



# Disaster Services

# CHURCH PREPAREDNESS

## & LOCAL RESPONSE GUIDE



CONVOY OF HOPE



**"Have no fear of sudden disaster or of the ruin that overtakes the wicked, for the LORD will be at your side and will keep your foot from being snared."**  
(Proverbs 3:25-26, NIV)

# WELCOME

When disaster strikes and chaos ensues, most congregations wish they had been better prepared for a major disaster. The daily needs of congregational life demanded the time, energy, and resources that could have been used to prepare. However, if church leaders will take the time to know the basics of disaster planning, they will at least have a framework to fill in the gaps after one hits.

**“Preach the word; be prepared in season and out of season; correct, rebuke and encourage—with great patience and careful instruction.” (2 Timothy 4:2)**

We don't have the capability to pick and choose when or where a disaster may strike. Because of this, it is important to be ready if we truly want to help those who have lived through a disaster. Since 1998, the Convoy of Hope Disaster Services team has responded to hundreds of disasters, both domestically and internationally. When our team deploys, the goal is to work through and elevate the local church as much as possible. We have seen that the Lord positions His church in the middle of the chaos to point people back to Jesus — the source of true hope.

Many churches want to engage and assist when a disaster or a small local emergency strikes, but they often do not have the experience or knowledge to do so effectively. We believe in the power of God to move through the local church, but we recognize that many churches may miss the full potential of how they can best respond and assist.

We fully recognize that no two disasters are alike, and a method that works for one church may not work for another. However, we have seen common threads of what makes a church well-prepared and ready to respond within their community. Here is a non-exhaustive list of ideas and practices to consider with your church staff, congregation, and facilities team before, during, and after a local emergency.



## Practice Awareness

Our team once called a church to see if they had been damaged in widespread flooding that had occurred in their area. They replied, “Flooding? Really? We had no idea there was flooding in our city.”

Be aware of impending weather. Have someone monitor the weather and the news for your community. Learn what areas of the community are more susceptible to certain issues like flooding or power outages. See the “Continuing Education & Weather Monitoring” section of this guide for more information.

## Make Adjustments Based on Past Experience

What disaster-related experiences have you had in your community? How did your church respond? Was your staff organized? Was the response efficient? How was the communication within the congregation? What worked well? What didn’t work well?

As a rule, disasters are chaotic. However, there is great value in taking a step back after a disaster and objectively looking at what your church did and whether it was “organized chaos” or just “general chaos.” Be encouraged by what worked, but most importantly, be educated by what didn’t work. Assess and adapt.

## Develop & Maintain a Church Culture of Service

God’s chosen vehicle of help and hope is the local church. We have seen over the years that during times of a local emergency, the behavior of a church is always going to stay true to its normal pattern. If a church has a consistent culture of service, it will engage during a heightened time of need.

## Stay Connected with City Leadership

Having established relationships with city leadership — including the mayor, police chief, fire chief, and public works — prior to a disaster is pivotal for many reasons. They will have useful knowledge during a community emergency related to safety, curfews, road closures, the status of public water supply, the coordination of relief supplies, and knowledge of those who are in need. The stronger the relationship between church and city leadership, the greater the opportunities for the church to be at the forefront of help and hope during a time of a local emergency.



## Don’t Be an Island

It is important to have a healthy relationship with local service-oriented ministries, agencies, and organizations. Look for opportunities to collaborate in an effort to serve the various needs of the whole community and prevent unnecessary duplication of services.

## Communicate with Your Congregation

The consistent, clear, and accurate transmission of information with your congregation is incredibly important. This is true before, during, and after a time of crisis. Utilize communication tools that will work best for the culture of your congregation, whether it be a combination of social media platforms, emails, or an old-fashioned phone tree.

## Incident Command Structure

There is a world of knowledge and protocols under which emergency services operate. While it can be overwhelming at times to try and understand everything, it is beneficial for churches to have a basic understanding of the Incident Command Structure, the National Incident Management System, and the terminology they both use. For more information, refer to the “Industry Knowledge” section of this guide.



