



Preparing for Disaster: A Guide for Mennonite Congregations

Adapted from "Preparing for Disaster: A Guide for Lutheran Congregations" with permission

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Foreword

This manual has been prepared by the Mennonite Disaster Service (MDS). MDS is a faith-based agency that responds to disasters by providing volunteer labor for cleanup, repair and reconstruction of homes. We believe that volunteering is a means of touching lives and helping disaster survivors regain faith and wholeness. MDS places special emphasis on helping low-income families, single parents, the elderly and the disabled.

As part of the community, congregations have the opportunity and responsibility to respond to disaster. The deep human needs and psychological scars left after a disaster require care beyond the restoration of physical needs. Putting lives back together after a disaster requires care, hope and love. Counseling, understanding and direction enable people to cope with their anger, guilt, tests of faith, loneliness and turmoil.

A time of crisis is often the best time for Christians to demonstrate the reality of God's healing grace through caring and sharing.

This manual is provided to assist congregations to prepare for disaster. It asks questions such as: What is disaster? Is your facility ready? Are your church records protected? Does your congregation have evacuation plans? What can your congregation do to prepare to care for members and others in your community in response to disaster?

Acknowledgments

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Preparing for Disaster:

A Guide for Mennonite Congregations

	Page
MDS and Your Congregation's Preparation	5
Why Develop a Disaster Preparedness Plan?	6
What is a Disaster?	7
What Happens in a Disaster? (Rescue)	8
What Happens After a Disaster (Relief)	8
What Happens in the Long-Term? (Recovery)	8
Caring through Christ	9
Preparing your Congregation for Disaster	10
1. Identify Potential Disasters	10
Natural Disasters	10
Technological Disasters	10
Violence	10
2. Prepare the Facility for a Disaster	11
a) Post emergency numbers by each phone	11
b) Review insurance policies annually	11
c) Protect facilities	11
d) Protect church records	12
3. Plan for Evacuation of Facility	13
4. Train Church Staff for Preparation and Response	13
5. Prepare to Serve Church Members	14
6. Plan to Resume Worship Services	14
7. Prepare to Serve Your Community	14
8. How to Assist Neighboring Communities	16
9. Your Congregation's Ministry during Disaster	17
a) Rescue response	17
b) Relief response	17
c) Recovery Response	18
10. Helping Your Members Prepare for Disaster	18
References	19
Appendix A: Congregation Facility Safety Checklist	20
Appendix B: Congregation Safety Checklist	22
Appendix C: Family Disaster Plan	23
Appendix D: Putting the Disaster Plan into Action	24

MDS and Your Congregation's Preparation

This manual was prepared by Mennonite Disaster Service (MDS) to assist congregations in preparation for disasters.

MDS works through five Regional Directors and 40+ Unit Chairs/Coordinators. A current listing of the Regional Directors is listed below. The Unit Chairs/Coordinators and MDS local church contact people (CCP) can guide congregations in their preparation for disaster (check with Regional Directors for Unit officers and their contact information). They can help congregations plan preparedness training, assist pastors to understand their roles in times of disaster and develop cooperative relationships with the regional offices of disaster response organizations.

Your disaster response activities should be carried out in full cooperation with MDS, other denominations through interfaith groups, governmental agencies and voluntary disaster response organizations.

[Regional Map](#)

Please see the regional map for contact information and for current news.

Why Develop a Disaster Preparedness Plan?

A disaster plan is a guide for your congregation to:

- Protect property
- Continue services
- Care for members
- Recover or repair disaster-related damages
- Communicate information

A plan is relevant and useful if it is:

- Developed by people who are concerned
- Tailored to the geographical situation and needs of the members
- Implemented and tested, to the extent possible, before disaster strikes
- Developed to include training for persons responsible during an emergency
- Reviewed and updated regularly

The planning process is more important than a document on a shelf. During the group planning process, individual concerns are expressed, priorities are set and values assigned to people's needs and to property. Planners get to know each other's gifts and capabilities, and energy is generated for caring for one another in a crisis.

Establishing a disaster preparedness committee in the congregation ensures that congregational members are prepared, that the pastor and church leaders have made advance commitments to help others in times of disaster and that congregational activities are coordinated with those of the community.

What is a Disaster?

A *disaster* is an event beyond the control or capacity of the individuals affected resulting in great harm, suffering, destruction and damage. It disrupts personal and community life, involves a significant number of people and causes physical, emotional, economic, social and/or spiritual crises. A disaster damages a community's ability to sustain life without outside assistance.

Natural disasters involve the forces of nature and creation – flood, windstorm, fires caused by lightning, tornado, earthquake, etc. Human-caused disasters occur as a result of violent actions by individuals or groups against people and/or property. Human-caused disaster includes such things as explosions, the collapse of a structure or the release of hazardous material.

Federal/government declared disasters may impact up to several hundred thousand people. These major disasters require emergency relief efforts beyond the ability of local communities and churches to respond. A federal/government declared disaster makes federal relief assistance available.

