

Disaster Preparedness for Parishes

(Based on Information from National Episcopal Relief and Development (ER-D))

Overview

A church cannot respond adequately to any disaster (emergency) without having anticipated its actions. Within the national Episcopal Church, planning is recognized as an important aspect of both diocesan and parish missions.

A disaster can be any event which has an effect on a parish or larger area. While earthquakes probably result in the most wide-reaching destruction, they are relatively rare events. Most likely is the loss of use of parish facilities. Additionally, floods, windstorms, snow, slides, wildfires and even a pandemic can affect many families not only from damage but also ancillary events such as disruptions in power, communications, and transportation. Moreover, disasters may affect only the immediate parish or community, or they can occur in other parishes and communities.

The Diocese of Oregon in the past several years has been affected with the tsunami in Brookings, flooding in Marion and Linn Counties, wind and storm damage on the central west coast, and even a church arson. St. Alban's in Tillamook lost its facilities as the result of an arson.

To be ready to respond, parishes should develop a plan which, at a minimum, allows them to prepare for and respond to a loss of their facilities. Once this is completed, some parishes may want to identify assets (both personal and material, e.g., cooking facilities) which they can provide in a more widespread disaster. There are numerous tools available to assist with planning. These can be obtained through the Diocesan Disaster Coordinator, Richard Raub (DDCOregon@gmail.com) or through Episcopal Relief and Development (ER-D), (<http://www.episcopalrelief.org/press-and-resources/resource-library>)

With any plan, two tasks are critical. First is publication so that anyone in the parish can see it and even comment. Recommended is a notebook copy kept in the church office, and the second is a .PDF file made available online usually through the church website. Second, is scheduled (usually annual) review and update. Full support for planning needs to come from the rectors and vestry. It is not just a single person drawing a plan, but the work of many. That also helps with acceptance and continuity.

Introduction to Parish Planning

Parish disaster planning will help the parish prepare and respond more effectively and adequately. This will occur even if the plan relates only to loss of church facilities. A good plan is simple, written, assigns responsibilities, available to everyone. And regularly updated

The main ingredients in a good plan are:

- Sets forth objectives that will be met; then identify tasks to meet those objectives, how, when, and by whom.
- Identify specific tasks, e.g., backing up records, asset inventory.
- How to respond after the emergency, e.g., location of worship services, parishioner contact.
- Contains a process for updating.
- Makes the plan available.

Responsibilities for actions are shown by position (with back-up), e.g., senior warden, not a named person. The rector (vicar or priest-in-charge) normally will initiate response to an emergency and may undertake the actions, or delegate it to those named. In a larger-scale emergency, his or her main focus is likely to center on the spiritual needs of the congregation.

A good plan generally often comes from efforts of many people in the parish. Input and recommendations, and review are done in conjunction with the rector (vicar or priest-in-charge). A task force is likely to undertake the process. Their role may continue with the process of updating and, as needed, expanding the scope of the plan.

The Episcopal Church through its Episcopal Relief and Development Office has developed templates that are easy to use and provide guidance. There are both a basic level (“bronze”) and a comprehensive one. Both are also available on the Diocesan web site.¹

Summary of the Basic Plan

The Basic Plan contains eight sections. It is intended primarily for responding to loss-of-use of parish facilities. It also provides basic contact information for any emergency or disaster.

1. Basic parish information.
2. Emergency response contact information
3. Insurance information.
4. Parish staff contacts.
5. Alternate facilities for services and for business operations.
6. Parish groups serving others.
7. Secure storage of records and archives.
 - a. business/office records
 - b. financial records
 - c. church and archives
 - d. photographic and video inventories of assets²
8. Diocesan contact information.

Once the parish completes its basic plan and is comfortable with the process, it may consider what other responses are appropriate. Such response often consist of providing both physical

¹ Oregon Episcopal Diocese website under “Disaster Preparedness Program,” <http://www.diocese-oregon.org/disaster-preparedness-program/> “Templates and Resources”

² Suggestions for conducting photographic and video inventories and their updating are found in a document “Photographic and Video Inventory of Church Assets” located on the Oregon Episcopal Diocese, “Resources”, “Disaster Preparedness Program,” <http://www.diocese-oregon.org/disaster-preparedness-program/> “Resources” (under development).

and personal assets to assist either with the longer term response or recovery (note: initial response to a disaster often is handled solely by emergency services personnel and the Red Cross and Salvation Army). If the parish has some specific emergency services skills, e.g., medical, they should in addition to planning their use, make them known to the local emergency services and disaster agency (ESDA). Because the Diocese will be coordinating with statewide emergency services, these skills also should be provided to the Diocesan Disaster Coordinator. Examples of physical assets include facilities capable of providing hot meals or temporary shelter. Personal assets are as many as diverse. For example, one southern parish has people trained with completing government forms for obtaining rebuilding monies.

Regardless, a more comprehensive plan will specify the task, how the parish will prepare for it, who are the contacts, and how it will be performed. Because many of these assets may be needed outside the immediate parish, providing the Diocese with the comprehensive plan and additions will allow more effective implementation. Because the Diocese is a member of the Oregon Volunteer Organizations Assisting in Disasters (ORVOAD), the Diocese will share appropriate assets with this organization. The role of this organization is to coordinate the efforts of volunteer organizations to avoid too many groups trying to help.

The Diocesan Disaster Coordinator will provide assistance to parishes in all phases of planning. He also will be providing the parishes important information about disaster preparedness as it becomes available and is applicable. Finally, the Coordinator will try to provide training in aspects of disaster preparedness.

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