

“One of the questions I have found myself asking lately is how we can reclaim the ancient idea of the common good. In times of adversity, how can we respond in a way that promotes and preserves our best values? Using the backdrop of disaster preparedness, this book tells how individuals, congregations, and communities have worked together to respond in times of tragedy and crisis. It is a great resource for people of faith to know how best to love and serve their neighbors.”

—Jim Wallis, Sojourners

“I am delighted to hear about the release of *Help and Hope: Disaster Preparedness and Response Tools for Congregations*. When I read through the list of contributing writers, I knew the text would be rich with ‘best known solutions.’ The diverse experience of the writers have experienced firsthand the importance of preparing congregations, and I strongly recommend all faith leaders invest in the time to read the wisdom imparted within the text.”

—Jono Anzalone, The American Red Cross

“As people of faith, we are compelled to heal a hurting world. However, it is more apparent than ever that we need strong relationships and the proper tools to accomplish this. Church World Service is a leader in this effort, training faith based partners in disaster preparedness, response, and recovery. *Help and Hope* is yet another example of this worthwhile and timely effort, providing direction and advice to those congregations who wish to prepare for ministry to those affected by disaster.”

—Keith Adams, Episcopal Dioceses of New Jersey and Newark

“*Help and Hope* is a much-needed resource that has been long-awaited. Penned by skilled ministers and practitioners, this practical guide is for both ordained and lay ministers alike. Here you glimpse the gritty work of post-trauma ministry through real-life illustrations, useful questions that lead to actionable next steps, and roadmaps for planning meaningful worship, practicing care, and envisioning mission after trauma. If you and your congregation are discerning your roles in the aftermath of disaster, this will be a helpful companion. More books like this one are needed in the coming years as congregations continue to embrace their capacities to be catalysts for healing after trauma.”

—Kate Wiebe, Institute for Congregational Trauma and Growth (ICTG) and Presbyterian Disaster Assistance (PDA)

SAMPLE

Help AND
HOPE

DISASTER PREPAREDNESS
AND **RESPONSE TOOLS** FOR
CONGREGATIONS

AMY GOPP
BRANDON GILVIN
EDS.



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PRESS

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Foreword

Help and Hope: Disaster Preparedness and Response Tools for Congregations is an indispensable tool for faith communities to prepare for the critical role they can play when disasters impact their hometowns. This resource provides what the disaster relief and emergency response field has been missing and what North American communities of faith have needed—guidance on how to be an asset rather than an obstacle when assisting those who have been affected by disaster.

Twice when I was a teenager, my family’s home and business suffered major damage from flooding and high winds caused by hurricanes that traveled up the East Coast of the United States. Those early experiences shaped my understanding of how important “community” is in such moments. But they also taught me how well-intentioned offerings can become an obstacle in recovering from a major disaster. I learned that some ways of helping are actually more helpful than others.

The most effective recovery occurs when the individuals, families, and communities affected by a disaster play an integral role in determining their own recovery process. Families and communities need to know which resources are available to them and which will be the best tools for recovery. Government assistance for disaster survivors abounds, but accessing it is often a challenging, lengthy, and frustrating experience. Community support, especially through faith-based organizations, is often the most helpful factor in supporting individuals and families who are journeying to recovery.

As my own family learned years ago, and which has been reinforced to me in my professional experience coordinating emergency response and disaster programs, the first step is to “expect the unexpected.” If and when a disaster occurs, those who are affected by it are best-served when faith communities are well-informed and prepared to function as advocates, spiritual care givers, donors, and support networks.

During my family’s brush with disaster, our home had flooded and a group from a local church spent four days helping us “mud out” and power-wash the lower level of our home. I’ll never forget my father’s heartfelt words to the volunteers: “I can’t tell you how much your help has meant to us. This felt like an impossible job.”

What could be more important than helping someone accomplish what feels discouragingly impossible? As faith-based communities, that is our calling in times of disaster. Through the guidance and expertise offered in this book, I invite you to be better prepared to care for those affected by disaster.

