

The Religious Community  
as Disaster Educator

# *Planning, Prevention, & Mitigation*



**CHURCH WORLD SERVICE  
EMERGENCY RESPONSE PROGRAM**

# The Religious Community as Disaster Educator:

## *Planning, Prevention, & Mitigation*

As part of its disaster response, the religious community—concerned about the values of human life, human community, and the environment—will just naturally become involved in disaster planning, prevention, and risk-reduction on mitigation.

The focus reflects a paradigm shift from merely reacting and responding disasters. For the faith community, however, planning for, reducing the impact of, and actively preventing disasters—matters of systems analysis and engineering for other disaster responders—are matters of education and proclamation, holding up a vision, and influencing change in the tradition of Biblical prophets who called for a new city, a new dream, a new reality. They mean working to assure disaster recovery that provides immediate justice, helping survivors overcome their problems and not become victims. They mean working to make people and communities less vulnerable to disasters.

### *Some Basic Understandings*

The commonly used definition of a **disaster** contends that unless people and their possessions are adversely affected, a flood is just a flood; an earthquake is just an earthquake; a tornado is just a tornado. Disasters are events that cause human suffering and may result in human needs that survivors cannot alleviate without spiritual, monetary, material, or physical assistance.

**Hazards** are human or natural events or forces that cause disasters: hurricane, tornado, storms, flood, tidal waves, earthquake, fire, explosion, contamination, civil strife, war. They may or may not be recognized or acknowledged and may have existed for a long period of time or represent a new threat.

**Mitigation**, or risk reduction, is action which alleviates or reduces damages, losses, and vulnerability/risk.

Mitigation and prevention of potential disasters considers three factors:

- Exposure: The number of people in a particular risky location.
- Probability: The likelihood of a particular “natural” or human-caused emergency in that location.
- Vulnerability: The inability of (1) the earth and structures built upon it to withstand forces and (2) people to evacuate, protect themselves, and to cope with the event emotionally, spiritually, and physically

### Sources of Prevention & Mitigation Issues

Mitigation and prevention issues arise when once-unsettled areas become settled and significant environmental changes occur through construction build-up, deforestation, and new technologies. The potential for catastrophic disaster is increased in our modern world because of the growth of cities, the amount and management of hazardous materials, and development along shorelines, in floodplains, and in other hazard-prone areas.

Natural events—a hurricane, flood, tornado, earthquake, landslide, tidal wave—will occur, but human factors often make the critical difference in whether or not they become disasters. Moreover, human-caused or technological disasters—explosions, contamination, warfare, etc.—are fully preventable.

Response following an emergency situation is not enough. Emphasis must be focused on prevention and mitigation measures that reduce the effects of a potentially disastrous natural or technological event.

People and communities have come to rely on help after a disaster rather than to learn about risks and take feasible mitigation and prevention measures. The economics of prevention and mitigation often seem

far too overwhelming or costly to be seriously considered at first glance. Clearing flood plains and retrofitting or adding extra construction superstructure in buildings for protection against hurricanes and tornadoes can be costly in dollars, political harmony, and business decisions.

As we learn to see beyond the scenic views and sales potential of hazardous lands, recognize the ultimate rent due for intensive development, and seek to adapt to our environment rather than alter it, disasters will be less likely.

Religious groups responding to disasters need to:

- Learn more about policies, procedures, and existing programs related to disaster prevention and mitigation.
- Facilitate training to help their constituents and others do hazard mitigation.
- Incorporate mitigation into response starting immediately after a disaster strikes.

These important questions must be addressed:

- Are existing programs adequate for the community?
- Do people know whether they are vulnerable to particular hazards?
- Are natural, human-caused, or technological hazards considered when plans are made for siting new structures in the community—especially essential facilities such as hospitals and utilities?
- What kind of building codes does the community have? Has the code been updated in recent years? How strictly is it enforced? Do people who purchase new properties know about the code?

## Prevention of Disasters

Monitoring and controlling land use may be one of the most effective ways to prevent a hazard from becoming a disaster—especially as related to housing. Zoning, building codes, and lending institution policies are the public ways to influence the use of hazardous areas. Peer, neighborhood, and community pressure at a personal level can also often have positive outcomes.

In the long run, the best disaster readiness plan is not a detailed warning and evacuation system that crumbles with one traffic accident or bridge washout, but pre-disaster action that prevents persons and their belongings from being in harm's way.

The religious community can work on disaster prevention by:

1. Building awareness about disaster-related issues among groups such as men's and women's societies, Sunday School classes, Boy and Girl Scouts, and service clubs.
2. Maintaining contact lists that include:
  - Individuals and groups working on land use practices
  - Pastors trained in crisis counseling
  - Friendly public elected want to avoid or mitigate an existing or potential problem
  - Agencies and people working on or responsible for addressing technological hazards in your local, county, state, or territory governments; e.g. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA),
3. Meeting local agency officials and putting a "face" on the area of concern. Take five or six people and visit local agencies. Go in a group; never go alone.
  - Ask about plans for emergency services prior to

a human-caused technological/ environmental disaster in your area.

