, in response to the March 2008 Manhattan crane collapse, DCS sent chaplains from six faiths to the Red Cross reception center/shelter and later, to New York City’s reception center at Saint Peter’s Lutheran Church to offer emotional support to displaced residents.

“Since we first began working with DCS during the 9/11 response, they’ve always been available to provide crisis intervention and spiritual comfort to those affected by disaster,” says Diane Ryan, ARC/GNY Director of Mental Health. “Partnering with the Red Cross has been a gift,” agrees DCS Executive Director Reverend Julie Taylor. “The missions of both organizations are about helping people at their most desperate times.”

This past May, Grace joined ARC/GNY’s Ready When the Time Comes (RWTC) Partner Group. The RWTC program trains volunteer teams from local companies, organizations and community-based groups like churches to provide disaster relief and deploys them to disaster sites in the New York area as needed.

Three months later, in August 2008, through the RWTC program, Grace hosted a Greater New York Chapter Reserve Institute, a one-day disaster training for community members. As a result, 27 community members, including Pastor Lingerman, are now fully certified Red Cross volunteers, able to provide immediate humanitarian assistance should a major local disaster strike.

Although the Reserve Institute program is specific to the Greater New York Chapter, which comprises New York City, Orange, Putnam, Rockland, and Sullivan Counties, churches in other parts of the country can have congregation members take Red Cross shelter training classes.

“Red Cross is not people coming in from the outside—it’s people who are already part of the community,” says Bob Imborroni, ARC/GNY Deputy Response Officer, Operations. “Trained parishioners can run

and operate their own Red Cross shelter. Their local Red Cross chapter will help them with supplies and other support as needed.”

In November 2008, Grace became part of the National Shelter System, signing an agreement to serve as a designated shelter for Orange County. Lingerman calls this an agreement in spirit: “We agree to try to work together to the best of our ability to serve our community; however, if it’s something we can’t do, the Red Cross won’t be upset with us.” Grace is considering improving its building to serve in a time of crisis better, perhaps adding showers, which are not now part of the church facilities.

RED CROSS COMMUNITY PREPAREDNESS PROGRAMS

Churches can also host Red Cross community preparedness presentations to teach local residents how to be “Red Cross Ready” in order to keep loved ones safe and informed during a disaster. The church provides the space; the Red Cross presents the program, which can last from 45 minutes to 1 ½ hours.

This is something Grace is planning to do in 2009. “A church can open up its whole

building or a smaller room, as needed," says Pastor Lingerman.

EVERY CHURCH CAN HELP

In the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina in 2005, Grace connected, through a parishioner, with a church just outside New Orleans. The town around them had been destroyed, but the church was still standing and had power. "They were plugging extension cords into their building and running them outside," says Pastor Lingerman. "There's always something a church can do. Probably each crisis will look different. In that instance, because we couldn't be there, we sent money to help the church handle its monthly expenses."


He adds that what churches have to offer is space: "Even a small church of thirty

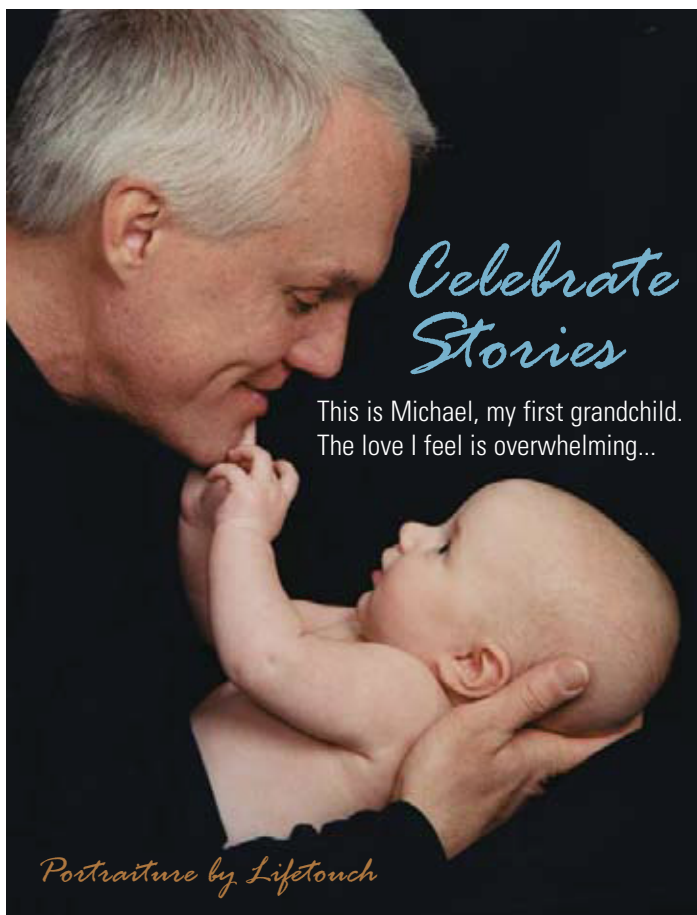
What is the bottom line? "The Red Cross and faith-based organizations have a common interest in helping people, doing good, and making a difference."

people has a building that can seat a hundred. The hearts of most people in churches are oriented toward serving and helping."

What is the bottom line? "The Red Cross and faith-based organizations have a common interest in helping people, doing good, and making a difference," says ARC/GNY's Olivier Szlos.

Pastor Lingerman concurs: "We need to work together to make sure we are prepared for the next disaster, whatever it may be. Don't be afraid of calling your local Red Cross. Find out how easy it is to work together."

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