

Be Ready: A Guide for Churches Preparing for Disaster Response

Preparing for the kinds of disasters most likely to hit the local community where your church ministers ensures that the church does not miss an opportunity to share God's love for your neighbours during a time of great need. Preparation also ensures that your church family is able to take care of its own during a crisis.

1. Choose a Disaster Response Coordinator

The Disaster Response Coordinator coordinates the church's involvement during a crisis which could include using the church for shelter, distribution of supplies, training, crisis counselling etc. This person would undertake preparatory tasks like:

- Establishing a church disaster response inventory of member skills, equipment and resources
- Creating maps of the church indicating escape routes
- Promoting family and personal emergency preparedness among church members
- Organizing a buddy system for congregation members who are elderly or who have health, mobility or transportation issues
- Developing an evacuation route
- Making sure church staff and volunteers like Sunday School teachers are aware of evacuation routes, safety equipment etc.
- Establishing one or more first aid kits and ensuring supplies are up to date.
- Creating relationships in the nearby community, especially with service organizations like food banks, shelters, recreation centres, community disaster agencies
- Having a plan for recruiting and managing volunteers
- Creating a map of all church members' locations, including contact information
- Developing a contact system to ensure all members of a congregation are accounted for and to assess their needs during an emergency

This person must:

- Want to serve by helping others
- Be free to spend considerable time responding to a crisis and not be called away by professional duties
- Be able to work under high stress
- Be able to make decisions quickly

- Be a good communicator
- Understand the need for self-care and rest despite a crisis
- Must be a good delegator and work well with others
- Have experience working with and managing volunteers

2. Create a Disaster Leadership Team

The team decides how the church can best use its skills and resources before and during a crisis.

Possible members include people who know the building facilities well, the church treasurer, people skilled in counselling such as mental health counsellors or retired pastors, people well connected to community resources.

It is usually a bad idea to have the pastor on this team as the pastor will have a lot else to do during a crisis.

Establish leadership in each area of church involvement, such as: food delivery, shelter & billeting, counselling, community clean-up, communications etc.

3. Take Stock of Your Resources

During a disaster such as a flood, earthquake or fire, how a church is able to help the community largely depends on the material resources of the church and the congregation's skill set and availability.

Don't try to be something you are not.

Assess your church's facilities. What do you have that might be useful in a crisis? For example, do you have any of the following:

- Sanctuary/hall for meetings or shelter
- Kitchen – what is its capacity to prepare and store food?
- Offices – can they be used for private counselling of victims
- Areas that could be used for temporary shelter such as a gym or the sanctuary
- Large bathrooms that can be used by many and be separated by gender
- Showers that can be used by people needing shelter, first responders or volunteers
- Places to pray
- Computer or internet availability

- Children's play and daycare areas to help families keep children safely occupied
- Power generator
- Vehicles like cars or church vans to taxi people where they need to be
- Parking lot for first responders, volunteers

See the document: *Assessing Your Church's Potential for Disaster Response* for a checklist.

Build relationships with local disaster authorities in advance of any crisis. Find out whether your church could become part of the community's disaster response inventory.

Give every adult in your congregation a resource inventory form that lets them identify their personal skill sets and their material resources, such as construction equipment. A sample form is *Disaster Response Volunteer and Resource Inventory*.

Using the resource inventory forms, create a resource bank. Establish this on a computer, ensuring contact information is included. Keep backup files where they cannot be damaged in a disaster and can be accessed by more than one person, such as on an internet cloud. Also keep paper files. Routinely maintain files at least annually.

SWOT – Take stock of your church's strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats.

4. Set Goals and Objectives

How a church responds to a disaster must be based on the physical facilities and equipment as well as the skills and availability of its members. A desire to help must be focussed and prioritized, usually based on strengths the church already knows it has. For example, if the church already runs a food bank, it makes sense to continue to help the community in this way during a disaster. It makes less sense to try to start one from scratch or to duplicate what a church down the street is doing. It helps no one if the church exceeds the capacity of its facilities by offering shelter without being able to provide adequate washrooms, kitchen facilities or showers.

