

A Quick Tip Guide for Response to Disaster and Crises for Parishes in the Episcopal Diocese of Upper South Carolina

prepared by

Jayne Crisp, CTS, EDUSC and former Episcopal Relief and Development Disaster Coordinator

The purpose of a disaster response plan is to assure the viability of the parish, its associated ministries and its assets. The emphasis of the plan should be on pre-disaster planning and recovery. To do nothing is not a responsible action for the leadership of the church. During times of disaster, we may be in the affected area and need help ourselves. If not, we may be able to offer help to others. The Episcopal Diocese of Upper South Carolina plans to be prepared to both receive help and offer help. This practical Quick Tip Guide will provide guidance to the Diocese and parishes in the development of their own policies and procedures for whatever situation may arise.

When a disaster occurs, clergy and parishes should communicate with the Diocesan Office through the Canon for Evangelism and Mission, Alan Bentrup (abentrup@edusc.org or 713-553-3358).

Should communications be down or the Diocesan Office relocated, disaster response information will be communicated in the best way possible depending on the circumstances.

Advantages of the church's response to a disaster or crisis

- Faith leaders and laypersons have **established relationships** with congregation members. They have frequently cared for individuals and families through normal developmental crises and periods of stress.
- Faith leaders and laypersons have the advantage of **immediacy and access**.
- Faith leaders and laypersons **have credibility and access** to other resources such as community agencies and organizations.
- Houses of worship can draw from a **team of members** to support survivors.
- Houses of worship have **space**. Many houses of worship have large buildings, kitchens, meeting spaces, gyms, day care centers, pre-schools, and sanctuaries that meet critical needs in a crisis or disaster.
- Many houses of worship have access to **trained volunteers** and youth workers who can provide pastoral care, feeding units, and other practical help in an emergency.
- Trained faith and lay leaders can **help meet the spiritual and religious needs** of victims in the aftermath of crisis, and can assist in response to spiritual questioning and exploration as well as reconciliation of beliefs

Pre-incident planning

1. Collaborate and partner with other houses of worship, members of the faith community and trained volunteers.
 - a. Develop a list of resources (include churches) that can support or provide basic needs to affected individuals and families with such actions as helping with emergency shelter, food, information, home repair, communication and prayer.
 - b. Identify resources that would be available to assist especially vulnerable populations such as:

Elderly, non-English speaking populations, individuals with disabilities, culturally diverse populations, undocumented people, and children.

2. Have a **Weather Radio** available for your parish that offers a public alert during an emergency. According to Consumer search.com the Midland WRT 300 weather radio is the overwhelming top choice of experts (Est. \$30). If you want a crank radio the Eton FR160 is very good in an emergency (about \$30). There are also excellent Midland (battery operated) radios available at Publix. Make sure that the radio has NOAA Weather Alert!
3. **Back up your computers.** In regard to electronic vaulting (computer backups), it is critical that files be backed up daily and that file copies be maintained off-site.
4. **Get supplies together.** A supply of 4 mil. plastic sheeting, duct tape, bubble wrap and cable ties needs to be purchased and ready at all times, because these supplies will quickly be exhausted in the local stores. It is wise to identify equipment that needs to be wrapped (e.g. organ, computers, copy machines, electrical connectors, telephones, etc.) and kept dry, and to precut plastic to fit in order to expedite protection of valuable equipment and facilities. Strong and portable mount-out containers should be kept ready for packing items that would be moved following a decision to evacuate the Church premises, and each container should have an inventory sheet of exactly what goes in the container and who takes charge of it.
5. **Critical Records.** Secure adequate fire & water resistant storage cabinets and/or safes for all current and critical Parish records, as appropriate, to include but not be limited to: (originals and/or required historic records and documents should be stored off-site through a commercial document storage service or storage facility).
 - All computer back-up files
 - The Parish Register books for baptisms, weddings, funerals, church services, and communicants.
 - Memorial Garden internment and pre-pay records (if appropriate)
 - Articles of Incorporation and property deeds
 - By-Laws and Policy Manuals and Ministry Manuals
 - Computer passwords, communication system passwords, and safe combinations
 - Emergency Contact Numbers and emergency telephone notification trees.
 - Membership and participant rosters.
 - Financial Records, including pledge and payment records, not otherwise backed up.
 - Meeting Minutes (Suggest scan or digitize original documents)
 - Historical documents.
 - Confidential personnel files and/or pastoral records, not otherwise backed up.
 - Have available emergency phone numbers (police, fire, ambulance, church association office, support and counseling programs and networks).
 - Create a comprehensive contact list of all key church staff and support staff including janitorial and maintenance crews.
 - Check insurance policy coverage for natural disaster coverage, National Flood Insurance Programs, acts of violence, vandalism, etc. Insurance agencies can direct you to a customer service specialist for information.