Donna J. Derr
Director, Development and Humanitarian Assistance
Church World Service

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Preface

Disasters: the “expected” unexpected. But how might we expect what is always, necessarily, and unfortunately unexpected? Whether a freak storm or a school shooting, disasters surprise us. They shock us. Almost without exception, they catch us off guard, unaware, unsuspecting, and unequipped. Even the most earnest attempts by experts—in the fields of meteorology, environmental science, economics, sociology, and international relations—to predict potential crises do not safeguard us from the crises occurring, of course. Nor do these predictions change our expectations about what could happen. There is no way around it: disasters, by nature, are simply unexpected. For most of us in the North American context, the possibility of disaster striking—either natural or human-caused—is not on our day-to-day radar screens.

Expecting and preparing are two vastly different notions, however. While we know, intellectually, to expect disasters, we rarely do. Yet they still occur, and they feel unexpected to us. But we *can* prepare for disasters. We cannot necessarily prevent them, but we can prepare for them. We can act proactively to inform, organize, and equip ourselves for when an emergency will inevitably take place. Thus, this resource.

After eight intensive years on the staff of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)’s relief and development ministry, I have learned not only to expect the unexpected, but, more importantly, to prepare for it. I also quickly learned that one of my primary tasks is to help others prepare for the expected unexpected. I was to begin my new position with Week of Compassion—the relief, refugee, and development mission fund—on September 1, 2005. I actually began on August 29—in the throes of Hurricane Katrina. There was no time to waste—not even the three days between the 29th and the 1st. Too much work needed to be done: too many pastors to call, congregations to visit, funds to raise, and cleanup to begin. Eventually there would be far too many houses to gut out, mold to scrub, debris to clear, church members to console, families to comfort, solidarity grants to send, ecumenical meetings to coordinate, long-term recovery groups to organize, and stories to tell. There would be stories of sadness and suffering, as well as stories of faith and fortitude.

They would be stories of disaster and all that encompasses it—both the hardship and the hope.

The help we offer one another during times of disaster enables us to handle the hardship and provides us with hope to hold on for the future. What is most important is understanding *how* to help.

All disasters, by definition, are local. They are contextual. They happen in a certain place, at a specific time, and are always unique and different from any other disaster that has ever occurred. Yet there are commonalities present in all catastrophes, and, thus, common ways to respond. So what are those best practices? When is it most useful to offer assistance? What kinds of assistance are most needed? Who is best suited to offer that assistance? Because all disasters are indeed local, what is the role, if any, of outside assistance? How appropriate are material donations such as food, clothing, and other items? When, if ever, is the optimal time for unskilled volunteers to reach out during a disaster? Most pointedly for the purposes of this project, how might congregations and other faith communities stock their disaster response toolboxes? How are faith communities uniquely positioned to respond to individuals and communities post-disaster? What are the tools most appropriate and distinctive among congregations to enable them to offer both help and hope?

As the world witnesses the devastating, and, in many cases, irreversible, effects of climate change, it has become increasingly clear that the sheer number of natural (or so-called “natural”) disasters is on the rise. Tornadoes are touching down in France for the first time in history. Airplane turbulence is consistently stronger, and flights are crossing anything but “friendly” skies. Record snowfalls in areas of the U.S. Midwest are ushering in summer. Hurricanes such as Sandy caught everyone in Atlantic City, across the Jersey Shore, and through New York City to Staten Island completely by surprise, also affecting the Caribbean countries and 24 states from Florida to Maine and even into Canada. This hurricane spawned the phrase, “super-storm”—a fitting name in a time when severe weather is becoming the norm. While political debates concerning the causes of climate change continue, what is certain is that the disasters are frequent, more destructive, and demand a more sophisticated and premeditated response.

This book aims to equip congregations with the tools necessary to respond to natural disasters, and to offer guidance to faith communities as they cope with other human-caused crises. Just as severe weather and changing weather patterns seem to be causing more natural disasters, the world’s ever-changing and struggling economies, political instability, ethnic strife, and increasing demands for natural resources also lead to tremendous human need and suffering. Hunger, poverty, displacement,

disease, violent conflict, and war are plaguing humanity. For many Americans, news of yet another mass shooting no longer seems surprising. It no longer feels safe to run a marathon, or go to the cinema to see a movie, or send your child to school—even in higher income and seemingly immune communities.

Regardless of the type, each disaster, by definition, causes harm. Each disaster affects the well-being of Creation. Peoples' lives are impacted. Changed. In some tragic cases, lost. In all cases, disasters merit a response.

