



Great Plains United Methodists
Organizing the Local Church for Disaster
Ministries

HANDBOOK FOR CHURCH PASTORS

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The information provided in this guide is an excerpt from UMCOR’s Connecting Neighbors February 2010 training materials and from the Great Plains Conference Disaster Response Policy and Plans as adopted by the Conference Connecting Council in March 2014. It is offered with the hope that regions, districts and local churches will be committed to the potential for congregational, community and conference disaster preparation and response. The time to prepare is now because when disaster strikes and people lie wounded, each of us who claim the Christ Way are called to respond. We are best able to respond from our strengths and planning.

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Develop a Plan Before Disaster Strikes

1. Appoint a member from the local church as the Local Church Disaster Response Coordinator.
2. Develop relationships within the local community agencies and resources
3. Know who the relief agencies are in your area (American Red Cross, Salvation Army, etc.).
4. Know your law enforcement and County Emergency Management personnel in your area who will have authority in a disaster. Learn how your county plans to deal with disaster response (contact the county Emergency Management Office), how this plan is supposed to work, and how the local church can fit in or help.
5. Contact the local ministerial association or church council. Prepare a community disaster plan.
6. Become familiar with and keep a list of the existing community agencies. Share any skill that can be utilized in time of a disaster.
7. Know the Resources Within Your Church
 - Contact Conference Disaster Response Coordinator to arrange Connecting Neighbors or Early Response Team training.
 - Guide the local Board of Trustees to develop an inventory of church physical facilities to be used in an emergency response to disaster in the area.
 - Determine if your facilities could be used as an American Red Cross certified facility to provide shelters and mass feeding, or other efforts in cooperation with the American Red Cross or other agencies. The Red Cross will inspect your building(s) and determine its suitability and verifiability. Your church will need to develop a written agreement with the American Red Cross that specifies the Red Cross and its insurance will cover provider liability and the cost of repair for any damages incurred. The Red Cross and may choose to supply your shelter with a shelter kit containing signs, registration sheets etc. for operating your shelter.
 - List the human resources within your congregation, their interests, skills and talents with regard to opportunities for disaster response volunteer work; encourage those who might have an interest to complete basic and early response team training.
 - Develop a personal plan and a plan to care for your congregation:
 - ✓ Make plans to provide safety for self and family
 - ✓ List specific medical needs for each of your family members.
 - ✓ Make provisions for food, shelter and clothing.
 - ✓ List emergency contacts for all single persons and for each family in parish.

Acting When a Disaster is Imminent

1. Monitor the news
 - Listen to the radio and television and monitor your County and State Emergency Management websites for disaster updates; follow any instructions issued by your County Emergency Management Agency or the National Weather Service.
 - If you are advised to evacuate, go! As a leader in the community, you are looked to for guidance. People who stay, when ordered to evacuate, risk their own lives, and the lives of emergency personnel who must go in to save them
2. Prepare for Interim Ministry
 - If there is enough time, gather essentials for ministry, i.e. a Bible (pocket size preferred), Church Directory, maps, this disasters plan, portable communion set, etc.
 - Take only the essentials that will help you respond with pastoral care and/or disaster-related ministry.
3. Evacuate and move to a safe place
 - Protect yourself and your family first. Do not abandon your family for the sake of the parish. No matter what your level of involvement in disaster response, you will not be effective if you are not certain of the safety of your household. What you do for them will be an example for others to follow with regard to themselves, and their families.
 - If you must evacuate, of personal possessions take only what you must have in order to survive. If you can carry more, focus on small items of personal rather than monetary value, i.e. photographs, insurance papers, wills, etc.
 - Pack a “go box” ahead of time to make evacuation must less hectic; include a copy of this handbook.
 - If you know that you are going to a shelter, take your own bedding. Cots will probably be in short supply.
4. Notify your District Superintendent that you are going and where.
5. If you know of shut-ins who need to be evacuated, notify the nearest law enforcement person or rescue worker and let them handle the actual evacuation.

Acting Immediately Following a Disaster

1. Assess your own damage first.
 - Unless it is unsafe to remain, stay sheltered with your family and property until emergency personnel get to you.
 - Listen to and follow the instructions of emergency personnel. Do not rely upon your own judgment if you are a victim or the judgment of other victims.
2. Stay Alert
 - You can monitor the damage to your parish first of all by listening to news reports.
 - Do not interfere with any ongoing relief efforts where you are not trained or qualified to be.
 - Stay at home until the danger is past. It will be easier for the District Superintendent and/or parishioners to contact you at home during this phase.