## Assign Roles

In keeping with the “Active & Inactive Response Structure” and “Role & Function” resources that accompany this guide, assign roles to key individuals if you have not already done so. Establishing key people in designated roles will help strengthen internal and external communication.

Establish someone to be the point person during times of a local emergency or disaster. This individual should be an independent decision-maker with the authority to make quick judgment calls. On our team, we call this role the Field Operations Director.

Once the lead point person is identified, begin to assign roles and responsibilities to leadership team members and church staff. For example, the building manager could be assigned to supervise facility preparation before a disaster strikes. This does not mean that they will perform all necessary tasks but instead will serve as the lead contact for those types of activities in an emergency.

## Know the Needs of Your Congregation

Many parishioners have no one but the local church to turn to in times of disaster. Before a disaster strikes, determine who your vulnerable parishioners are so you can establish a plan for helping them in a time of need.

Pastoral, administrative, and volunteer staff may know which congregants have medical disabilities. These individuals are particularly vulnerable when their services or the tools required for their needs are interrupted or cut off. For more information, see the section on “Congregational Preparedness.”



## Realize You Are a Conduit

You're a conduit — a way for the Lord's love to flow into a community. As you look to serve your community in the midst of a local disaster, pray with faith and expectancy. When a need arises — whether spiritual, emotional, physical, or operational — tell the Lord. Psalm 37:23 (NLT) says, “He delights in every detail of their lives.”

Time and time again, we've heard stories of churches who stepped out in obedience, doing what “little” they could, and the Lord honored their efforts.

## Take Care of Yourself & Your Team

The emotional, physical, and spiritual health of you and your team is of utmost importance. Working in unity comes out of a state of good health. Part of preparedness is promoting good boundaries and health practices among team members so they're ready when a storm comes.

Your team will be working extended hours, and there will be a certain level of general chaos as you process the situation and sort out your new roles and functions. Not only will they be connecting daily with people who are working through tragedy, there's also the likelihood that your team's homes and families could be directly affected. Being active in a community that has experienced a large disaster always takes a toll on the mind and body.

The enemy is relentless in looking for opportunities to bring disunity. He does his best work when we are tired and overwhelmed with needs and decisions that present themselves. It is important to recognize it, prepare for it, call attention to it, and give everyone around you an extra bit of grace as you work together through it.

After a disaster, ensure that your team is recovering and processing what happened in a healthy way. Make rest a priority. It's one thing to make it through a response. It's another thing to have your team alive, healthy, and unified by the end of it.





## Embrace Humility

*“Good judgement is the result of experience and experience the result of bad judgement.”*

—Mark Twain

You probably have experience in making decisions, and people follow. However, it’s healthy and acceptable to acknowledge that you may not always know what the best course of action may be, especially when navigating a crisis. Responding to disasters is usually new territory for church leadership, and we encourage you to be humble, accept words of wisdom and advice, and collaborate with those who have more experience in this area.

## Know Your Team & Know Your Lane

Different team members are going to have different strengths and weaknesses. Knowing your team members’ gifts will enable your structure to function better. Some will be much more relational, while others will prefer to work with equipment and physical aspects of the ministry. Having team members in the appropriate places where they can use their gifts well will decrease the potential of burnout.

In the midst of a crisis, the needs will be many, and one person or church can’t do it all. For best practice, the lane of service you identify to pursue should align with the current mission and vision of your church. It is wise to establish parameters in which you can work with excellence. For more information on staff roles and responsibilities, look to the accompanying “Active & Inactive Response Structure” and “Role & Function” resources.

## Ask Questions

There are countless variables and unknowns involved with disaster response. We highly suggest that you take on the mindset of living in a state of learning. We encourage your church to ask questions and listen. Wise decision making is contingent upon accurate and validated information.

## Maintain & Prepare Your Facilities

Routine and preventive maintenance can help minimize the damage done to a church facility during a disaster. Insurance claims can be denied if routine maintenance issues are allowed to go unresolved; think of it as a “pre-existing condition.” It is imperative that church property, such as buildings and grounds, have routine maintenance checks to resolve problems as soon as they appear. See the “Prepare Your Facilities” section of this guide for more information.





