

# crisis in communities

In times of disaster, is your church ready to offer hope and help?

By Kary Kingsland

Floods, hurricanes, tornadoes and pandemics confront us with large-scale tragedy. Yet they also provide the church with one of its greatest opportunities to demonstrate God's love to people who are hurting.

Though government and public agencies are prepared to help in times of disaster, there is no greater or more effective organization in a community to offer eternally significant help and comfort than the local church.

Local churches are uniquely invested in their communities and remain long after the media, the government and public agencies have moved on. Local churches best understand the culture and people around them. Most importantly, every church shares a mandate from God not just to preach the gospel but to love their neighbors sacrificially.

In the wake of a crisis, opportunities abound to build relationships with people who might never attend a traditional church service. As families struggle to rebound, churches can live out the mandate to love them as congregations band together to relieve suffering and bring comfort. Disaster response provides a myriad of venues for these opportunities.

Churches don't need to wait to respond to major disasters like Hurricane Katrina, 9/11 or the Oklahoma City bombing. Far more disasters involve a single family or an individual, and the church — if it is prepared to do so — is one of the few organizations equipped to help at that level.

Every community faces disasters. The most vital thing churches must do is to plan and prepare in advance how they will respond. Here are some priority issues every church should consider.

## Promote individual family preparedness

If the members of a church are themselves unprepared for disasters, the ability of the church to respond and assist in disasters is hindered. Families who are not prepared have to react to and focus on their own disaster issues, thus depleting the church of one of its most valuable resources — volunteers. Churches can provide training for families on issues of individual preparedness by contacting a local Salvation Army or American Red Cross chapter about having these kinds of training sessions. Convoy of Hope provides manuals on individual preparedness on its Web site, [convoyofhope.org](http://convoyofhope.org).



### Develop a strategy

Consider the church's location, size, volunteer base, financial and material resources and strengths.

- Can the building be used as a feeding center or shelter?
- Are some members professional responders who could set up a medical clinic or counseling service?
- Could church members assemble and distribute relief kits?
- Can the church serve as a distribution center for food, hygiene kits or clothing?
- Does the church have additional facilities to warehouse large quantities of food and relief supplies for the community?
- Could the church assist with or function as a long-term recovery center?
- What current ministries could continue or even expand during a disaster?
- How can the church help the

elderly, single moms, the poor, those with special needs, and other vulnerable populations?

Once a church identifies how best to serve, a team should be built to oversee the coordination of response efforts. The senior pastor should be included in the team, but not necessarily serve as the head of it. His or her attention would likely be diverted in times of disaster to overseeing the many needs of the church facilities and ministering to needs within the congregation.

### Connect with your community

The disaster ministry team leader should connect with others in the community involved in disaster response, especially the local emergency management. This person can help assess needs in the community's disaster response

plans and help the church find its niche in the community. This helps prevent duplication of services and confusion between organizations.

No church can fill every need. A church should pick one area to become involved in and work to become as efficient and effective as possible in that area, and partner with local agencies and other local churches with a heart for serving the community during disasters. Disaster response is much more effective when everyone works together.

### Develop team protocols

A church's disaster preparedness team needs to know when and how the church's disaster ministry plan is to be initiated.

- Who is responsible to initiate and coordinate activities when a disaster hits?
- How would the team communicate with each other?

- What central location will the team use to meet?

### Prepare facilities

Once the disaster response ministry is defined, the facilities should be prepared, the proper equipment acquired, and all volunteers trained.

- In the event of disaster, what measures are in place to protect the church, including documents and data?
- Who is responsible for assessing damage and contacting appropriate persons (including local response agencies, insurance agencies, district and national officials, etc.)?
- Are there plans for evacuating the facilities during a service or large gathering? How is this information communicated and by whom?
- Do your volunteers have access to equipment needed for response, and can they get to it in a timely manner? Do they know how to use the equipment?

### Provide training

Many communities offer a spectrum of training courses. Every church's disaster response team should take advantage of such training. Ideally, such training opportunities should include the whole church. Schedule teams to take classes such as CERT (Community Emergency Response Training), CPR, shelter training, and spiritual and emotional care courses including Critical Incident Stress Management courses.

Any church, anywhere of any size can promote church preparedness and community disaster response. More information, including manuals on preparedness measures, is available at [convoyofhope.org](http://convoyofhope.org). **tpe**

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E-mail your comments to [tpe@ag.org](mailto:tpe@ag.org).



# Partners needed!

Convoy of Hope works with the Assemblies of God by helping coordinate disaster response at all levels, from the local church to the national headquarters. It is always the goal of Convoy of Hope to make the local church the face of help and hope in disasters.

The Convoy of Hope U.S. Disaster Response (USDR) team monitors weather daily to get the earliest possible information regarding a disaster. USDR identifies key individuals and organizations needing immediate contact prior to the incident. At the earliest opportunity, they attempt to contact partners in an affected area (for example, districts, local churches, FEMA, state and federal emergency operations centers) to provide information on how the USDR team can be reached in the event of a disaster, and to place local responders on standby alert.

A unique feature of the ministry of Convoy of Hope USDR is their relation-

ships with state and federal emergency management and response agencies. Through such relationships, USDR can connect the local church to these agencies and their additional resources. This positions the local church to be a key player in the community's disaster response and recovery, providing new avenues of ministry.

Partner churches can help by contacting Convoy of Hope if they become aware of an impending disaster in their area or immediately following a disaster by calling 417-823-8998. Often, because of damaged communication grids and the condition of utilities after a disaster or because people are displaced, it is easier to call out from the affected area than it is for those outside to call in. The USDR team also makes every effort to reach those with whom we partner.

Typically, when Convoy of Hope brings supplies into an area, USDR does not select church parking lots as distribution

sites due to the limited size of the lots. The ideal location for a distribution site includes the following components:

- Near location of the hardest hit area
- Access to major roads
- Areas with unmet needs — (outlying, rural, impoverished, etc.)
- Large enough footprint to accommodate relief operations

There are several other ways to be involved in Convoy of Hope U.S. Disaster Response. Contact us to become more involved in any of these areas:

### Assessment

Accurate information is critical to helping determine the need and thus the required response to any given disaster. This information is gathered through connections to state and federal emergency management officials, local churches, media, weather reports, and when possible, by going to the affected area to assess the damage in person.

### Volunteer teams

Convoy of Hope used nearly 21,000 volunteers in 2008 in disaster relief. Volunteers can help in many ways. To find out more about group or church partnerships with Convoy of Hope before, during and after disasters, e-mail [usdrvol@convoyofhope.org](mailto:usdrvol@convoyofhope.org).

### Amateur radio communications

Amateur radio is one of the most reliable methods of communication. Convoy of Hope has launched CARRS — Convoy of Hope Amateur Radio Response Services — to coordinate local radio operators who can help relay vital information in disasters. More information about becoming involved in amateur radio disaster response is available by e-mailing [fieldservices@convoyofhope.org](mailto:fieldservices@convoyofhope.org).

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