

Disaster Response - Follow in Their Footsteps

CASE STUDY

On April 27, 2014, a tornado tore through central Arkansas, killing 16 people and causing significant property damage. Unfortunately, Arkansas is no stranger to severe weather. Because tornadoes were a likely hazard in their area, the Arkansas Episcopal Disaster Relief Team had met for months to prepare, and were ready to launch their response to the deadly storm.

In collaboration with diocesan leadership, other local responders and Episcopal Relief & Development, team members were able to assess the impact of the storm and determine where their efforts were most needed. Volunteers from seven churches responded by providing gift cards, offering spiritual support and running drop-in centers where individuals could connect with multiple forms of assistance. Youth groups were set to work removing debris from their communities. Response coordinators connected with bilingual volunteers to make a concerted effort to ensure that undocumented and non-English speakers were able to access services necessary to rebuild. A local church in Conway opened their doors to individuals in need of temporary housing. Now, after extensive relief efforts, the Arkansas Episcopal Disaster Relief Team has shifted its focus to long-term recovery so that it can continue to support the communities impacted by the storm.

The Arkansas Disaster Relief Team was able to initiate such thoughtful and enduring tornado response because it was able to mobilize a large constituency of passionate supporters before and during the disaster. Here are ways to activate your own network of enthusiastic contributors:

BEFORE DISASTER - BUILD RELATIONSHIPS

Pre-existing relationships with key stakeholders make it easier to obtain information and have focused conversations about response after a disaster.

- Start small and within your church family - Don't try to tackle everything right away. Gather a few people who feel truly called to disaster ministry. This cohort will take the initial steps that will lead to a broader preparedness effort. In Arkansas, we held house meetings for almost a year to establish a common vision and learn more about disaster relief.



BIOGRAPHY

The Arkansas Episcopal Disaster Relief Coordination Team comprises Ginger Bankston Bailey, Diocesan Disaster Coordinator (above); Jan Thames, Assistant Diocesan Disaster Coordinator; Rev. Lorrie Slaymaker, Pastoral Care Coordinator and Diane Brownlee, Long Term Recovery Coordinator.

FAST FACTS

DIOCESE: Episcopal Diocese of Arkansas

CHURCHES: 60

MEMBERS: 14,000

LOCATION: Central Arkansas

DISASTER TYPE: Tornado

DISASTER RELIEF: Mobilizing supporters, debris removal, gift cards, drop-in centers and pastoral care.

- Meet your responders – Government emergency managers, other organization leaders, firefighters and police officers were eager to share insights and tips for effectively responding to disasters. Meeting these people prior to a disaster helped us to better understand hazards in our region and allowed us to be more connected to the response efforts after the tornado struck.
- Use the gifts and connections of your community members – The individuals who are already active in community outreach are often the people best positioned for disaster response. In Arkansas, many of our team members have social media skills and relationships with schools and other services agencies. These relationships and skills were incredibly helpful after a disaster.

BUILD INTEREST

Once you have a core group of team members, look for opportunities to expand your network of supporters within your diocese. Investing in relationships early will help gather volunteers later on.

- Use conventions, resource days, and other gatherings – Use stories, photos, informational brochures and candy to provide a public witness for your disaster preparedness and response ministry
- Collect contact information – Gather the emails and telephone numbers of people who express interest in disaster relief.
- Now use that contact information! – Send out periodic updates and disaster preparedness information. We send out free brochures from FEMA at several points during the year, like updates about ice hazards in the winter and materials on tornado preparedness for storm season.

AFTER A DISASTER – ACTIVATE CONTACTS

- Reach out to your entire network – This includes diocesan leadership, responders, clergy, other community organizations and folks who expressed interest at convention. Send out emails to potential supporters detailing volunteer opportunities, prayer requests and how to donate funds and needed supplies.
- Electronic, print and phone updates – Use existing social media and diocesan newsletters to regularly communicate progress and volunteer opportunities. Follow up with personal calls to key supporters.

RAISE VISIBILITY

- Connect with your diocesan communications officer or administrator and ask to add a disaster ministry page to the diocesan website.

CRANKING UP DIOCESAN CONVENTION PRESENCE!

- Offer candy to lure people in. Try melty peppermints!
- Create a display that includes images and other visual aids such as items to have on hand in the event of emergency.
- Have a disaster responder share their personal stories.
- Collect the names and contact information of people who stop by your booth.
- Engage passers-by with questions about how they would respond to potential hazards.
- Provide basic information about disaster preparedness.
- After convention, don't just send out one email! Provide ongoing information and support to the people that you met.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

For more information and resources for mobilizing your network of supporters, take advantage of these resources:

- “How to: Building Relationships for Response” - Diocese of Louisiana
- The Arkansas Episcopal Disaster Relief Team’s Disaster Relief News <http://episcopalarkansas.org/our-ministries/disaster-relief/>
- To order free publications from FEMA <http://www.ready.gov/publications>

- Interview clergy and lay people who have responded to disasters and ask them why they engage in this ministry. Write up their stories as blog posts for your website.
- Don't be afraid to ask for more help from your volunteers, community leaders and other supporting organizations.
- Advertise opportunities for future disaster preparedness training to your volunteers to maintain the relationships that you've worked so hard to build.