

Preparing your congregation for a disaster

During a Disaster

What happens in a disaster?

In the moments, hours and even days surrounding a disaster, there is great concern for safety and preservation of life. Police and civil-defense forces are strained. Those affected by disaster seek temporary relief and assistance - often provided by the American Red Cross and Salvation Army. Respected community leaders, including clergy, can help guide survivors to assistance.

Disasters and human responses to them vary greatly. Generally there is great concern for safety and preservation of life. Most people, even the victims, are cooperative. Police and civil defense forces are strained. Some victims will deny that a disaster is taking place. Respected community leaders and clergy can help them deal with the reality of danger.

What happens after a disaster?

The relief process begins in the days following a disaster. Concerns for safety, life and health remain high priorities. Government and the American Red Cross are active. Other relief activities are organized. The church may offer immediate housing and feeding. Food supplies may be solicited and distributed.

Voluntary organizations (such as the Illinois Conference Disaster Readiness Ministry *DREAM Team*) begin to participate. The DREAM Team will bring all U.C.C. partners and local U.C.C. leaders together to share information and organize a skeletal plan of response for those affected by disaster in cooperation with fellow ecumenical and secular partners.

What happens in the recovery?

Focus changes from the disaster to the future. Homes are being rebuilt and repaired. Community committees for unmet needs are set up and begin to function. Plans are made for clothing, furniture and equipment while relief activities continue. The spirit of cooperation dissipates. A spirit of hope is critical.

What about long-term recovery?

Depending on the scope and scale of the disaster, recovery usually takes three to five years. Rebuilding continues but support diminishes as the event becomes old news. Congregations in the community still play an important role. Often disaster volunteer groups, organized through the Illinois Conference DREAM Team, are involved in the rebuilding.

Disaster victims experience grief

This may be expressed as denial, anger, depression and finally, acceptance. The church ministers through prayers, ritual and Scripture reading. Worship services should be restored immediately even in temporary or damaged facilities. The sacrament should be available, and the pastors should be identifiable (wearing their collars). Pastoral care should be publicized. The church may have to reach out to those who are in denial or depressed. Care should be extended to the caregivers (including pastors) who may also suffer grief as they deal with human loss.