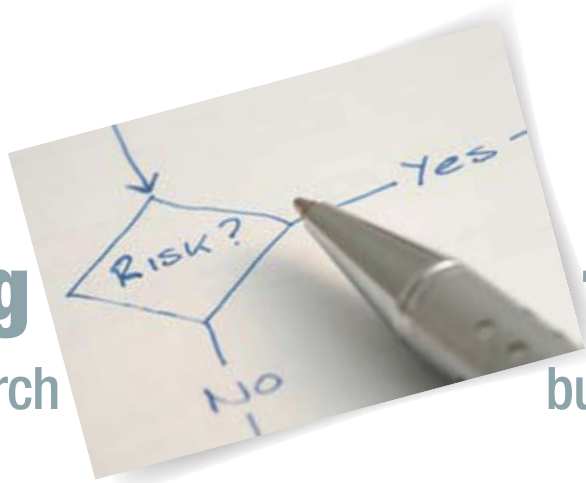


Preparing

(I have church



for disasters?

business to conduct.)

by J. Lewis Saylor, FCBA

MANAGING STAFF. Paying invoices. Scheduling groups. Coordinating with the pastor. Maintaining the building and grounds. There always seems to be more to do than can be accomplished in a day. Every day there is a potential for emergencies and disasters.

- Who will pay those invoices if you and the treasurer are ill for a prolonged period of time?
- How will the church continue to operate if a fire destroys the church facility?
- How will ministry teams respond to increased demands in the event of a community disaster?

Taking the time, energy, and finances to prepare for natural or man-caused disasters is an investment. If you are thinking, however, that preparedness is yet another task or that the benefit of being prepared only manifests itself during an actual internal emergency or a community disaster, then it is time to “re-boot” your thinking.

Preparing for the unexpected is the process of integrating readiness into all elements of ministry. It is an opportunity to weave prevention, preparedness, response, and recovery into the broad array of functions and activities in the church. Without question, taking a methodical approach to readiness is a much preferred choice to frantically reacting and/or purchasing materials as a disaster unfolds.

On a personal level, being prepared touches the spiritual, emotional, and physical aspects of life. For clergy, lay leaders, and staff, preparing for the unexpected is a great challenge and at the same time creates a powerful opportunity for breathing life into what it means to be “in community.”

IMPROVED CHURCH OPERATIONS

An immediate benefit from integrating preparedness into the church is the potential for improved operations. One of the key principles of preparedness is to have a succession plan for leadership. In the event that an individual is unable to fulfill his responsibility, another person is trained and ready to serve. One denomination recommends a three-deep roster for each position. You may adopt this succession approach or, at the very least, ensure that staff and key volunteers in the church office and ministries have been cross-trained to keep the church fully functioning due to illness, weather, and other conditions.

Both cross-training and succession planning are elements of a larger initiative referred to as continuity of operations planning (COOP) or “ministry continuity planning.” In other words, how will clergy, lay leaders, and staff ensure that the church and its ministries continue to serve regardless of a technology failure, public health crisis, severe fire, major weather event, or other catastrophe. Regardless of the emergency or disaster, people will need spiritual, emotional, and physical help; payroll must be made, and

if at all possible, the church doors need to remain open. In rare cases, the church may need to relocate temporarily. Our goal, as God’s expression of grace and compassion must be to remain present and not stop ministry.

AWARENESS OF STEWARDSHIP

We should never underestimate the power of conversation. Conducting candid conversations regarding the assessment of internal risks and community vulnerabilities can create a greater sensitivity to your entire ministry environment and to our roles as stewards. That awareness may result in an intentional conversation with your insurance company to ensure proper coverage for your vehicles, church facilities, church site, and parsonage. There is great value in the immediate peace of mind that comes from knowing that if a fire should impact your church, you are prepared and will be able to recover. Are you covered for other situations?

Another immediate benefit is having clergy, lay leaders, and staff recognize their role as stewards of the church setting, particularly when the congregation gathers, can be manifested through identifying potential risks and immediately acting on those issues. Never forget that your members and visitors place their trust in church leaders for maintaining a safe environment every time they come for worship, attend an evening activity, or visit your office. A key safety issue in the church is the ability to evacuate the facilities. The congregation and visitors can quickly remove themselves from the

church building or buildings in the event of an emergency when the following procedures are carried out:

- An informed usher team keeps chairs away from doorways.
- Staff ensures stairwells are clear of items.
- Trustees monitor the condition of exterior lights, etc.

On a related note, you will not have to become stressed when the fire marshal makes his annual visit. At other times, the safest action to take may be staying inside your facilities. Are you prepared for that option?

Weaving a greater sense of stewardship with risk assessment can create a greater opportunity for safety and security. Such assessment will enhance the experience of those who are attending activities—whether a regular children’s Sunday school classroom, a youth retreat away from the church, or any other ongoing church activities and mission efforts.