# CONGREGATIONAL PREPAREDNESS

## A large storm hit your town 48 hours ago ...

- *There is an apartment complex nearby mainly occupied by the elderly. However, it is not classified as an assisted living facility. The building lost power during the first few hours of the storm, and it has not been restored yet. An elderly lady who has attended your church's prayer group for the past 30 years lives there. She uses a walker and lives on the third floor. All of her food has spoiled in her refrigerator. She normally has someone who comes and helps her during the day with medical treatments, but they have not come since the storm hit. Her children all live out of state. And it's the middle of August.*
- *A single mother of three who has one child in diapers just started going to your church a few months ago, but only when she's not working on Sundays. She was unable to get her last paycheck before the storm hit and can't go shopping for supplies. The stores have been closed since the storm hit, and they aren't going to open for another week.*
- *Marco and his two little sisters attended a Bible school that your church hosted in their neighborhood. His family has started coming to your church, and their home was damaged by the storm. His mother is 8 months pregnant, and his father works night shifts. Marco and his sisters are the only ones in their family who are fluent in English.*

## These are all real situations we've seen while responding to a disaster.

Galatians 6:10 (NLT) says, "Therefore, whenever we have the opportunity, we should do good to everyone — especially to those in the family of faith."

Pastoral, administrative, and volunteer staff may know which congregants have medical disabilities that make them reliant on electricity for homebound medical treatments. These individuals are particularly vulnerable when electrical service is interrupted for an extended period of time.

There are innumerable variables to consider before, during, and after disasters. Here are a few ways to get the conversation started within your church's leadership and congregation:

- Distribute the Family Preparedness Guide within your congregation.
- Host a CPR training night.
- Host a meal for local first responders to honor, bless, and pray for them. They are putting their lives on the line every day for people in your city and people in your own congregation.
- Identify populations in your church that may need assistance. Build relationships with those who are potentially more vulnerable before an emergency ever strikes.
- If a large local emergency were to strike, consider:
  - Who will be checking on the elderly of your congregation?
  - Who will be assisting the single moms?
  - How are you going to assist those in your congregation that need emergency power to keep their insulin cold or run their oxygen machine?



# CONTINUING EDUCATION & WEATHER MONITORING

## Courses

Your local Emergency Management Office may offer preparedness classes. The Salvation Army, American Heart Association, and the American Red Cross offer them, as well. Your city might have a CERT program or offer SKYWARN classes. We know many churches that have become host sites for these public services.

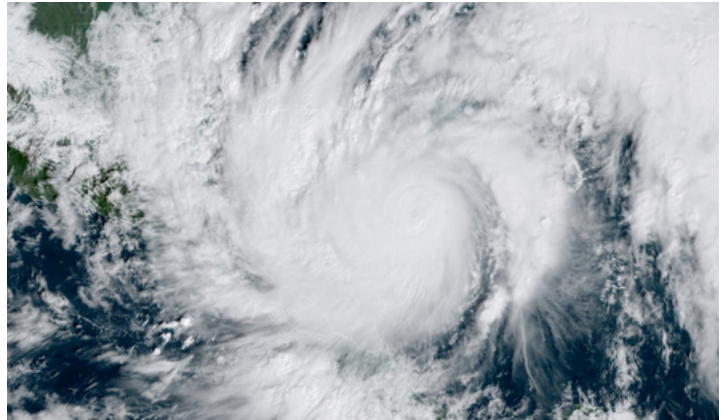
### *FEMA Emergency Management Institute*

FEMA offers a plethora of online courses free to the public through their Independent Study Program. For a complete list of courses that we recommend, see the “Recommended Courses and Screenings” handouts.

## Weather Monitoring

With mainstream media and social media, it can be difficult at times to determine which entities are reputable sources of weather information. Below are trusted open source websites and suggestions that our Disaster Services team uses.

- 1. National Storm Prediction Center**
- 2. USGS Earthquake Map**
- 3. National Hurricane Center**
- 4. River Gauge Forecast**
- 5. Spaghetti Models**



Believe it or not, Twitter is a great source of real-time data, provided you are following trusted sources of information. Sources like the ones mentioned above and Twitter accounts from the National Weather Service that are specific to your geographic region are great resources of information.