Imagine scenarios of what might happen during a disaster that might hit your community or your church building (flood, fire, earthquake, wind storm etc)) from the initial warning through the disaster's consequences (loss of power, injuries, deaths, collapsed or destroyed buildings, evacuation orders, traffic congestion, loss of internet etc). What resources do you need? What skills do you need at each stage? Where do you get help at each stage? How do you provide help?

Set priorities for action. If you can only do one or two things, would it be providing shelter at the church or in billets, counselling, food, prayer, debris cleanup, pre-paid gift cards, etc. Do what you can do well.

Set goals and objectives. For example, you might make as a goal contacting all congregation members within a specific timeframe after a disaster with the objective of ensuring all members are accounted for and safe or taken to safety. Another goal might be to establish a shelter for victims with the objective of providing shelter for 72 hours after the crisis occurs.

Know what outcomes you want to achieve through your priorities for disaster victims, volunteers from the church, first responders, the congregation, others.

5. Create a Plan

Once the church knows the goals and outcomes it wants to achieve, it is now time to decide what actions would be taken, when they would be taken and who would take them. It helps to break up a disaster into phases such as immediate response, short-term response and long-term response.

Always consider multiple solutions to a single problem so you can compare what might work best or most appropriately.

For every action:

- Describe the scenario being addressed
- Set a timeline
- Identify and describe decision points
- Identify and describe tasks
- Identify who would fulfill the tasks
- Select the action you will take
- Identify the resources needed to support the action (not the resources you have) so that missing resources that need to be acquired are accounted for. This also helps the church figure out whether a course of action is realistic and do-able.
- Make sure that different actions don't require the same set of resources, thus preventing some actions from being taken. For example, if the church has one refrigerator but needs it both for the actions of providing food and for storing medicines, one of the actions might need to be reconsidered or a second refrigerator found.
- Determine what information participants need to know at each stage and when they will need it for making decisions or taking actions

- Identify tasks that must be completed or else the action won't be done properly
- If the church doesn't have all the resources required for the action, identify where/how they will be obtained. For example, they might be purchased or an agreement might be worked out with another agency
- Ask yourselves what assistance hasn't been thought of or planned for and do that if it fits your church's mission and skill set.
- Check that your planned actions fit in to what needs to be done and that they don't conflict with the actions being taken by agencies around you, such as nearby churches, recreation centres, food banks, first responder agencies etc.

Find ways to run your ideas by church staff and the whole congregation before solidifying the ideas into a plan. The support and buy-in from staff and the congregation is essential at all stages of developing a plan.

Write the plan. Ensure that it:

- Meets the needs that might arise during and after a disaster
- Is feasible
- Has the support of the church staff and congregation
- Is complete
- Complies with the requirements of local Disaster Response Teams and meets all legal and financial of the municipal, provincial and federal governments. For example, if you wish to offer food, the church must comply with Food Safe requirements.

Get official approval of the plan from the church board.

Make sure the congregation knows of the plan and has opportunities to become familiar with it.

6. Implement the Plan

Hopefully, no disaster will fall upon your community and the full plan will never need to be implemented. However, there may be parts of the plan that can be implemented.

If the plan requires a certain number of volunteers to get training (First Aid, CPR, Food Safe etc), now is the time to start getting this done.

Work through scenarios. For example, do a fire drill to test whether the church's evacuation and fire drill procedures actually work. Or check out the church phoning tree to see how long it takes and whether everyone gets contacted or if some people are missed. Or stage a mock

earthquake scenario to see if volunteers can be mustered and the right equipment made available for the church's priority actions in this scenario.

Correct the problems that come to light during scenarios.

Review, revise and maintain the plan at least annually. Take into account changes in resources, church members skill sets, local demographics, new laws and bylaws, the church's willingness to accept risk etc.