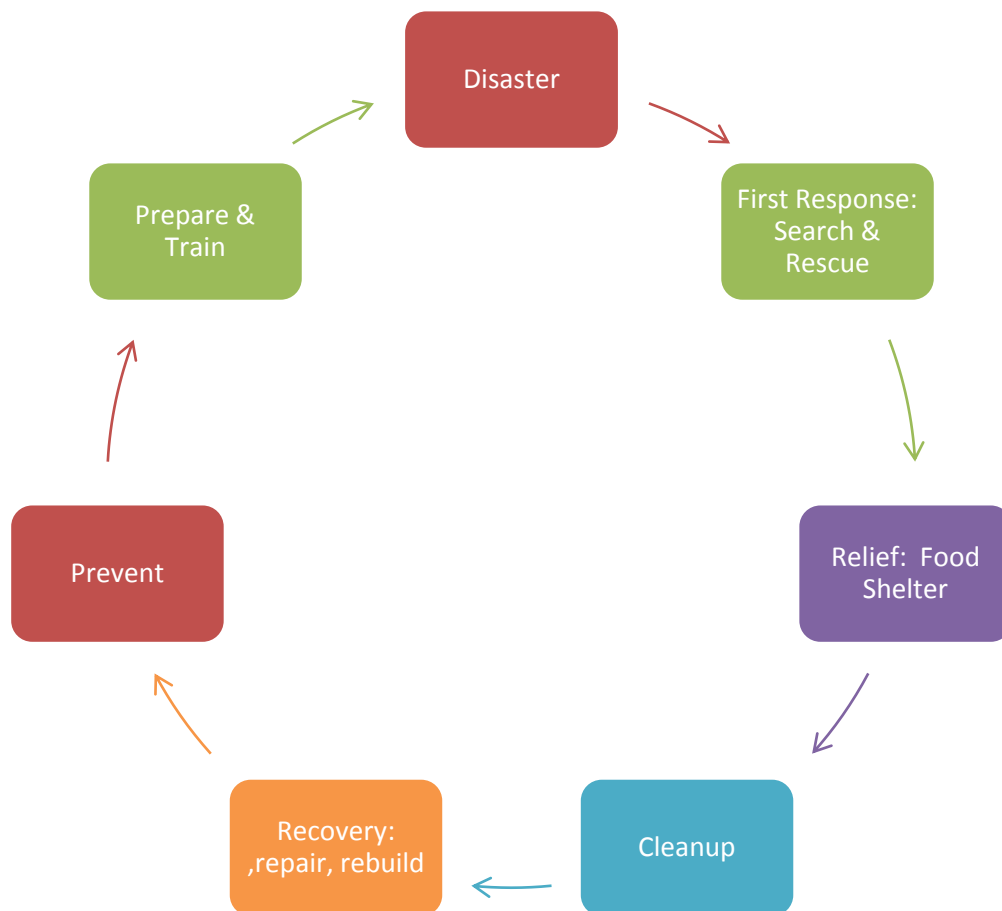


Stages in Disaster Response

We read about floods, earthquakes, wildfires, ice jams, snowstorms, prolonged power outages and chemical spills in the news almost every day. Sometimes we think ‘that couldn’t happen here’. But it might.

The church that is prepared for disaster is prepared for ministry opportunities to share the love of God in immediate and practical ways.

Disasters are events that cause suffering and human need on such a large scale that individuals, families, neighbourhoods and communities cannot recover without help. Whether a flood or earthquake, a fire or snowstorm, disasters – and disaster response – follow a similar pattern:



First Response: Search and Rescue

Most churches won't be involved on the front lines in the emergency search and rescue phase. That task is best left to trained first responders from the fire, police and medical professions who have the right equipment and knowledge to take acceptable risks in saving lives and property. However, there are some important things churches should do immediately after a disaster strikes:

- Understand the scale of the disaster and anticipate some of the needs that will arise in the first 72 hours.
- Be aware that in the confusion of a disaster, initial communications might have errors and may need to be corrected. Try to get the facts and news updates, but work with what you know until you get new information.
- Make contact with all church members in the disaster area to ensure they are safe.
- Alert authorities to the presence of congregation members in the disaster area if those people are unable to get themselves to safety without assistance.
- Contact emergency authorities to let them know how your church is prepared to help, highlighting the priorities identified in the Church's Disaster Response Plan.
- Take the steps identified in the church's Disaster Response Plan to begin its implementation.