A *catastrophic disaster* event is federal/government declared and larger in scope. It involves a large number of deaths and injuries and extensive damage or destruction of facilities. Catastrophic disasters involve an overwhelming demand on state/provincial and local response resources and mechanisms. Federal relief becomes available.

Generally, disasters strike without warning. Each disaster is different in magnitude and impact on the affected area. People react differently and local authorities are often hard pressed to manage the impact of the disaster on the community.

While state/provincial and national relief efforts are being mobilized, the local church has an opportunity to reach out and minister to those in need – whether Mennonite/Anabaptist related or not. The church's response to a disaster is a commitment and witness to the Gospel of Jesus Christ to assist those affected by the disaster.

What Happens in a Disaster? (Rescue)

A disaster may strike with or without warning. In the moments, hours and days surrounding a disaster, the concern is for safety and preservation of life. Those affected by disaster seek temporary relief and assistance – often provided by the Red Cross and Salvation Army. Local police, civil emergency, and/or defense forces are often strained to carry out their tasks. Respected community leaders, including clergy, help survivors deal with the reality of danger and guide them to assistance.

What Happens After a Disaster? (Relief)

The relief process begins in the days following a disaster. Concerns for safety, life and health remain high priorities. Government agencies/departments and the Red Cross are active. Other relief activities are organized.

Voluntary organizations (such as Mennonite Disaster Service) begin to participate. The MDS Area Coordinator, Unit officer, and/or CCP in your area will bring Mennonite partners and local Mennonite leaders together to share information and organize a skeletal plan of response in cooperation with fellow ecumenical and secular partners. Your congregation should participate as requested.

Congregations may offer immediate shelter. (See www.redcross.org to become a certified shelter.) Congregations may provide food and other items through a planned distribution system. Distribution may involve joint planning with other churches.

What Happens in the Long-Term? (Recovery)

The long-term response to disaster focuses on the future. Homes are being built and repaired. Community committees for unmet needs are set up. Plans are made for clothing, furniture and equipment while relief activities continue. Depending on the scope and scale of the disaster, recovery usually takes three to five years, but it may be longer. Rebuilding continues but support diminishes as the event becomes old news. Congregations in the community continue to play an important role. Often disaster groups, including those organized through MDS, are involved in the rebuilding.

Caring through Christ

The deep human needs and psychological scars left after a disaster require care beyond the restoration of physical needs. Putting lives back together requires real care, hope and love. Compassion, understanding and direction are needed to enable persons to cope with grief expressed as anger, guilt, loneliness and turmoil. In serious trauma situations, referral to counseling services will be necessary.

Care is given through effective listening. Author William J. McKay offers these points. “Listening means paying attention to the other person – real attention, the kind that drops everything else and ignores distractions to focus on what the other person is saying and feeling.” McKay continues to define the task of listening by highlighting these six important facts about listening:

- Listening is hard work. Your attention and focus are on the person speaking.
- Listening is an important way to show care. Giving your time and effort says to the other that they are valuable to you.
- Listen to more than just words. Notice facial expressions, body language and tone of voice.
- Listening involves talking too. Say just enough to demonstrate attention and encourage the other person.
- Listening also involves a response, such as asking appropriate questions. Ask open-ended and clarifying questions.
- The goal of listening is to draw out the other person, not to find solutions or smooth over a problem. Listen with patience and care to help the other discover solutions to problems.

People suffering loss are particularly open to experiencing the Gospel through the care of those living it out. As members and ministry groups from your congregation serve disaster survivors, they are sharing Christ.

The church may take the initiative in reaching out to those who are in denial or depression. Some will be unable to seek assistance. Care should also be extended to caregivers (including pastors) as they deal with human suffering.

Preparing your Congregation for Disaster

1. Identify Potential Disasters

Use this list to identify potential causes for disaster in your community. Place a check mark in the box to indicate potential for this to happen in your community.

Natural Disasters

- Flood
- Hurricane
- Tornado
- Earthquake
- Extreme heat
- Thunderstorms/lightning
- Wildfires, fire danger during/after storm
- Ice/snow storms
- Public Health Emergency/Pandemic

Technological Disasters

- Hazardous materials
- Railroad accidents
- Highway and trucking accidents
- House and building fires
- Radiological/biological accidents
- Nuclear power plant emergency
- Terrorism/bioterrorism
- Prolonged power outages

Violence

- Family violence
- Community violence

2. Prepare the Facility for a Disaster

For further reference, see Appendix A: Facility Safety Checklist

a) Post emergency numbers by each phone.

Include 911 (or area equivalent), the poison control center, law enforcement and fire departments. Make sure a phone is accessible in each area of the building at all hours.

b) Review insurance policies annually.

Make sure your insurance policy meets the minimum requirements of your mortgage holder and the most likely disaster hazards for your geographical area. When was the last estimate on the value of the church property? How accurate are the figures?

Does the insurance policy cover the cost of recent additions or high value items such as stained glass windows?

Does the insurance policy cover the cost of temporary rental of another facility in the event your church is severely damaged or destroyed?