Consider this book your disaster response toolbox. A nuanced look at all aspects of any emergency response, this resource offers practical tips for any individual, group, layperson, ordained clergy, youth, or mature adult to become better informed and equipped to react during and after disaster strikes. All the practical tips and tools inside these pages have been applied. They have been tested and can be trusted—offered to you, the reader, as part of the contributors' lived experiences. Insight is offered from theological, pastoral, spiritual, psychosocial, psychological, liturgical, and ecological perspectives. Experts in spiritual and emotional care, trauma healing, children's psychology, congregational life, pastoral care—and in the disaster, emergency response, and humanitarian sector—offer vital information for how anyone can not only respond to a disaster but also, and just as importantly, prepare for a disaster.

With this hope of preparedness, we commend these pages of practical and powerful information, insights, and inspiration. None of the contributors to this book ever expected to experience a disaster, let alone be so changed by it that they would eventually offer tips on how to prepare and respond. The question is not, "Will a disaster strike my community?" It is, rather, "When disaster strikes my community and affects my life, how might I be best prepared to respond to it?"

The answers to that very question lie inside. Prepare to expect the unexpected; it is holy work.

Amy Gopp
June 26, 2013

Amy Gopp is director of member relations and pastoral care for Church World Service. An ordained pastor in the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), she formerly served as executive director of Week of Compassion.

The Expected Unexpected

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Prepare to Be Changed

What Happens to a Disaster-Affected Congregation

JILL CAMERON MICHEL

Early on the morning of August 6, 2012, a fire burned west of Joplin, Missouri. Even though the fire department responded quickly, all that remained as the sun rose that morning was the smoldering remains of a building—the building that housed the Islamic Society of Joplin.

In the days that followed the fire, something amazing happened in Joplin. People came together in support of our Muslim friends and neighbors. Several faith communities whose leaders had worked with the local imam (the Islamic faith leader) in the past hosted an Iftar dinner (it happened to be the holy month of Ramadan) at the local Episcopal Church and invited the Muslim believers to hold prayers in the parlor. A student at the local Bible college started planning a community event of support. On the Sunday after the fire, many of us came together to place a full page ad in the local newspaper that read, “Deeply saddened by recent events, the faith communities of the Joplin area stand by our neighbors from the Islamic Society in their time of tragedy. We believe that ‘Love thy Neighbor’ has no restrictions.” Listed on that ad were over one hundred names, primarily of pastors and faith communities: Roman Catholic and mainline Protestant, Jewish, Baha’i, Pentecostal and others.

Jill Cameron Michel is an ordained minister in the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) who has served congregations in Missouri, Kentucky, and Kansas. A decade into her ministry at South Joplin Christian Church in Joplin, Missouri, she had the challenge and privilege of pastoring that community in the aftermath of Joplin’s May 2011 tornado.

Looking at the list of signatures on this statement, I was aware that not only did support cross lines of faith, but even among the Christian partners (which were the majority) were those whose differences kept them from coming to the communion table together and whose understandings would make them hard-pressed to put their names on a single statement about Jesus.

As I surveyed the names, I couldn't help but be aware that this list was likely much different than it would have been just fifteen months earlier.

* * * * *

On May 22, 2011, an EF-5 tornado tore through Joplin. When people emerged from the rubble, or when they went into the tornado-devastated path searching for a family member or wanting to help someone in need, the lines of division that usually play a role in how we relate had all but disappeared. When shouting the name of a person not yet found, no one asked if that person was black or white; no one asked if they were Christian, Jewish, Muslim, or atheist. Politics and economics did not matter when combing through rubble. In the aftermath of that tornado we learned something about what really makes a community.

Changes of heart are worthy of celebration. However, these are not the only changes that occur in the face of disaster. We also learned how to prepare for that which we hope never happens. We learned is that, in some ways, we were more prepared than we realized. In other ways, we could have been better prepared. Today we know that the more prepared we are—whether or not we ever face disaster again—the better our ministry, even our routine and expected ministry, will be.

* * * * *

5:41 p.m. is the official time the tornado hit Joplin. Not long after that, I learned that a particular family's home had been directly in its path. As the evening grew later and I managed to make it into town, the scope of damage began to set in. Even a week later, after long days trying to connect with congregation members, I was still discovering damaged neighborhoods that I had not even known that I needed to be concerned about. Within a congregation that averages fewer than one hundred people on Sunday mornings, we had more than fifteen families who lost their homes, and countless others who experienced varying degrees of damage. With homes destroyed, telephone lines out, and fewer cell towers standing, locating people was difficult. Weeks later, we were still searching for one man from our congregation. For those who lost their homes, apartments were few and far between. Even finding someone who could suggest available housing proved to be difficult.