Relief

Victims of a disaster have an immediate need for:

- Food & water
- Medical assistance
- Shelter
- Warmth
- Clothing
- Toiletries
- Counselling & emotional support
- Communication with loved ones
- Hope, encouragement and prayer

Your church can respond effectively to these needs if it is prepared and able to focus on what it is good at and planned to do. The church's offer to help will be more effective if it is already connected to existing disaster response agencies and is able to muster its members to volunteer quickly. Some of these agencies include the Salvation Army, Samaritan's Purse, Red Cross, St. John's Ambulance and the Mennonite Disaster Service.

Networking with other agencies such as the government and non-profits is essential.

Know that some things, like evacuations, providing shelter, or locating loved ones, will take time to accomplish. Usually relief comes within 72 hours, but calmness and patience are vital.

Cleanup

Depending on the nature of the disaster, church members might be able to help out in the cleanup immediately following a disaster. If they have the proper equipment, skills and safety protection, they might be involved in activities like:

- Removing loose debris, fallen tree branches
- Mucking out flooded, burned or damaged houses (only with the proper safety and respiratory equipment)
- Sorting personal possessions and furniture into what is salvageable and what is not
- Removing sandbags
- Helping victims document damage for insurance purposes

With so many people in need, it is best to focus on helping people who cannot help themselves, such as seniors, people with mobility or health issues, people who are disadvantaged or poor, and people without adequate insurance coverage.

Volunteers serve at their own risk and should have all necessary safety equipment such as hard hats, safety boots, face masks with HEPA filters, work gloves, safety glasses etc.

Volunteers should avoid coming into contact with hazards like downed power lines, chemicals, stray animals, condemned buildings, unstable structures, fast moving water etc.

Cutting down trees or removing them from roofs should be left to experts with the proper experience and equipment.

Volunteers should work under supervision of a cleanup coordinator or a homeowner. They should ensure they do not do work or repairs that might compromise a homeowner's insurance claim.

Recovery

Once the immediate needs created by the disaster have passed, the long-term recovery can begin. This may take weeks to years. It involves everything from rebuilding destroyed homes to helping people come to terms with their losses and move forward. While much of the physical

rebuilding will be undertaken by paid contractors, businesses and government, there is a long-lasting role for church ministry in areas such as:

- Ongoing friendship & visiting
- Trauma & grief counselling
- Restoring missing possessions like furniture & clothing
- Advocacy on behalf of victims with insurance, government granting agencies, financial institutions and legal services
- Meals
- Transportation
- Billeting victims while homes are reconstructed/repared
- Work parties to rebuild homes, replant gardens, clean up remaining debris

Prevention

Churches and their members can advocate for governments to take action that will prevent or mitigate the damage of a disaster. For example, in areas prone to flooding, pressure could be applied to governments to ensure berms are built, riverbanks stabilized, water removal equipment is available, and trained first responders are hired.

Prepare/Train

If you haven't prepared for a disaster or trained your church members to assist in the relief, cleanup and recovery phase, it is too late to start once a disaster hits. Get ready for next time.

- Encourage church families to have a family disaster response plan.
- Encourage families to have first aid kits, fire extinguishers and a 72-hour supply of food and water in their homes.
- Encourage church members to get First Aid/CPR certification.
- Most of the larger municipalities offer disaster response training for interested individuals who can be trained to work providing social services in reception centres, or can be trained to be part of neighbourhood emergency response teams capable of operating fire hydrants, offering basic medical assistance, locating victims and operating communications equipment.
- Get working on evaluating and improving your disaster response plan – or if your church doesn't have one, get working on one.