



Disaster Response – Follow in Their Footsteps

How To: Building Relationships for Response

CASE STUDY

Over the past five years Louisiana has faced many disasters – Hurricanes Katrina, Rita, Gustav and Ike, and an oil spill. A diocesan-wide response to these disasters requires an assessment of needs and assets, program planning and providing support to many congregations at once. This task can be extremely challenging when communication is spotty, roads are impassible, etc. The Episcopal Diocese of Louisiana has learned that consistent communication with congregations before a disaster is imperative to an efficient response. Nell Bolton, Executive Director of Episcopal Community Services of Louisiana, and a team of volunteers are visiting every congregation in their diocese to establish permanent lines of communication. The goal is to create stronger relationships, and gather knowledge on congregational ministries, partnerships and potential congregational responses to future disasters.

START YOUR OWN CONGREGATIONAL ASSESSMENT PROJECT

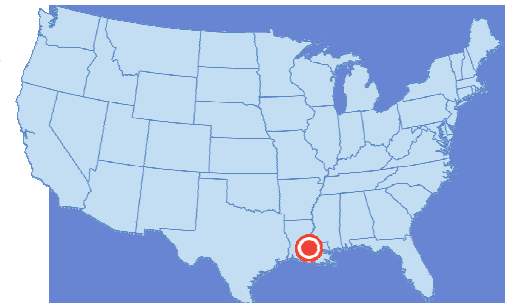
Understand Your Mission

- **Our mission is to establish strong relationships between congregations and the diocese.** This mission helps us use an open approach to our interviews. We don't go with a set agenda or questionnaire, but rather talk and share with church members. The ties we build will help us to work well together if there is another disaster, which is a way to be prepared.



Biography

Nell Bolton is the Executive Director of Episcopal Community Services of Louisiana.



Fast Facts

DIOCESE:
Episcopal Diocese of Louisiana
CHURCHES: 56
MEMBERS: about 18,000

DISASTER TYPE: Hurricane and oil spill

DISASTER RELIEF:
Assess congregational preparedness and response capacity



Logistics

- **A diocesan-wide assessment can be a very daunting task.** Visiting more than 50 churches in one year is difficult – almost a full time job! Make sure you have the needed manpower and your time horizon is realistic – we have several staff and volunteer team members dedicated to this job so that we can finish within the two-year time limit established by our leadership.
- **Look to volunteers to create your team.** We brought an AmeriCorps VISTA volunteer on board to help with congregational visits and preparedness planning; we also have a deacon focused on establishing initial contacts and the first round of visits. Your diocese could hire an intern or ask for volunteers.
- **Decide how to assess.** Discuss and decide on the best medium for this assessment. You could visit individual congregations like we are doing; you could also phone or email congregational leaders.
- **Request a meeting.** We usually send a request to the rector or senior warden and explain why we want to talk to them. We also ask them to invite anyone else they want to have there: i.e. vestry, outreach committee. Congregations have had us come to everything: from a bible study or a vestry meeting, to a church service, or even a personal meeting with just one other person.

Assess Assets

- **Preparedness Assessment.** Ask congregations if they are prepared – have they completed a disaster preparedness plan? Do they have a plan to contact parishioners in case of an emergency? You may wish to use your time together to work on rounding out their plans.
- **Response and Interest Assessment.** Ask congregations whether they have responded to local disasters in the past, and whether they want to respond in the future. What do they need to respond more effectively?
- **Asset Assessment.** Ask what they have that can be used for a response. What kinds of relationships do they have with other organizations and within the community that they can build upon in order to respond? What financial or property resources do they have – for example, what vehicles are available?
 - **Human Resource Assessment.** Do they have social workers, medical professionals, etc., those whose skills might be valuable in outreach or response? Are there parishioners with experience in disaster response?
 - **Community Assessment.** What kind of relationship does the congregation have with the broader community? What kinds of outreach programs already exist and who do they work with?

Follow-up

- **We approach the assessment in two phases.** After the initial visit we return to churches that expressed an interest in preparedness and response. We ask what kind of support they want from the diocese – what training and resources they may need, and identify the specific assistance we can provide.
- **We support year-round outreach programs as a means to help prepare.** Successful outreach programs establish relationships with the more vulnerable members of the community. If we support congregations in these endeavors, when another disaster hits in the future, they can use these relationships and pre-established infrastructure to respond effectively.

All Saints, Ponchatoula:



After Hurricane Katrina, churches of several denominations worked together in Ponchatoula to provide support to evacuees living in shelters, and to help with other relief efforts. They found this shared ministry so effective that representatives of each congregation continue to gather once per quarter to share a meal and discuss how they might address pressing community needs. The churches take turns hosting these lunches, and the topic of conversation varies from session to session. Participants include both laity and clergy, which means that strong relationships are being formed across a wide swath of the faith community. These relationships and communication channels will prove invaluable the next time a crisis arises.

Additional Resources



For more information on preparing for disaster, please see the following online resources:

“How To: Winter Shelters”

Share your own disaster response stories or tips to help a community in need at www.episcopalrelief.org