

US Disaster Program

Disaster Response Success Stories

Supporting First Responders during a Local Emergency

Last December, I joined with four others members of church leadership to complete a comprehensive disaster preparedness plan for Church of the Redeemer in Pendleton, OR. Church of the Redeemer focuses on nurturing relationships and ministry beyond the immediate worshipping family, so we made sure to include ways our gifts could be of use the community in the event of an emergency.

I hoped we'd never need the plan but felt confident we could handle most anything once we had discussed what we should do in the event of an emergency. We had discussed as a congregation that if it was needed, we wanted to open up our building in the event of a disaster. We'd even met with the county emergency services manager to let him know we were available.

One Tuesday morning, I'd finished breakfast and heard sirens. My wife took a call from our Senior Warden notifying us that the old city hall building behind and across the street from the church was on fire. I raced around frantically getting ready to head for the church when I received a call assuring me the church was not in danger. About that time I saw my first cellphone photo of flames from the top floor of the old city hall.

My first thought was, "somebody's going to need a place to go."

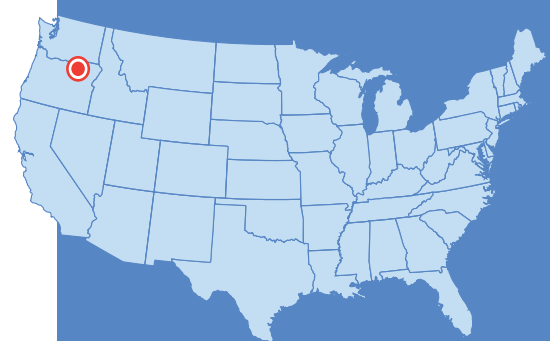
I grabbed a nearly-full case of water bottles, tossed it in the car and headed for the church, not even thinking to grab a copy of the disaster plan with all its emergency phone numbers and names of willing volunteers.

On arrival, I ran around the outside of the building, through heavy smoke and onlookers, and spotted the county emergency services manager. I said we had the church open if needed, and he said they needed a place for the fire personnel to take breaks. Well, the church had no power, and of course David forgot his copy of the plan too. Oops.

While David made a sign to direct people to the right entrance, I phoned another member of the team who read off the volunteer contact information needed from the plan. Minutes after seeing the emergency manager, a county nurse was setting up equipment in the parish hall, followed by VFW volunteers



Bruce Barnes is Episcopal Relief & Development's Diocesan Network coordinator and Chair of the parish disaster team at Episcopal Church of the Redeemer in Pendleton, Oregon



Fast Facts



DIOCESE:
Diocese of Eastern Oregon

LOCATION:
Pendleton, Oregon

POPULATION:
16,935

CONGREGATION:
Episcopal Church of the Redeemer

DISASTER RELIEF:
Opening a cooling shelter for first responders



that came out of nowhere with cases of water bottles and a tray loaded with sandwiches. About that time the first fire fighters showed up, sooty, sweaty, dropping into chairs, shedding outer layers – obviously tired. And expressing gratitude for having a cool place away from smoke to let down, clean up and get refreshed. They rotated in and out, taking breaks in shifts. While the nurse was checking the firefighters, I remember my head feeling kind of numb and thinking “I wonder how I’ll feel tomorrow.”

More food kept coming, and more cases of water bottles – from parishioners, a nearby restaurant, a grocery. Members of the church came in and helped in the kitchen. About five hours after opening the parish hall, it was all over. Fire crews gone, nurse gone, food and water sent to the fire station and the Salvation Army, the hall and kitchen cleaned up, power back on and the building locked... ready for an evening small group gathering. The events of the day seemed surreal as I drove back home.

I now look back and think about the loaves and fishes. We ended up having three times the water bottles and food that was needed. The event didn’t last long, and when we cleaned up and left it was like it might not have even happened. The extra food and water was donated to local non-profits and the fire department. What really hits me in the face is that we only actually called and connected with three people, and we were overwhelmed with far more help than we could have imagined.

Many people have asked how it went, and each time I tell the story I’m more aware of things I’m thankful for. I’m

so glad we created the disaster plan. If we hadn’t, the fire department would have had to improvise under some trees or find another place to use.

The very act of planning made it possible; without the plan, offering to open our doors would not have occurred to anyone.

Others in the community have noticed what we did, and many have expressed appreciation for our action, including mention in a newspaper editorial.

I’m really proud of our congregation. This experience has given us a renewed sense of purpose and strengthened our commitment to be available to the community in times of need. In the future, we will be more confident that if needed in the future, we can do whatever we are called to do.

Tips!

- Save a copy of your disaster plan on your smart phone.
- Try to advertise your services with a sign or by word of mouth. Make sure that all responders know that your space is available.
- Remember to thank those who helped during church the following Sunday. Celebrate your success with your entire congregation!



Members of The Church of the Redeemer’s Disaster Preparedness Team involved in responding to the fire.

Additional Resources



For more information on helping during local emergencies, please see the following online resources:

The Comprehensive Guide to Disaster Planning

Tips and Lessons: Individual & Family Preparedness

How To: Providing a Temporary Neighborhood Shelter

Ready.Gov