6. **Accessibility and Communication.**

- Have available a map of your facilities and extra keys. They may need to be utilized by police or firefighters.
- Identify those who can provide the parish with extra clerical support, answer phones, update website, and receive donations. Identify contractors ahead of time who can respond for emergency repairs.
- Develop an evacuation plan for your church, daycare and for the entire facility. Determine a safe place to meet as well as other alternatives.
- Determine a way to contact parents, co-workers, families of staff and employees.
- Network with other houses of worship, synagogues, the County Emergency Management Office, police and fire departments to identify capabilities and additional resources that may be shared in an emergency.
- Plan ahead to determine who can assist with an 800 number, website, cell phones, radios, or other means of communications that might be necessary in a community crisis.
- Determine methods of receiving, managing and being accountable for donations of cash and other resources made available to assist victims.

7. **Disaster response guidelines for people who want to help from a distance**

- It is almost **NEVER** helpful to send used clothing, canned goods, diapers, bottled water, and furniture to the affected site unless there is a specific request from an established response organization.
- Do not go into a disaster area *unless you are invited* and have a specific mission to accomplish that is requested by the local host.
- If you do go on site, make sure that you can be self-sufficient on site so as not to compromise the resources of the local victims and volunteers.
- Be willing to work as a member of a team and are willing to follow directions.
- Be respectful of victims and survivors. Do not make public comments or share information that you do not have specific permission to share.
- Make sure you are in good health emotionally and physically and that your inoculations are up to date.
- Connect with your local community disaster response organizations and learn new disaster response skills so that you can become a member of a local team and help in future disasters.

8. **Survival strategies for the caregiver**

- Encourage colleagues engaged response to stay mentally, spiritually and physically healthy.
- Pray (for yourself and others). *Never* force prayer upon a person. Although it is important that the caregiver pray regularly for guidance and for the person who is suffering, ask for the support of others to help you in your efforts. Prayer certainly is a source of comfort, inspiration, strength and hope, but it should be offered not imposed. (If tempted, ask yourself, "*Whose need am I meeting?*")
- Only bring up prayer when it is appropriate. Remember that the person in crisis needs to feel safe and secure during a time of crisis.
- Eat nutritious foods and good balanced meals. Avoid caffeine, sugar, pastries, fast foods high in salt and fat.

- Eat regularly 4 to 5 times in small amounts.
- Eat high-energy non-perishable foods: dried fruit; granola bars; nuts; trail mix; fruit; water; mineral water; milk; decaffeinated coffee/tea; juice; electrolyte supplements.
- Eat with a friend. Don't isolate yourself!
- For those able to, taking calcium supplements can counteract high level of lactic acid produced by tension and taking Vitamin C may maintain alertness. *(Always check with your doctor to make sure you can tolerate these supplements.)*
- Develop realistic expectations about the rewards as well as the limitations of helping. Set boundaries for yourself. Ask for and accept help from other professionals.
- Find opportunities to acknowledge, express and work through your experience in a supportive environment. Debrief yourself regularly and build healthy support groups.
- Seek assistance from other colleagues and caregivers who have had experience with trauma and have remained healthy and hopeful or have learned from their experience. Take their advice.

9. Count-down Procedure for Weather Related Disasters

Establish a count-down sequence to make timely decisions and complete work not later than the following schedule of deadlines. Where the logic of "Plan the Work, Work the Plan" delivers benefits is in not needing to make additional decisions, procure additional supplies, or figure out how to do things. Planned operational movements should proceed directly from scheduled decisions to designated actions.

- 96 hours: Declare and Activate the Plan.
 Notify Committee Members of activation.
 Start the countdown and observe the clock.
 Communicate to the whole parish that preparations are underway.
- 48 hours: Back-up all computers with several copies.
 Send a copy by express mail to a safe off-site location out of the area.
 Place copies to travel off-site with the Rector and Wardens.
 Bring all outside equipment (as possible) into buildings.
- 24 hours: Rector or designated alternate makes the firm decision to evacuate or remain.
 Communicate the evacuation decision to the Diocesan Office.
 Notify leaders of event cancellations; communicate cancellations to media.
 Set thermostats on refrigerators and freezers as cold as possible.
 Put up shutters and wrap all vulnerable equipment in plastic.
 Place special notices on the telephone voicemail and website home page.
 If evacuating, pack essential and valuable items in designated mount-out containers.
 If evacuating, remove reserve sacrament materials.
- 18 hours: Disconnect all utilities and thoroughly shut down buildings.
- 12 hours: If evacuating, leave by now.
 All readiness plans should be complete.

