



Tips and Lessons — Liturgy after a Disaster

How To: Adapting Liturgy and Ritual After a Disaster

When the Episcopal Church of the Ascension was damaged by the Sierra Madre Earthquake in 1991, the rector, The Very Rev. Canon Michael Bamberger, made several adjustments to continue offering services until the church was repaired. Below are his reflections and suggestions on how to maintain liturgy after a disaster.

Offering Worship When All is Not Normal

It's always bad news when they name an earthquake after your town.

On Friday, June 28th, 1991, Sierra Madre, California was the epicenter of a 6.0-magnitude earthquake. There was one fatality and many injuries. Among the many buildings affected or destroyed, the Episcopal Church of the Ascension was badly damaged. The next Sunday, the congregation gathered for worship outside on a playing field. By the following Sunday, the Parish Hall had been inspected and repaired enough for safe occupancy, and for the next nine months, this was the worship space while the historic building was restored.

A year to the day later, on Sunday, June 28th, 1992, the congregation experienced the powerful Landers earthquake during the early service. It provided an excellent reminder about congregational preparedness.

Communicate that worship will happen

If it's possible, reinstate regular Sunday worship as soon you can, even if it's in an alternate location. Announce that worship will happen and when and where it will be. Use every media avenue – websites, email, social media, phone trees, signs and posters, and if possible, a press release to local TV and radio. If evacuation orders are in place, it is advisable to consult with local law enforcement authorities about access issues.

Respect vulnerability and plan for safe worship

Folks may have been traumatized even if they had no property damage. They may be grieving for any number of reasons. Be sure that the space you choose for worship is safe. This may mean having building inspectors assess the structural integrity of the space where which worship will be held. And be attentive to the need for emotional “safe space.”



Biography



The Very Rev. Canon Michael Bamberger is rector of the Episcopal Church of the Ascension in Sierra Madre, CA. He is also the Diocesan Disaster Coordinator for the Episcopal Diocese of Los Angeles and is one of Episcopal Relief & Development's Partners in Response.



Fast Facts



CONGREGATION:
Episcopal Church of the Ascension

CONGREGATION SIZE:
About 200 households.

LOCATION:
Sierra Madre, CA

AREA POPULATION:
10,000

DISASTER TYPE:
Earthquake



Celebrate and mourn

Worship after a disaster celebrates survival and resiliency and holds up those who helped. But it also acknowledges loss, uncertainty, and fear. In the immediate aftermath of a disaster, people often find comfort in worship that seems familiar. It is always appropriate to pray aloud for local community leaders and for other worshipping communities that are similarly affected. A *Public Service for Healing* from the *Book of Occasional Services*, as well as materials from *Enriching Our Worship*, can be easily adapted to speak to the needs of the congregation.

At the same time, it is critical that Church leaders proclaim the Resurrection. Without being Pollyanna-ish, believe that recovery will be achieved. And when that seems impossible, remember the phrase from the 12 Step Movement – “Fake it ‘til you make it.”

Be ready for newcomers

In the wake of a disaster, people often seek out community. They may be looking for answers to “why this happened.” They may have a newly discovered need to “belong somewhere.” Whatever the reasons that may draw visitors and newcomers, a disaster can be an opportunity to welcome and embrace new members. In addition to planning for more people in the pews, be ready to provide extra fellowship, as well, in the form of coffee hours and church potlucks. People need to gather, be nourished, and share their stories and hear the stories of others in times of crisis.

Understand the “emotional life cycle of a disaster”

Some disasters are short-lived, and some take a long time for a “new normal” to emerge. Church leaders must attempt to be attuned to the emotional and spiritual condition of congregants, the congregation as a whole, and the community at large. The first heroic days of disaster response often give way to a long slide of disillusionment for those who must deal with displacement, lost income and ongoing uncertainty.

It is appropriate to address people’s frustration and exhaustion. Anticipating when longings will be at odds with reality is helpful. For example, having to hold Christmas worship in another venue because the familiar space has not been restored may re-open a sense of grief.

It is also critical to remember that life events continue to happen after a disaster. People will be born, folks will want to be married, and funerals will need to be held. One congregation, undergoing extensive repairs, put up a banner on the surrounding scaffolding proclaiming “Marriage Under Construction” for weddings.

Only when the time is truly right, celebrate recovery. That might happen when there is consensus that the “new normal” has emerged.

Preparing Ahead of Time



- What likely events could disrupt how your congregation worships? Electrical outage is a common result of a disaster. Do you need power to worship? It is important to have thought about how your congregation can improvise. Some churches have put together “Church in a Box” packages with all the necessities for holding worship in the event that their building is not useable.
- Plan ahead for an alternate space for worship. Consider making arrangements with another church now to share space if necessary.
- Such a strategy can be part of a comprehensive parish disaster plan. Download a free “Preparedness Planning Guide for Congregations and Parishes” from: episcopalrelief.org/resourcelibrary.

Additional Resources



For more information on similar topics, see the following online resources in our Resource Library.

(episcopalrelief.org/resourcelibrary):

- “The Sunday After a Disaster”
- “Self-Care After a Disaster”

For more information on Episcopal Relief & Development’s U.S. Disaster Program visit:

www.episcopalrelief.org/usdisaster.