

Offering Worship When All Is Not Normal

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 so that the church could continue offering services until the building was repaired. Below are his reflections and suggestions on how to shape and maintain liturgy after a disaster.

Communicate that Worship Will Happen

If it's possible, reinstate regular Sunday worship as soon as possible, 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, 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 worship will be held. And be attentive to the need for emotional "safe space."

Celebrate & 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 other worshipping communities affected. A Public Service for Healing from the [Book of Occasional Services](#) and materials from [Enriching Our Worship](#) can be adapted to speak to the congregation's needs.

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 through 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.