The use of Crime Prevention through Environment Design (CPTED) is a very credible tool for viewing your church environment. Having an individual or team of individuals take a critical look at your site, facility, policies, and local neighborhood with a discerning eye is a valuable service. CPTED considers your activities and facilities from a day time, night time, weekday, and weekend perspective. This type of evaluation is particularly valuable during the initial design phase of a new and/or expanded facility.

INDIVIDUAL GROWTH AND EDUCATION

Our collective ability to respond to a community disaster or significant internal

emergency is predicated on the capacity of individual believers. Many of our congregational members could be extraordinary caregivers during a crisis or recovery effort. The opportunity to experience significant spiritual growth with pre-disaster education and training is another benefit. People always want to help when something happens. The challenge is to get people involved before something happens. For example, a large scale situation would create the need for people with good listening and interpersonal skills. (A side note: please note that I did not say good speaking skills.) Offering education on congregational care, Stephen Ministry, and similar training will increase your capacity of care.

Other forms of training are available through Citizen Corps programs. Just one example is that of Community Emergency Response Training or CERT. This course is open to just about everyone regardless of background, physical strength, age, or technical ability. It will help with your response in the aftermath of a disaster.

Your denominational office or response agency and many groups associated with the Voluntary Organizations Active in Disasters (VOAD), whose members are great resources for education for operating a shelter, information on how to become pre-registered as a volunteer for disaster, and so much more. These educational programs are wonderful means to introduce your members to a wide world of opportunities to serve and learn new skills—skills that can be used in a disaster tomorrow or around the church today.

NEIGHBORHOOD RELATIONSHIPS

Many communities are familiar with the Neighborhood Watch program. It is a program that law enforcement uses to help

deter crime in local neighborhoods. Law enforcement offers a program known as Worship Watch. It is similar in its intent to prevent crime; however, Worship Watch is for houses of worship and their immediate surrounding community. An element

Summary

- Taking the time, energy, and finances to prepare for natural or man-caused disasters is an investment.
- An immediate benefit from integrating preparedness into the church is the potential for improved operations. Many matters of the church must continue; yet, insurance coverage and safety issues must be addressed.
- A church’s ability to respond to a community disaster or emergency is predicated on the capacity of individual believers.
- A Neighborhood Watch program invites local residents to become participants in the Worship Watch as an extra set of eyes watching over the church.
- By participating with those associated with VOAD, Citizen Corps groups, law enforcement, office of emergency management, and many others, your church will become better prepared for the unexpected.
- Even when there is no disaster, well-trained members of your congregation can sharpen ministry care skills by becoming involved in chaplaincy or in a workplace ministry.

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of this program invites local residents to become participants in the Worship Watch as an extra set of eyes watching over the church. What a tremendous opportunity for the church to establish relationships in their local neighborhood and become better acquainted with their next door neighbors and local home owners association.

VISIBILITY OF THE CHURCH

All of us are searching for ways to establish authentic relationships with people in the community. By participating with those associated with VOAD, Citizen Corps groups, law enforcement, office of emergency management, and many others, your church will become better prepared for the unexpected. In that process of forming partnerships your church will become a part of an integral network that supports the entire community. The immediate benefit here is not only the greater visibility of church but the message that the church is relevant in the 21st century.

READINESS

Most obviously, being prepared means congregational members and their families have a plan and the supplies in their home, at work, and in their vehicle for when an emergency arises. When the hurricane or flood or snow or man-caused emergencies take place, your members, individually and collectively, are in the position to help provide relief—and will

not become victims themselves, frantically attempting to contact family, find supplies, etc.


NO DISASTER – WHAT TO DO?

Let us assume your members are trained, your congregation is wired into your denomination's response plan, and it is a part of the local community network. Every individual and family is prepared for the hurricane or snow storm or flood or whatever, and there is no disaster this week. What do you do with the food, resources, and investment in training? Answer: a whole lot. Here are just a few ideas to get you started:

- Practice your organizational and recovery skills by renovating a house in the local neighborhood. If that is not enough, renovate an entire neighborhood in coordination with other community groups.
- Use the lessons learned in how to be an effective listener to create positive interactions on the next youth overnight trip, during the week-long mission trip, and in everyday local ministry activities.
- Take your church team to one of the many towns or cities still recovering from the disasters of the past few years. Many people in this country need

more than your financial support and physical assistance; they need your presence as God's mercy and grace.

- Sharpen your ministry care skills by becoming involved in chaplaincy or in a workplace ministry.
- Start a Worship Watch or, if one is not available in your area, start a neighborhood watch program around your church and begin to build new relationships with those residents nearby the church.
- Become intentional in working with single parents, those with limited mobility, and others within your congregation's sphere of relationship to help them prepare.
- Promote preparedness throughout your congregation. Add a section to your library and bookstore on preparedness or conduct a lesson for children and their families on how everyone can help become more resilient.

Are there immediate benefits to preparedness? Absolutely! Let us prepare today and create the capability, strength, and enhancement of ministry long before the next internal emergency or community disaster occurs. 



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