Acting When it is Safe to Move About During the Rescue Phase

1. Check on people in your congregation and community
 - Identify yourself as clergy to the emergency management personnel.
 - Check to see if anyone in your church or community has become a victim.
 - Notify other clergy if you know of members of their church who are victims.
 - Work closely with law enforcement personnel to get a tour of the damaged area.
 - Do not take a camera (unless you are going to photograph any damage to your church's building or other parish-related property).
 - If a parishioner is a victim, be a presence to that family as you would in any other emergency. Your presence will provide some comfort.
 - Expect that you and others may be in shock.
 - Victims and near-victims will want to tell their stories over and over; be prepared to use your training as a listener – this is an important function you will offer.
2. Check on property damage
 - Consult with the local emergency management incident commander for a preliminary damage assessment
 - Determine the amount of damage in the area of your parish.

3. Communicate Updates

- Inform your District Superintendent about your situation plus that of your church's physical plant. If the disaster is too large for the local community to handle, request the District Superintendent to contact the Conference Disaster Response Coordinator and request the Conference Disaster Response System be activated.
- Offer your services to assist clergy who may be victims or who have many victims in their parish.
- If there is damage in your area, be prepared to take your District Superintendent and/or your Conference Disaster Response Coordinator (CDRC), Regional Disaster Response Coordinator, and Conference VIM Coordinator, and possibly others on a Disaster Assessment Tour.
- Be ready to provide either the Conference Disaster Response Coordinator and/or Volunteer in Mission person a place they can use as temporary "headquarters" while in your area.

Local Church Role During the Relief Phase

1. For disasters that can be handled by the local community:
 - Organize "clean-up" crews to be ready to go into areas where and when you are permitted to assist.
 - Do not begin any clearing until the damage has been assessed; your premature assistance could lower the amount of settlement awarded to a victim.
 - Concentrate first on opening accesses and protecting personal property.
2. For disasters that are too large for the local community to handle:
 - Contact the District Superintendent to request help from the Conference Disaster Response. Be available to visit with the Regional Disaster Response Coordinator who can be contacted directly or through the Conference Disaster Response Coordinator.
 - Be prepared to help the Conference Disaster Response Coordinator and Regional Disaster Response Coordinator.
 - Be available to visit and meet with the Regional Disaster Response Coordinator and provide them with the point of contact in the damaged area.
3. Find out what kind of aid can be expected and the kinds of bills that will be paid by the American Red Cross, Salvation Army, etc. Information can be obtained from the state Volunteer Organizations Active in Disaster.

- Be aware that the types of assistance will vary according to the category of the disaster. Emergency relief organizations (such as those mentioned above) are prepared to handle early expenses of victims.
 - Do not give money to any disaster victim at this stage. Help meet basic needs. Money given directly at this stage will lower the amount of assistance the victim(s) will receive from other agencies.
 - Church funds (or grants) are usually distributed during the Recovery Phase, often after all other forms of help from the community have been exhausted.
 - Direct Contributions to the Conference Office
 - ✓ Money should be sent to the Conference Office and designated “For Disaster Recovery.”
 - ✓ This money will be distributed by the Conference Disaster Response Coordinator consistent with conference policy.
4. Assist with Cooperation and Coordination to plan for the long term
- When you can report something of a substantive nature to your District Superintendent, let him/her know whether or not you and your community need help.
 - If help is needed, be prepared to set up a meeting of your church members with the District Superintendent, the Conference Disaster Response Coordinators or designee and/or the Conference UMVIM Coordinator or designee.
 - If such a meeting is envisioned, be sure to invite all of the other community religious leaders to attend as well. As United Methodists, we are committed to ecumenical efforts. As servants of God, we will accomplish much more in the matter of relieving human suffering working cooperatively than alone. “Lone Rangers” are of little value in the aftermath of a disaster plus Lone Rangers also have a high burnout rate.
 - Help your community begin its recovery process more quickly by assisting the community leadership to take “ownership” of its disaster.
 - It is appropriate to begin the formation of a Long Term Recovery Organization (LTRO) at this point.
 - FEMA Voluntary Agency Liaison personnel can be contacted for assistance if it is a federally declared disaster.
5. Keep a Journal
- Keeping a journal of your activities or what has been happening to you in the course of a disaster can be helpful both to you and to the Conference Disaster Response Team both during and after the disaster.

Local Church Role During the Recovery Phase

1. Personal Initiative and Involvement: **The pastor has responsibility to be involved in the disaster recovery program.** Expect heavy disaster involvement for 2-6 months.
2. Seek to develop partnerships, network, and interfaith collaboration
 - When major disasters occur, an interfaith organization is recommended as a preferred way to work at recovery by pooling the resources of all the churches. Very often such an Interfaith, upon organization, can hire a local director and/or case manager to coordinate the recovery effort on behalf of the churches.
 - Long Term Recovery Organization (LTRO) is one type of interfaith community organization.
 - State Interfaith Disaster Response Organizations (IDRO) are other types of interfaith community organization.
 - FEMA Voluntary Agency Liaison personnel may be able to help form such an organization.

Local Church Role in the Aftermath of a Disaster

1. Take some time to assess yourself and other's performance during and after the disaster using the "Assessment Form" found in the Appendix section.