10. Inventory for Rapid Deployment Mount-Out Box (This is dependent upon what is already stored off-site)

- Administrative office relocation kit, prepackaged
- Copies of all computer back-up media
- Parish record books and service attendance records, all volumes
- Church Roster
- The most essential parish files
- Vestry and Annual Meeting minutes for recent years
- Financial records, contracts, leases, monthly bills and assessment statements, discretionary fund checkbook
- Archival materials about the church
- Stewardship files and pledge cards
- Communion set of equipment
- Home Communion kit (Church in a Box)
- Minimal vestments for the current and upcoming liturgical season
- The most essential of the Rector's library books
- Complete set of keys
- Church consecration certificate

11. Protection Checklists

Church Sanctuary

- ___ Remove all unattached sanctuary equipment and store it in enclosed rooms.
- ___ Disconnect electric organs; bag connectors in protective bubble wrap.
- ___ Cover the Organ in plastic wrap.
- ___ Cover the Altar in plastic wrap.
- ___ Wrap audio equipment and control room equipment in plastic wrap.
- ___ Wrap projection equipment in plastic and stow equipment that is not tied down.
- ___ Remove sacramental reserve elements.

Kitchens and Parish Halls

- ___ Set refrigerators and freezers at coldest settings.
- ___ Move all loose items into cabinets or drawers.

Sacristy

- ___ Altar Guild moves all vestments and loose items into closed cabinets or closets.
- ___ Altar Guild locks up particularly valuable sanctuary equipment.
- ___ In case of evacuation, Altar Guild packs valuable sanctuary equipment for transportation.
- ___ Altar Guild prepares a transportable kit of minimum equipment and vestments to support potential temporary relocation of worship to another site.
- ___ Stow or pack for transport the Church Services register book.

Church Office

- ___ Prepare back-up media for transport off-site and send a copy to a responsible party outside of the area for additional safety.
- ___ Disconnect all computer equipment; bag all connectors in protective bubble wrap.
- ___ Disconnect all electronic equipment; wrap in protective plastic wrap.
- ___ Place all critical parish records in the safe unless they are being packed to evacuate.

- ___ Stow all loose items in cabinets or drawers.
- ___ Wrap the Secretary's desk, other work desks, copier, and printer in protective plastic.
- ___ Change recorded telephone message to give instructions to members that they should contact the Parish after the storm or emergency passes and how to do so with an alternate method in case the Office cannot reopen.
- ___ Place a message on the Website with emergency contact instructions and how to reach the Office after the storm and an alternate method in case the Office cannot reopen.
- ___ Cover bookshelves in plastic.

Work cooperatively with other worshipping communities in the immediate area to arrange for temporary use of their facilities if needed and make your parish facilities available to them if they suffer disaster. Discuss other ways to support each others' operations if disaster strikes any ecumenical neighbor.

Become sufficiently prepared for eventualities that action can be taken quickly according to plans and with a minimum of decision making or invention.

12. Recovery Priorities Following the Disaster

Physical Safety

- Reestablish communications access and availability for parishioners reporting in as a first priority.
- Walk through the property to assess damage and immediate needs for security.
- Contact the Diocesan Office directly.
- Begin contacting parishioners to assess short-term and long-term needs.
- Contact the insurance carrier, utility providers, contractors and government agencies as needed.
- Reestablish the parish routine and schedule.
- Begin cleaning up to reestablish minimal operations.

Emotional and spiritual safety

The following addresses the needs of those most *directly affected* by the event:

Help individuals (victims, families, eyewitnesses and others) with safety and security needs by:

1. Contacting family members; locating phone numbers
2. Providing locations for meetings; offering transportation and victim mobilization assistance.
3. Assure and manage privacy from the media and other intrusions.
4. Assisting with logistical and organizational planning and services for families.
5. Helping identify "compassion centers" or safe and comfortable meeting places where survivors, families, and friends may congregate. (If the church is the scene of the traumatic event, that place may not feel safe for awhile or ever).
6. Provide pastoral care, prayer, crisis intervention or other opportunities to provide a "ministry of presence".