Months later, as people settled into new homes and made plans for the future, and as damaged homes were repaired; we started to ask our members for information for the church directory: address, phone number, birth date, and e-mail address. We also added some new questions:

Who is your local emergency contact person?

Who is your out-of-town emergency contact person?

Where would you go in case of emergency?

These questions not only prepare us for natural disasters, but will also prove helpful in health crises and other unforeseen events. See a sample Family Information Form available for download on the Help & Hope page of chalicepress.com.

* * * * *

Not only were families in our church directly impacted, but our church building also sustained damage. Although not in the direct path of the tornado, it stood close enough to the funnel's winds to fall victim to their force. The roof was torn off and windows were broken out. For two days, rain poured into the building. The nearly completed task of a recent capital campaign had to be restarted and an additional 50 percent of the interior had to be gutted.

This presented several problems for our congregation and others like us. First, where would we meet? Clearly, meeting in our building was not possible. However, our sister congregation across town welcomed us without question. The pastor of that congregation pulled a table into her office to give me my own desk. Worship times were negotiated, Sunday school space was shared. Even though our congregations hadn't had a significant relationship prior to the tornado (other than being part of the same denomination), the arrangement worked easily, because of our historical connection and simply because of compassion.

So we had a place to meet. But no matter how good the hospitality was, we didn't want to be there forever. Again, preparation was important. Although none of us had expected a tornado, we had begun in recent years to take seriously the stewardship of our building. A few years earlier we had conducted an assessment of our facility and crafted a long-range plan for building improvements. Our recent capital campaign was the first in a plan that included three capital campaigns over ten to fifteen years. Thus, when it rained in our sanctuary, we were not without a plan. The tornado did not force us to ask for the first time with what we would replace our nearly forty-year-old blue carpet. It was not the first occasion for conversation about improving our worship or education space.

When the time came to begin putting the church back together, we were *ready*. We did not have to spend months wondering or dreaming about what that might look like. We did not have to spend time—which was in high demand in a community in the midst of recovery—meeting to determine what we could and could not change. We also did not find ourselves making decisions out of fear or desperation or sheer exhaustion. We had a plan in place. Yes, there were still decisions to be made, but, for the most part, those decisions could be entrusted to a small group of people.

Another important piece of this equation was insurance. If you are a property chair or a trustee of a church or even, like me, the pastor, read your insurance policy. Know your coverage. Do not make the mistake of skimping on insurance as a cost-cutting measure because you hope a disaster might never happen to you. It might have never happened to us—but it did. We were fortunate to have excellent coverage from an excellent company specializing in insuring churches.

Because we had excellent coverage, we knew how we would put our church back together, and we were able to create a more welcoming space that was better suited to the ministries to which we are called.

And, in the midst of many physical concerns—about both people and property—spiritual concerns are a constant. I realized that the way we talk about God on usual days makes a difference in how we are able to help people understand God through the days that are unexpectedly difficult. When I have talked about my understanding of God, I have often wondered if my theology would stand up to my tragedy. And I am grateful for each day that I do not really need the answer to that question. I am also aware that the question has to be asked. For, when the winds blow and carry away all evidence of people's history; when waters rise and drown out the memories; when unexpected tragedy occurs, people need to know the love and comfort of God.

In the face of disaster, tremendous and unavoidable changes occur. Some, such as learning that we are all more alike than different, are simply gifts. Others, such as locating people, finding temporary space, remodeling or rebuilding buildings, and developing a theology that works in tragedy, are things for which we can prepare. Taking the time to prepare, even if a disaster never strikes, will serve your congregation—and your entire community—well.

QUESTIONS

1. Where would you go in case of disaster? Who knows your plan?

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2. What intentional communication within your church ensures that people share these plans? If this is not happening, what can you do to help it happen?
3. When was the last time your congregation did a serious assessment of its facilities? Do you have a long-range building plan? What would it take to create a plan if suddenly you had to remodel or rebuild your facility?
4. When was the last time your congregation's insurance policy was reviewed? Is it sufficient? Does someone in your congregation know the details of your policy well enough to negotiate a fair settlement?
5. How do you understand God's role in world crises? How do you talk about that? Is your understanding helpful both when things are going well and when disaster strikes?

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