

## **Advance Planning – When there is no Disaster**

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First, no community, no congregation, no judicatory is exempt from a disaster or major crisis. Whether a natural disaster (hurricane, tornado, flood, earthquake, forest fire), economic crisis (loss of a significant community employer or employers), or public health/medical issue (a pandemic that becomes deadly or disrupts the normal life of a community), any community could experience a disaster. Congregations must respond out of moral obligation to care for its members and neighbors and to assure the congregation continues to function through the disaster and the recovery.

### **Risk Assessment.**

Begin with a risk assessment. Any congregation that has not done so needs to go through such an assessment and then update it annually. Start with the obvious. If located in areas subject to and with a history of (no matter how far back) hurricanes, earthquakes, floods, or forest fires, then the congregation needs a plan for such a disaster. Also include economic and pandemic disasters. What is the potential of a major employer closing, leaving a large percentage of the local community unemployed? Identify the potential disaster, evaluate the probability, and the higher the probability develop more detailed plans.

### **Buildings**

For potential disasters that could destroy the church building (and any parish could burn down or experience theft), conduct a building and content inventory and video or photograph as possible. Store this documentation, and preferably a duplicate copy, in a *safe* location or locations off premises.

Congregations located in disaster prone areas need a disaster plan specifically for the building. This building plan should clearly and briefly state responsibilities so they can be put in motion without having to reread, designate a chain of command and responsible persons (with alternates), state the process for removal of items of value and essential electronic and written documents, and make arrangements for “a traveling box” so congregation operations can continue.

### **The Congregation**

Such congregations also need a plan for the congregation. The congregation plan should identify a reliable source of disaster information communication, develop a disaster response team designating the chain of command and responsibilities, establish means of communication with the judicatory, have members develop

family disaster plans and have them on file in the “traveling box,” establish means of communication with members, designate a post disaster gathering place. For every designated person or procedure, develop an alternative or backup because some will not be available or work as planned.

The importance of the post-disaster communication and gathering place cannot be overstated. In parishes that had a means to communicate after Katrina, members have emphasized its importance for their immediate post-storm functioning and recovery. This communication included a listing of deaths or injuries, the current locations of those who evacuated, the status of member residences, and, for those who did not evacuate, support needs: food, water, immediate repair, debris removal, etc. Only accurate information should be communicated. Rumors or inaccurate information will worsen the situation. If the congregation plans to distribute food or water to members or the broader community or participate in the broader community recovery, then a specific plan for this is needed along with the storage of sufficient supplies.

### **Disaster Plans for Families**

Encouraging and assisting members to develop family disaster plans is also a responsibility of congregations in disaster prone areas. All families need predetermined criteria of when to stay and when to evacuate. Family disaster plans should include where they will meet, with alternate locations when needed, after the disaster, a designated out of town contact in case they cannot get to the designated meeting place or get separated, and what do with pets.

Those who consider staying during an approaching disaster need to have emergency “stay” supply: sufficient water and nonperishable food for at least a week, a battery operated radio, flashlight, and extra batteries.

Whether planning to stay or leave, all need an evacuation to do list: turn off water and electricity, if instructed to do so, a list of what will be secured. All also need predetermined evacuation routes and alternate routes, a full tank of gas and an emergency “go” kit: food and water, medicines, blankets, battery operated radio, flashlight, extra batteries, and appropriate clothing (sturdy shoes, “work” clothes).

In addition to the “go” kit, evacuation plans should also include a predetermined list of what to take e.g. family and financial records and significant personal belongings.

Finally, they need to plan for the post-disaster return: securing appropriate instructions for passable reentry routes and passing through entry check-points,

supplies to bring back, and the process for clean-up. An additional essential includes planning for pets. Many of those killed during Katrina did not evacuate because they could not take pets to the designated evacuation sites. As a result, during subsequent disasters, emergency management personnel now include arrangements for pets, but families still need to plan accordingly.

### **Dioceses**

Dioceses also need disaster plans. These plans should include the primary contact person(s) to receive/disseminate disaster information, a list of evacuation sites and congregations able to house evacuees, the process for coordinating how congregations in the disaster area can access these evacuation locations, pastoral support at primary evacuation sites, what and how immediate support will be provided to effected congregations, and a coordinated system to receive and distribute supplies, resources and volunteers.

### **Economic or Pandemic Disasters**

For economic or pandemic disasters, based on their risk assessment, congregations should develop plans of how to respond. For congregations in communities with a high potential of a major economic crisis or soaring unemployment, the plan should include how it will handle a sudden and drastic reduction in congregational income, provide financial assistance and pastoral care for those needing emotional or spiritual support. In the broader community, the plan should address how the congregation will support nonmembers needing financial or pastoral support and participate in the broader community assistance and recovery. Although the H1N1 flu outbreak has passed, future potential pandemics will probably continue. When this occurs, a parishes should develop a plan that includes how distributing the Eucharist and modify it based on medical data, and all congregations should have a plan for pastoral support of ill members and for clergy responsibilities in case of clergy illness.