

Building the Diocesan Disaster Preparedness and Response Team

INTRODUCTION

Churches can be great in a crisis. By their very nature they have the capacity to gather people to common cause, to pray and facilitate hopeful and healing ritual and to offer hospitality and community outreach. Their coffee makers are large. They usually have a good supply of tables and chairs. And among their people are the kind of folks who roll up their sleeves and get things done.

Most importantly, churches are animated by the Gospel and its central call to see and serve Christ in society's most vulnerable members. When people are in danger of falling through the cracks, churches offer important safety nets, including a human one that embraces, supports, heals and loves.

When a disaster hits a community, churches have a unique role to play and a particular set of gifts to employ.

But mobilizing all these gifts on a congregational level during an unexpected crisis is no easy task. It works better with some preparation, with a vision of what effective response looks like and a sense of how to use the tools and gifts at hand as needs change on a community's road to recovery. Here the diocese has its own role to play, as a source of leadership and support and a clearinghouse for information and resources.

The mission of a Diocesan Disaster Preparedness and Response Team is to help the diocese and its congregations activate a congregation's gifts of ministry when a disaster impacts vulnerable people around them. And that requires some strategy, especially in places where churches are spread out, where communication is something of a challenge and where budgets are rather tight.

Building the Diocesan Preparedness and Response Team is designed to help diocesan teams develop the systems required to engage congregations in the ministry of disaster preparedness and response. It can be used in the initial development of a team as well as in the orientation of new team members.



ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Special thanks go to the many diocesan disaster coordinators and team members who have attended Episcopal Relief & Development's diocesan disaster coordinator trainings over the years. Your questions and comments, and your requests for resources to use at home, have shaped these exercises.

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6 PARISH-LEVEL DISASTER RESPONSE STORIES

The exercises were adapted from Episcopal Relief & Development's Level I Diocesan Disaster Coordinator Training. The resource is divided into three modules:

MODULE 1: Vision and Mission of the Diocesan Team. Through exercises that explore how the diocesan committee might support congregations in responding to a disaster, participants will determine the committee's vision and mission.

MODULE 2: Where Are We Now? And Where Do We Go From Here? By evaluating where the diocese is on a continuum of preparedness, participants will begin to develop a strategy on how to move the diocese forward.

MODULE 3: Parish-Level Disaster Response Stories. By listening to first-hand accounts of how local parishes have responded to disaster and crisis, participants will get a deeper understanding of skills and best practices already present in the diocese.

Depending on the time available, portions of these modules can be inserted into regular planning meetings or can be grouped into a series of 60 to 90-minute training sessions. An outside facilitator or a team member can lead the exercises. Suggested language is provided for introducing and unpacking the activities.

WHO SHOULD ATTEND THE SESSIONS?

The Diocesan Disaster Preparedness and Response Team may grow over time, but it's important to start with a core of diocesan and congregational leaders who are committed to fostering local disaster preparedness and response efforts. You might begin with four to six members who have experience with long-term disaster response, who are well connected with local congregations and who have relationships with vulnerable groups in the community and the network of organizations that serve them.

It's also important to have the buy-in of diocesan leadership. If a disaster hits a diocese, the bishop, the canon to the ordinary and the communications director will likely be heavily involved in initial diocesan-level response efforts. While it's not essential that these diocesan leaders sit on the team, it is important that they attend the first part of Module 1. Their input on the team's role and their thoughts on who can help shape the initial committee would be very helpful.



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FOLLOWING THROUGH ON DECISIONS

Some of the activities in these modules require the group to make decisions about issues such as its role and its membership. While formal minutes don't have to be taken, it's important that these decisions are captured, noted and shared with the members. Either the facilitator or a designated note taker should compile these and note if the group indicated any follow-up steps and who might accomplish them by what deadline.

Also make sure to save flip charts for reposting at future meetings, especially if the team will continue its work on an activity.

HOW CAN EPISCOPAL RELIEF & DEVELOPMENT HELP?

The role of Episcopal Relief & Development's US Disaster Program is to inspire, connect and equip leaders of the US Episcopal Church to prepare for hazards that might affect their communities, as well as mitigate the impact of those disasters and help vulnerable make a full and sustained recovery. Dioceses that sign on to our Disaster Preparedness Initiative can receive ongoing annual regional training for diocesan coordinators and team members (up to two people a year) and can also receive small grants and technical support for offering diocesan-level trainings. The Resource Library on Episcopal Relief & Development's website, www.episcopalrelief.org/resourcelibrary contains free, downloadable disaster training curricula as well as case studies of parish and diocesan best practices in disaster preparedness and response.

For more information on this or other resources please contact Barb Ballenger at bballenger@episcopalrelief.org. We welcome your questions as well as your suggestions for resources that will support your work in disaster preparedness and response.

MODULE 3: PARISH-LEVEL DISASTER RESPONSE STORIES

What experience do individual parishes in your diocese have with disaster response? This exercise invites people in your diocese who have responded to a disaster or crisis on the parish level to share their stories. Because most disaster response happens at a local, parish or congregational level, the experience invites the diocesan team to learn the local story. From there they can examine how the diocesan team can offer support to parishes, and they can also network with experienced people in the diocese.

TIME 60-75 MINUTES

GATHER THE STORIES

In Module 2 you asked the team to brainstorm people in the diocese who have experience with responding to a local disaster on the parish level. You determined how your group would like to gather their stories. Individuals could be invited to speak at your meeting in person or via Skype or conference call. Or committee members could interview them outside the meeting, and report the story to the committee.

Their stories should address:

- What happened and what the parish did to respond?
- What resources to respond were in place in the parish?
- What went well?
- What did they learn from the experience?

DISCUSS LESSONS LEARNED

After all the stories are gathered and shared, plan for a separate discussion or session that addresses:

- How were the different parishes we heard from prepared to respond? What elements of preparedness did they have in common?
- Consider the roles and vision that we determined for disaster response in our Module 1 meeting. Would our team have supported and encouraged these kinds of responses? How would we have responded to them?
- What can these parishes teach other parishes about preparedness, and how can we share their stories?
- How do the insights we've gathered from these stories shape or contribute to our goals as a committee this year or in the future?

Consider compiling summaries of the stories for team members for reference in the future. Make sure to note any important insights or action steps that come out of the discussion, as well.