Make sure to familiarize yourself with your local fire or police departments’ Facebook pages. It is common for municipalities to use these pages to communicate public service announcements in times of local emergencies.





# INDUSTRY KNOWLEDGE

## Courses

We want to share some simple terms with you from the emergency management industry. Knowing these terms will aid in your communication with those in the emergency management profession. We also will use some of these terms throughout the guide.

## Four Phases

Every disaster moves in phases. Below is the terminology and definition of those phases.

### *Mitigation*

The first phase in the cycle is mitigation. This phase is about making wise decisions and having best practices in place before a disaster occurs. For example, before you build a house, you might make sure the land it's on isn't prone to flooding. Or, you might buy flood insurance so your ability to recover wouldn't be as bad if it did flood. Essentially, mitigation is anything you do that prevents a disaster from occurring or reduces its potentially harmful effects.

Mitigation also occurs after a disaster has taken place. To mitigate post disaster means to learn from what's happened and put practices in place to prevent the damage from being as bad if or when another disaster strikes.

### *Preparedness*

This phase also occurs before a disaster. Proper preparedness means taking steps to be as ready as you can when handling an emergency. While mitigation is about creating an environment where a disaster won't happen — or won't be as bad — preparedness is about having a plan to respond when something does happen. Our "Family Preparedness Guide" is a great place to start in the process of preparing.

### *Response*

This phase occurs during an emergency. Something has happened, and now you are putting your preparedness plans into action. For example, if a tornado siren is going off, you should respond by making sure all the members of your family are safely in your tornado shelter.

### *Recovery*

This phase occurs after the disaster. It concerns taking steps to restore what was damaged and to get things back to normal.

## Damage, Safety & Needs

Damage, safety, and needs are three things that exist in every disaster. At the same time, these same three things are always different in every disaster. Here are examples of how they can exist and yet be different.

### *Damage*

Smaller tornadoes will create tree and roof damage, while floods can cause damage of household items and roadways at a ground level.

### *Safety*

Flash flooding can escalate quickly, causing immediate safety issues within a small geographic area. The trajectory of a hurricane is more predictable and slow moving, which allows more time to prepare and evacuate from the larger geographic area it will affect.





### *Needs*

A power outage in Northern states during the winter months will produce needs for warmth and shelter, whereas a power outage in the South during the summer will produce needs of cooling stations and ways to keep insulin cold. Needs vary by disaster, timing, duration, and location.

## **Four Cs**

Within the world of volunteer organizations, there is a nationwide organization called the National Voluntary Organizations Active in Disasters (NVOAD). They encourage the “Four Cs” of coordination, collaboration, cooperation, and communication.

### *Coordination*

Coordination means having efficient protocols and practices of interacting both internally with your own ministry and externally with other ministries in order to maximize efforts. Coordinating ahead of time helps assign different areas of ministry focus and prevents the over extending of certain ministries.

### *Collaboration*

When possible, do things together. If you have the capabilities and another ministry has equipment, work together.

### *Cooperation*

Play nicely within your own ministry and with other ministries. Strive to be Kingdom-minded and not territorial. God will even greatly use non-faith-based organizations to bring practical help to people in a time of need.

### *Communication*

Keep all of your people and key players current on what’s going on. At the appropriate time, keep your external relationships posted on your activity.

When working inside or outside of your church, fostering the Four Cs is far more biblical and Kingdom-minded than one would initially think. Work well with other organizations and be the church that sets the standard for the whole city.





# PREPARE YOUR CHURCH FACILITIES

## Routine Maintenance

To routinely provide maintenance for your church grounds and buildings, you should:

- Check roofs and foundations annually. If the roof is leaking or the foundation has problems, schedule them for repair.
- Test smoke detectors annually. If the alarms are battery operated, replace batteries annually.
- Inspect HVAC equipment annually. If the HVAC needs maintenance, schedule it for repair.
- Have an electrician inspect the wiring, power connection, and circuit boxes annually.
- Inspect water heaters annually.
- Provide backups and surge protection for all power sources.
- Clean out gutters and drains annually.
- Maintain grounds and fences.
- Trim all trees away from church rooflines annually.
- Check the security of canopies and covered walks on a regular basis.
- Ensure church vehicles have updated preventive maintenance.
- Ensure jumper cables are on hand.

