



Churches Responding to Disaster

It will help us if we can separate the “phases encompassing a natural disaster” into three specific stages:

- (1) Pre-Disaster—before the “strike”—involves education, and mitigation;
- (2) Disaster Response— immediately following the “strike” (after the “all-clear” has been given)—involves emergency and immediate short-term needs being addressed and attended to wherever possible; and
- (3) Post-Disaster—following the “strike” after emergency needs have been addressed— includes the “Recovery” stage.

The Church is in an excellent position to play a major role in each of the three stages of a natural disaster; and in fact, has a responsibility from our Lord to do so. Following is a list of suggestions concerning the role that the church could and should play in preparation for and in the aftermath of a natural disaster. Our role is by no means limited to that which is written here. We can and should do much more. What you see here is simply the beginning. Seize the initiative and supplement what is written on these pages with ideas appropriate to your own, unique situations. May God our Father grant you wisdom, courage, and strength in this undertaking in His Name.

Pre-Disaster

What do we mean by “education?” – Programmes that provide training for our congregations and the community to enhance emergency planning efforts and the level of overall preparedness by individuals and families.

What do we mean by “preparedness”? – Activities, programmes, and systems developed prior to an emergency that support the development and dissemination of information and/or training about how individuals and families can prepare for a natural disaster.

What do we mean by “mitigation?” – Programmes that provide services that will enable individuals, families, and the church and community as a whole to make physical preparations prior to a disaster or emergency that will prevent loss of life, personal injury and destruction of property when a natural disaster actually strikes.

Education, preparedness, and mitigation are all closely related. What can and should we, the church, do in this Pre-Disaster phase?

- (1) We can preach, through our pulpits and individual pastors and church leaders, the importance of being “prepared.” We can and should “preach” the message that we know our God will wrap His loving arms around us during a natural disaster. However, He still gives us the commonsense and wisdom to prepare in advance and to take all necessary precautions including heeding government orders to evacuate to designated shelters.
- (2) We, each individual pastor and church leader, can and should invite government (district emergency officers) to our churches to present “preparedness and mitigation” programmes; and we can stress to our congregations and surrounding communities the urgent necessity of attending such meetings.
- (3) We, each individual pastor and church leader, can and should seek all available government printed matter on “preparedness and mitigation” and distribute to our congregations and surrounding communities.
- (4) Each church can and should prepare a mini-Disaster Response Team that would be prepared to go out into the surrounding community immediately following the all clear and attend to, as much as possible, the immediate emergency needs of individuals and families affected by the disaster. These teams could even be deployed to other areas of the country that may have been more severely impacted by the strike than our home areas. Look around within your conversations. You will find in most cases that we are blessed with church members with a variety of different talents, skills, and training. For instance, within our congregations we may have nurses, carpenters, brick masons, drivers, educators, tree surgeons, or simply people with the heart to assist their neighbour, etc. Each church should be able to prepare well in advance of a natural disaster a team that could outreach into the surrounding community and assist all (not just our members) however possible in the immediate aftermath of a disaster. This would involve having clear assigned roles, responsibilities, materials (e.g., medical equipment, vehicles fueled and ready, etc.) and most of all commitment well in advance of a disaster. Commitment must be emphasised. Without the commitment all plans are simply plans. **We NEED to commit and to act!**
- (5) If your church has been designated as a “shelter” by the government – either as an “emergency shelter for refuge” or a “shelter for distribution of food, relief supplies, etc. following a “strike”” or both – then you need to prepare and know well in advance what your responsibilities will be. You will need to assign a “shelter warden” and be well stocked in terms of immediate, short-term supplies (e.g., bottled water, canned foods, toilet paper, etc.). If you are not sure about your designated role then contact your National Disaster Office for clarification. The people in the community need to know that they must bring canned food and water with them when they evacuate to a shelter.

Disaster Response

What can and should we—the church—do in this Disaster Response phase?

- (1) We can and should activate and mobilise our Disaster Response Teams and send them out. Again, these teams could be sent to assist in some of the more severely impacted areas. Churches can and should assist other churches in helping all.
- (2) Through our Disaster Response Teams we can and should assist the government in facilitating the exchange of information (e.g., damage assessments) and/or providing short-

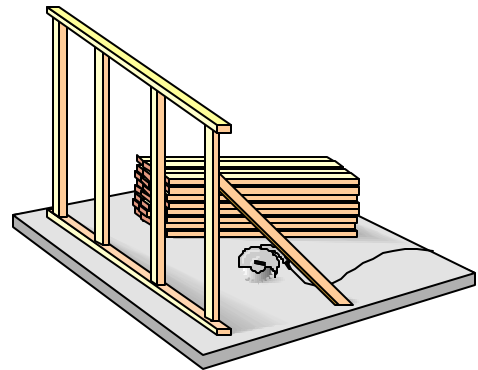
term assistance, usually in the form of food, clothing, blankets, temporary shelter, etc., for people who have suffered injuries or incurred losses due to the disaster.

- (3) Pastors and other church leaders have the “called” responsibility to provide spiritual, stress, and trauma counseling to the surrounding community. In the immediate aftermath of a disaster the physical needs are obvious. However, attending to peoples’ spiritual needs are just as much a necessity as their physical needs. We, as pastors, are in an excellent position to provide this spiritual counseling, not only to members of our own congregations, but to all in the community as well. Seek out those in need and support them spiritually.

Post-Disaster Recovery

What can and should we, the church, do in the Post-Disaster including Recovery phase?

- (1) In the Recovery stage the church can and should play an important role in identifying and prioritising the needs of the people at the grassroots level. The church will be able to identify people who may have “fallen through the cracks” in terms of government and/or external recovery assistance.
- (2) The church is an excellent position to identify potential programmes that would provide longer-term assistance for people who have suffered injuries or incurred losses due to a major disaster with the objective of facilitating the return of these communities to a condition hopefully better than that of their pre-disaster condition. (E.g., physical rebuilding should be done in a manner that encompasses building codes and mitigation efforts).
- (3) The church is an excellent position to use the disaster for some “good”. In others words to lead others to Christ in the wake of the disaster.



*Prepared by John Kimbrough
October 2000*