



# Disaster Response Handbook for Local Church Clergy

“Now when Jesus saw the crowds, He had compassion for them because they were troubled and helpless . . .” Matthew 9:36

The Great Plains United Methodist Disaster Response is a Ministry of Care that has theological, material, mental health, advocacy, and social service components designed to provide for the spiritual, emotional, and physical recovery of disaster survivors and for the well-being of their caregivers. The Conference Disaster Response Ministry exists for the purpose of responding to natural or man-made disasters of such magnitude that they overwhelm a community’s ability to recover on its own and additional help is requested by the community.

## Actions to Plan for a Disaster

1. Appoint a member from the local church as the Local Church Disaster Response Leader.
2. Develop relationships within the local community agencies and resources.
3. Know who the relief agencies are in your area (for example, American Red Cross).
4. Get to know your law enforcement and County Emergency Management personnel in your area who will have authority during a disaster. Ask the Emergency Management personnel how a disaster will be handled in your community. Ask how the local church can fit in to their plan to help.
5. Contact the local ministerial association and ask how each local church will be helping in times of disaster. Attempt to get each church to handle a different aspect of what will be needed, to reduce duplication of services.
6. Become familiar with local agencies in your community:
  1. County Department of Emergency Management
  2. Police and Sheriff
  3. Fire Department
  4. American Red Cross
  5. County Mental Health
  6. Health Department
  7. Ministerial Association
  8. Volunteers of America
  9. Local Food Banks
  10. Women, Infants, Children
  11. Community Action Agency
  12. Elderly Services
  13. Crisis Telephone Services
7. Possible Special Needs Group to be aware of:
  1. Ethnic Communities
  2. Refugees and Immigrants
  3. Homeless
  4. Children
  5. Elderly

6. Unemployed
7. Persons with Special Needs
8. Geographically isolated
8. Know the Resources Within Your Church:
  1. Contact the Conference Disaster Response Coordinator to arrange Connecting Neighbors Training. Module 1: Ready Congregants, Module 2: Ready Church, Module 3: Ready Response.
  2. Guide the Board of Trustees to develop an inventory of church physical facilities to be used in an emergency response to disaster in the area. The Conference Disaster Response Coordinator has guides to assist you in developing your Local Church Disaster Plan.
  3. With the Board of Trustees, determine if your facilities could be used as an American Red Cross certified facility to provide a reception center, shelter, and/or mass feeding.
    - ✓ 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 will totally oversee the shelter in your building. All most follow their rules and regulations.
  4. Inquire and list the human resources within your congregation, their interests, skills, and talents with regard to opportunities for disaster response volunteer work; encourage these individuals to complete the Basic Disaster and Early Response Team trainings.
  5. 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 family member
    - Make provisions for food, water, clothing for at least 3 days
    - List emergency contacts for all families and single individuals within your church.

## Actions When Disaster is Imminent

1. Monitor the news:
  - a. Listen to local news and weather, the National Weather Service, and your local community's way of alerting individuals of impending disaster. Abide by what you are instructed to do. There are many good Apps for your phone to follow weather and get real time alerts.
  - b. If you are advised to evacuate, go! As a leader in the community, you are looked to for guidance. Individuals 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:
  - a. If there is enough time, gather essentials for ministry, i.e. a Bible, Church Directory and/or phone list, maps, the church's disaster plan, portable communion set, etc.
  - b. 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!
  - a. Stay at your evacuated location until First Responders say it is okay to return home. Please be patient, this could take some time!
  - b. Protect yourself and your family first. Do not abandon your family for the sake of the church or community. 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 your family will be an example for others to follow with regard to themselves, and their families.
  - c. If you must evacuate, of personal possessions take only what you must have to survive for at least 3 days. If you can carry more, focus on small items of personal rather than monetary value, i.e. photographs, insurance papers, wills, etc.
  - d. Pack a "go box" ahead of time to make evacuation must less hectic; include a copy of this handbook. Be sure your "go box" is seasonal, items needed in the winter will defer from summer items.
  - e. If you know that you are going to a shelter, take your own bedding. Cots will be in short supply.
4. Notify your District Superintendent of your location.

5. If you know of shut-ins who need to be evacuated, notify the nearest Law Enforcement officer or First Responder, and let them take care of that.

## Actions Immediately Following a Disaster

1. Assess your own damage first:
  - a. Unless it is unsafe to remain, stay sheltered with your family and property until emergency personnel arrive to get you and your family.
  - b. Abide by the instructions of emergency personnel. Do only what they say!
  - c. If the disaster has affected you, do not rely on your own judgment, nor the judgment of others who were also affected.
2. Stay alert:
  - a. If possible, monitor the damage to your community by listening to the news.
  - b. Do not interfere with the First Responders in their initial relief work of search and rescue. Stay out of their way.
  - c. Stay at home until the “all clear” is given by official Law Enforcement or First Responder. If you are at home, it will be easier for the District Superintendent, the Conference Disaster Response Coordinator, and District Disaster Leader to locate you. It will also be easier for your congregation to locate you.

## Actions When it is Safe to Move About

1. Check on people in your congregation and community.
  - a. Most likely you will be walking, so please provide the presence of Christ and the Church to everyone you pass. Don't pass a house just to get to a church member's house.
  - b. Identify yourself as clergy to those you may not know.
  - c. Identify yourself as clergy to First Responders, Law Enforcement, and Emergency Management.
  - d. Identify those in your church and others in the community who have been heavily affected by the disaster. If you become aware of deaths in the general area where you are, reach out to the family. Identify

their church affiliation and let the family know you will contact their pastor. Please make that contact as soon as possible.