- Present specific concerns with factual information.
- Use the Freedom of Information Act, if necessary, to access information on "hot spots" (hazard and toxic areas.)

## Mitigation to Lessen The Effects

Mitigation encompasses a broad range of possibilities and levels of involvement:

1. Supporting politics and legislation oriented to keeping the environment safe and whole as stewards of God's creation.
  - Promoting safe, environmentally responsible lifestyles and informed citizen participation in governmental decision-making to minimize risks in community
  - Advocating for structural measures that assure soundly constructed school, hospitals, churches, and other critical facilities
  - Fighting for elimination of hunger, poverty, illiteracy, and discrimination
  - Seeking implementation and enforcement of building codes, firearms regulations, appropriate land use planning and management (i.e., siting of hazardous waste facilities)
  - Supporting community development that creates affordable housing, produces jobs, and reduces crime
2. Educating people about natural and technological hazards and how they can live, work, and play in ways that are in harmony with the world and natural phenomenon.
  - Capitalizing on enhanced awareness in the post-

disaster period to advance hazard reduction policies and practices

- Creating curriculum and materials for schools and churches and educating community groups and the public at large

Churches can encourage their members to take some basic steps in their homes to prevent and lessen the efforts of disasters accidents:

- Developing a family disaster plan
- Writing down emergency telephone numbers and personal support network information and filing it where it is readily available
- Knowing special needs of family members and neighbors for medications, life support equipment, communication equipment, mobility
- Learning about fuel load and other factors that make a home vulnerable to wildfires and taking appropriate action to reduce vulnerability
- Relocating or elevating appliances and electrical service entries in basements
- Creating “safe rooms” for protection from tornadoes, retrofitting homes, and planning new construction with disaster mitigation in mind
- Anchoring mobile homes to protect against high winds
- Minimizing concrete and paving around home
- Preventing water run-off from property

### Planning for Disasters

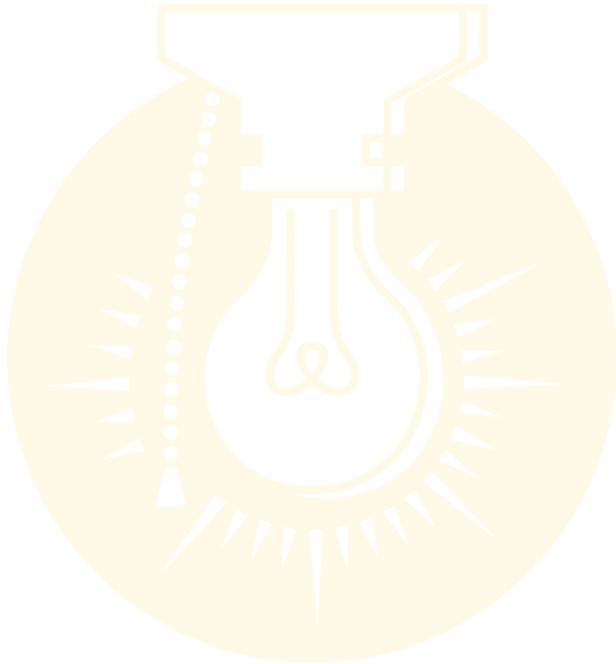
Mitigation in its broadest sense encompasses disaster planning, for effective response based on preparedness saves lives and protects property. Some basic planning considerations for churches:

- Knowing the hazard analysis for your area—what exists today and potential future hazards; possible sources of explosions, contamination, and radiation
- Adequate insurance on buildings and contents
- Protection of vital records
- Use of church facilities for shelters and other disaster response needs in cooperation with other care-giving agencies
- The congregation’s resources—people and material—and how they can meet disaster needs
- A telephone tree or system to check on church member needs when disaster strikes
- Training for people in the community in disaster preparedness, fire suppression, first-aid, light search and rescue, emotional and spiritual care
- Telephone numbers/addresses of out-of-town family members, judicatory staff, other support people and agencies
- Disaster plans of families in the congregation

### The Work of Disaster Educator

In the final analysis, the work of the faith community in planning, prevention, and mitigation is education.

Although energizing around these issues may fuel public policy advocacy around community safety and stewardship for the whole ecosystem, the work of education is effective when approached in a problem-solving, non-confrontational way. The most important tools for the faith community are education and facts.



## *Church World Service Emergency Response Information Sources*

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### *Publications*

- Cooperative Faith-Based Disaster Recovery in Your Community: Why, What & How
- The Disaster Response Chaplain: Bringing God's Presence to Trauma Victims
- Managing and Operating the Faith-Based Recovery Organization
- Prepare to Care: Church Response to Disaster
- The Religious Community as Disaster Educator: Planning, Prevention & Mitigation
- The Silent Disaster: People of Faith Respond to Technological Disasters

### *For additional information on resources, contact*

CWS Emergency Response  
475 Riverside Drive (7th Floor)  
New York, NY 10115  
Telephone: (212) 870-3151  
Fax: (212) 870-2236  
Worldwide Web Site: [www.cwserp.org](http://www.cwserp.org)



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Church World Service  
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For Additional Information, please contact

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