## Beyond Routine Maintenance

Thunderstorms that bring high winds, hail, lightning, and heavy rain are common occurrences in many parts of the U.S. and can cause significant damage. Remember, hours of preparation can save days of cleanup and restoration.

Depending on the type of disaster, individuals responsible for preparing the church facility will need to know what utility lines should be turned off to prevent damage.

If severe weather is forecasted, use the following checklist as a guide to reduce the risk of unnecessary damage.

- Close blinds and curtains to minimize damage from broken windows.
- If possible, position computers and other electronic equipment away from windows.
- File and secure all papers, books, and archival materials.
- Cover computers and furniture with heavy plastic to prevent wind and rain damage from broken windows. Elevate computer towers off the floor if computers are located on the ground floor.
- If high winds are anticipated:
  - Board vulnerable windows.
  - Remove outside furniture and store it inside.
  - Remove rooftop satellite dishes.
- Check the integrity of storage sheds, and close and lock the doors.
- Check the security of all doors.
- Check attic spaces and windows for leaking after every storm.









## Recommendations for Storing & Protecting Church Records from Fires or Floods

- Store inactive records in filing cabinets or in boxes on shelves.
- Piling loose documents on shelves increases the risk of fire and other potential loss.
- Store records in clean, well-lit, and well-ventilated areas that are free from pests.
- Equip storage areas with a fire extinguisher and, if possible, a fire suppression system.
- Prohibit smoking, eating, and drinking in the storage areas.
- Limit and control access to storage areas containing church records.
- Store important records, books, and marriage licenses in a fireproof safe or cabinet.
- The procedure may be church-specific within their constitution and bylaws.
- Keep current and detailed records (with pictures) of all valuable equipment and assets for insurance purposes.

## Have a Church Preparedness Kit

It's a good idea to have a few things on hand in case of an emergency. A Church Preparedness Kit can be made up of many things. We suggest that it at least contains:

-  **An NOAA weather radio**
-  **Jumper cables**
-  **Water**
-  **Nonperishable food items**
-  **Flashlights and batteries**
-  **A first-aid kit**





# SPIRITUAL CARE IN DISASTER

Disasters can shake anyone’s sense of meaning and well-being. That’s why everyone affected can benefit from receiving spiritual care, regardless of whether they are the person suffering loss or a response worker.

Disaster-prompted spiritual care is a process that people who are affected by a disaster go through to draw upon their background of faith, hope, community, and meaning — bolstering their recovery.

A recent survey by the International Critical Stress Foundation found that 59% of disaster survivors preferred to receive support from a religious counselor or clergy member (NVOAD, 2018). Comparatively, 45% preferred support from a physician and 40% sought help from a mental health professional.

## Humility & Practical Presence

### *Humility*

Humility involves having an accurate view of our strengths and weaknesses. It helps us stay “others focused.” Scripture is clear that humility is essential to service. In Mark 9:35, Jesus instructs his disciples, “Anyone who wants to be first must be the very last, and the servant of all.” He also preaches publicly in Matthew 23:11-12, saying, “The greatest among you will be your servant. For those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.”

### *Practical Presence*

Simply put, practical presence means “being there.” It focuses on meeting immediate physical needs through a safe, supportive presence. Spiritual care providers can offer a quiet presence, a calming word of hope, and a simple prayer of assurance to people as they share about their loss, anger, and pain.

## Additional Training

Trained spiritual care responders are important and can be effective in the healing and recovery process after a disaster. However, training is essential. For more resources on the topic, visit these websites:

- K-LOVE Crisis Response Care  
<https://www.crisisresponse.org>
- International Critical Incident Stress Foundation, Inc (ICISF)  
<https://icisf.org/sections/education-training/course-descriptions>

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NVOAD. (2018). Light our way: A guide for spiritual care in times of disaster.  
[https://www.nvoad.org/wp-content/uploads/light\\_our\\_way\\_2018\\_final-published-copy.pdf](https://www.nvoad.org/wp-content/uploads/light_our_way_2018_final-published-copy.pdf)