- e. Notify other clergy if you know of members of their church who have been affected by the disaster.
  - f. Work closely with Law Enforcement personnel to get a tour of the damaged area, if possible. Do not interfere with their work in order to ask for a tour.
  - g. Do not take a camera (unless you are going to photograph any damage to your church buildings or other church related facilities). As a standing rule, we do not take pictures of anything after a disaster. The last thing we want is to think we are innocently posting a picture on Facebook, or just showing the pictures to friends, and have someone recognize the home or area.
  - h. If a church member sustained an injury or died in the disaster, be a presence to that family as you would in any other emergency. Your presence will provide comfort.
  - i. Expect that you and others will be in shock. First Responders will most often be affected by shock and numbness.
  - j. Individuals affected by the disaster will want to tell their stories over and over; be prepared to listen and to be present in that moment. Give that person the attention and sensitivity needed.
2. Check on property damage.
    - a. At this initial stage of the disaster, detailed information is not needed. Determine the amount of damage to the all church facilities and the community.
  3. Communicate Updates.
    - a. Inform your District Superintendent about your situation plus that of your church's facilities.
    - b. If the disaster is larger than what the local community can handle, if not already present, contact the Conference Disaster Response Coordinator. Unless it is a long driving distance, the Conference Coordinator will be there very soon after the disaster. If the Conference Coordinator is not present at this moment, call them.
    - c. Offer your services to assist clergy who may have been affected by the disaster or who may have many of their church members affected.
    - d. If there is substantial damage in your area(s), be prepared to take the Conference Disaster Response Coordinator, District Superintendent,

District Disaster Leader, and Conference Volunteer in Mission Coordinator, and possibly others on a tour.

- e. Be ready to provide the Conference Disaster Response Coordinator and the Volunteer in Mission Coordinator a place they can use as temporary “headquarters” for Great Plains disaster volunteers while in your area. The church would be fine if there is not extensive damage.

## Actions During the Early Relief Phase

1. For disasters that can be handled by the local community:
  - a. Organize “clean-up” crews to be ready to go into areas when you are permitted to assist. Clean-up at this stage may be moving large items out of the road ways, and assisting families with trying to salvage their belongings. Throw nothing away!!
  - b. Do not begin any major clearing until the damage has been assessed; your premature assistance could lower the amount of settlement awarded to an individual affected by the disaster, or may cause insurance to deny any claim.
  - c. Concentrate first on opening accesses and protecting personal property by putting tarps up and securing them.
2. For disasters that are too large for the local community to handle:
  - a. Contact the District Superintendent and report on the magnitude of the disaster. Inquire if the Conference Disaster Response Coordinator has already been contacted by Emergency Management or Red Cross. The Conference Disaster Response Coordinator will have been in touch with the District Superintendent and will have updated all known information.
  - b. Contact your District Disaster Leader.
  - c. Be prepared to help the Conference Disaster Response Coordinator, District Disaster Leader, and the Regional Disaster Leader. If you have a city/county map, draw a circle around the affected area(s) so they will have a point of reference.
3. Soon after the disaster, and when it has been deemed safe, check with the Conference Disaster Response Coordinator for all agency plans and when and where the agencies will set up.

- a. A MARC (Multi-Agency Resource Center) will be established within a couple of days. Individuals will be able to come for initial assistance and assessment.
  - b. Be aware that the types of assistance will vary according to the category of the disaster. Emergency relief organizations (such as Red Cross, Salvation Army, etc.) are prepared to handle early expenses of those affected by the disaster.
  - c. Do not give money to any disaster survivor at this stage. Help meet basic needs by providing them a Health Kit provided by Great Plains Disaster Response and Red Cross. Money given at this stage will lower the amount of assistance the disaster survivor will be able to receive from other agencies. Also, it is not a best practice to give money, because you will be unable to give it to everyone.
  - d. Church funds are usually distributed during the Recovery Phase, often after all other forms of help from the community have been exhausted.
  - e. Direct Contributions to the Conference Office
    - i. Checks should be made payable to the Great Plains Annual Conference and designated “For Disaster Recovery”.
    - ii. 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
- a. The Great Plains Disaster Response Ministry is always on the leading edge of organizing and helping the community with long term recovery.
  - b. Work alongside of the Conference Disaster Response Coordinator to bring the community officials together to begin the process of planning for the “new normal”.
  - c. 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. A disaster is no place for a hero!
  - d. When the community, especially the community officials and leaders, takes ownership of the disaster and for relief and recovery, healing begins within the lives of the individuals and the community.
  - e. When the community officials begin to ask “what now?”, it is time to look at establishing a Long-Term Recovery Committee (LTRC). The

United Methodist have always taken the leading role in assisting communities with the establishment of this recovery committee. The Conference Disaster Response Coordinator will have an instruction guide to follow, yet you can download a copy on the National VOAD website.

## Actions During the Recovery Phase

1. Personal Initiative and Involvement:
  - a. As a leader in the community, the pastor has responsibility to be involved in the disaster recovery program.
  - b. Heavy involvement will be the first 6 months, with the expectation that recovery could last up to 3 years, depending on the damages.
2. Seek to develop partnerships, network, and interfaith collaboration:
  - a. 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. It is encouraged that churches organize to where duplication of services are not taking place.
3. Coordinate with District Disaster Leader:
  - a. During the long recovery phase, coordinate monthly congregational and/or community gatherings for the purpose of providing support and extending a listening ear.
  - b. Continue to keep an eye open for community needs.
4. Be a part of the Long-Term Recovery Committee

## Actions in the Aftermath of a Disaster

1. After taking some time to review the events before, during and after the disaster, meet with the Conference Disaster Response Coordinator to share your insights and suggestions.

