

# US DISASTER PROGRAM

## 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 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 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.

Ironically, 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

Communicate that worship will happen and when and where it will be. Some congregations have pre-identified a back-up site in their preparedness plan. 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

Respect vulnerability and provide 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

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### FAST FACTS

#### CONGREGATION

Episcopal Church of the Ascension

#### CONGREGATION SIZE

About 200 households

#### LOCATION

Sierra Madre, CA

#### AREA POPULATION

10,000

#### DISASTER TYPE

Earthquake

worship will be held. And be attentive to the need for emotional “safe space.”

## 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. One congregation took the opportunity to gather around a piano and sing their favorite hymns. 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.

## BE READY FOR NEWCOMERS

In the wake of a disaster, people often seek out community. They may be looking for answers as to why “this happened.” They may have a newly discovered need to “belong somewhere.” They may be curious to see how others are coping. If the congregation is active in reaching out to assist its neighbors, people may respond to the Gospel being lived out. Whatever the reasons that may draw visitors and newcomers, a disaster can be an opportunity to welcome and embrace new members.

## UNDERSTAND THE EMOTIONAL LIFE CYCLE OF A DISASTER

Worship and preach to the emotional life-cycle of a disaster. Some disasters are short-lived and some take a long time for the “new normal” to emerge. Church leaders must attempt to be attuned to the emotional and spiritual condition of congregants, the congregation a whole, and the community at large. It is appropriate to address people’s frustration and exhaustion. Anticipating when longings will be at odds with reality will be 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. It may be that the celebration will 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 usable.

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](http://episcopalrelief.org/resourcelibrary).

## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

The Sunday After A Disaster  
Self-Care After A Disaster

View these and others at [www.episcopalrelief.org/resourcelibrary](http://www.episcopalrelief.org/resourcelibrary)