

Faith and Life REFLECTIONS

December 2006

"It" Can Happen Here

Faith and Life Reflections is a monthly resource for lay and rostered leaders on headlines, current books, movies, social and ethical issues such as those involving natural disasters and developments in the church. Comments may be returned to the writer or to the editor, Mark A. Staples (Mstaples@Ltsp.edu, director of Faith and Life Programs at LTSP).

This reflection is written by Mark A. Staples (Mstaples@Ltsp.edu). Mark has served as a volunteer working with flood survivors in Bucks County, Upper Darby and Wilkes-Barre, PA, and in Mississippi. He is a member of the Lutheran Disaster Response Partners Task Force in Southeastern Pennsylvania.

The Context and Introduction to "It" Can Happen Here:

- We live in a challenging era when natural and human-caused disasters preoccupy us.
- Preparing to "respond" to disasters is key to responding well.
- Most people avoid becoming prepared and are quite content to leave preparation steps to "someone else" such as first-responders, who can be overwhelmed in a time of crisis.
- Preparing congregations and their families for effective response is a form of ministry.

Not "if" but "when"

For most people, preparing for disaster is not a priority, but the reality is that for many of us it is not a question of "if" but "when" some form of disaster will be visited upon us, or those we love. Most people thinking of disaster recall large-scale, dramatic calamities, such as 9/11 or Katrina, which overwhelmed first-responders and long-term recovery providers alike. Many feel that modern medical advances preclude the possibility of a disease "pandemic" (widespread flu or plague). Public health officials, however, frequently disagree and argue that we are "due" for such an event.

Regardless of whether a large-scale calamity ever occurs, small-scale disasters caused by fires or explosions are daily occurrences with devastating loss of life and long-term consequences for our neighbors. Fire, the number

one tragedy compelling first responders to action in the City of Philadelphia, always seems to dominate newscasts during the holiday cold weather period.

Lutheran Disaster Response and Red Cross officials recommend that every congregation and family have a disaster response plan. In planning, it is always a good idea to consider the local "risk factors" you could encounter, such as flooding, industrial accidents or explosions, or tornadoes. But officials recommend not focusing on just the most imaginable disasters you can think of. More general preparation is best because history has shown that many "specific" plans fall short in the event of an unimagined calamity. Congregations can be critical partners in disaster response in their community and beyond. Before being in the best position to help others, however, it is essential for congregations to prepare themselves and their families. For congregations that means knowing your resources and following steps in a Lutheran Disaster Response guide. For families it means having a household evacuation plan that you practice in the event of fire, having a first aid kit and emergency preparedness kit with a ready supply of prescription medications. It means deciding when you're together this Christmas where you would meet in the event a disaster makes communication impossible and you can't return home. Discussing these steps and putting them into action could save your life and the lives of those you love.



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Once you've prepared, consider volunteering to help disaster survivors who are less fortunate than yourselves, if you have not already done so. Pennsylvania Lutherans have been steadfastly diligent in assisting their "neighbors" in the Gulf region after Katrina! More help is needed, and for a very long time.

Questions to ponder and discuss

Why do you think preparing for disaster is a relatively low priority for most?

Is disaster response preparation appropriate for churches, or is it best left to others? Why or why not?

Why is it best to prepare more generally for disaster rather than for only the most logical events you can think of?

Does your church have a disaster response plan? If so, what do you know about it? Has the congregation campaigned to persuade families to have a response plan? Do you have a media spokesperson in the event

your church needs one? Where would you worship if your church is heavily damaged by fire? How would you conduct worship or ministry in the event a pandemic precluded your congregation from gathering?

Have you or your family members or friends become disaster survivors? What did you learn from the experience?

Do you have a first aid kit at home? Do you have an emergency preparedness kit including medications, a supply of water and non-perishable food, a flashlight? Do you have an agreed upon place to meet family members in the event of a disaster that prevents you from communicating or returning home?

What resources does your congregation have to assist others in the event of a disaster? Have you had volunteers or first responders involved in disaster response? Could your church serve as an emergency shelter?

Resources for further reflection *(please note that Web links may change):*

- a) **Lutheran Disaster Response** at www.LDR.org has a 33-page, downloadable guide for developing a congregational disaster response plan. The guide features indices for developing a family plan. The site also informs visitors of how to volunteer in areas in critical need of assistance. The guide may be found at: www.ldr.org/prepare/PrepDisaster.pdf
- b) **Target Corporation**, working with the Red Cross, Salvation Army and America's Second Harvest has developed a cogent, concise guide for developing a family response plan. The downloadable guide is called "Safe at home: Family Emergency and Disaster Preparedness Guide." The guide features a fun "family tree" resource for children. It may be found at: <http://sites.target.com/site/en/corporate/page.jsp?contentId=PRD03-001820>
- c) A wide variety of disaster response planning resources, including for families and businesses, is available from the **Red Cross**. Visit your local chapter to secure these items personally. Downloadable resources may also be found at: <http://www.redcross.org/pubs/dspubs/genprep.html>.
- d) Information on disaster response planning and the work of **Lutheran Disaster Response Partners in Southeastern Pennsylvania**, including guides on congregational planning and hurricane cleanup may be found at: <http://www.libertylutheran.org/lutheran-disaster-response-partners.asp>.
- e) Got a question? Contact the Rev. Kevin Massey, assistant director, **ELCA Domestic Disaster Response**. Email Kevin. Massey@elca.org.

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