Does the insurance policy cover the cost of temporary rental housing for the parsonage family in the event that the parsonage is severely damaged or destroyed?

c) Protect facilities

In preparing for a hazardous event, maintain a list of who is assigned to:

- Cut off the utilities
- Cover the windows
- Take down or secure any exterior swinging fixtures such as signs or lights
- Secure loose items around the church
- Raise important contents above potential flooding levels

Should a disaster occur :

- Inspect the congregation's facilities – this should include taking **photos** of the interior, exterior, and contents
- Make temporary repairs to protect them from further damage or looting
- Call your insurance representative
- A quick survey should be made to identify the types of items that need to be secured and any trees or branches that pose a direct threat to church property. Most of the damage from storms comes from fallen trees or branches.
- *No one should check on the church during a storm.* Members and the pastor should remain indoors at home or in a shelter.

d) Protect church records

Church records are a vital part of your church organization. Safeguarding them should be a matter of simple routine and limited expense. (If your records are not kept safe, what you do to restore them will seem like a disaster itself.)

Here are simple things to do now:

- Put your vital records in a fireproof safe and mark them “for church records only.” Do not keep money in the safe. Ensure the safe is big enough to hold the kind of oversize books that are normally used. Also ensure the container is watertight.
- Use a safe deposit box for those records (such as deeds, insurance papers and mortgages) that are not used frequently.
- If your church uses a computer for its finances or other vital functions, be sure your treasurer backs up his/her work and takes the backup home regularly. Regular membership and other specialized data can be stored in the safe, or the secretary can take the backups home.

3. Plan for Evacuation of Facility

For further reference, see *Appendix B: Congregation Safety Checklist*

- Identify the nearest storm shelter.
- Post clear directions on what to do and where to go in case of a severe storm/tornado warning.
- Practice evacuation/fire drills.
- Have a working weather radio or battery-operated radio in an accessible location in the church. Ensure that someone is listening during watches while church functions are in progress.
- Know where to locate large generators for prolonged power outages

4. Train Church Staff for Preparation and Response

- Assign a member of the congregation to serve as the congregation's disaster response coordinator (MDS CCP would be recommended for this position). This person should be acquainted with local emergency management leadership, coordinate and guide the congregation through its preparation and response.
- Have a contingency plan in the event that the pastor becomes personally affected by the storm. A layperson should be prepared to lead the service(s).
- Hold first aid and CPR classes at your church for adults and youth. Encourage ushers, elders, youth leaders and teachers to attend.
- Train ushers in case of emergency such as fire or heart attack.
- Train Sunday school and daycare staff for emergencies/disasters.
- Have a member trained in first aid and CPR at each church activity.
- Determine the special needs of people in your congregation (i.e., vision, hearing, physical impairments, heart conditions, etc.) to help prepare for special evacuation procedures when disaster strikes.
- Survey members and programs to identify special concerns to deal with during and following a disaster.
- Develop a plan to check on members to assess needs after a disaster.

5. Prepare to Serve Church Members

- Help your members learn what to do – be calm, heed warnings, follow instructions of public safety/emergency management leaders, be safe and know how to help each other.
- Collect emergency/disaster preparedness needs such as emergency lights, flashlights, first aid kits, blankets.
- Designate a group to call shut-ins before a storm and to follow up afterward. In the event of an evacuation, this group could also call the local emergency management office to tell them of those needing special transportation.
- Create a prayer/life phone tree of people who will pray and give blood in case of emergency/disaster.
- Know resources within your congregation and within your community, identify their functions and know how to access them.

6. Plan to Resume Worship Services ASAP

- Be prepared to resume worship services immediately even in temporary or damaged facilities.
- Know how you will publicize the fact that church services will be held. Many people will be listening to the radio; this may be the best method for getting the word out. Also publicize pastoral care.
- Determine a suitable alternative worship site, such as a school, and get an estimate of what it would cost to rent. If possible, get an informal arrangement that would allow your church to relocate quickly. This might be a reciprocal agreement with another local church to share a facility.

7. Prepare to Serve Your Community

- Develop processes for raising funds for disaster response and for receiving funds from outside sources. Be sure to check with your MDS regional director and/or area coordinator/Unit officer/CCP.
- Arrange a reciprocal agreement with another church/facility as a place to meet and worship; these benefit both parties in case of major damage or destruction.

- Arrange agreements to work with the Red Cross, other emergency management agencies, and your local social ministry agencies.
- Become a Red Cross emergency shelter. First, get the approval of the administrative body of the church. The Red Cross may use church buildings close to the disaster area as temporary shelters. Prior certification is required. Work with your local Red Cross chapter to meet requirements to be a certified site.
- Decide if the church can be used to house volunteers. Make the decision prior to a disaster. Plans should be made to minimize the impact to local church programs. Teams must be totally self-sufficient with food and bedding. It would be ideal if the church had shower facilities for the volunteers. Let MDS know of your willingness to house volunteer teams.
- Help to mobilize a Long Term Recovery Committee (LTRC) in your community. Does your community have a committee such as this? Does your congregation participate? If no such committee exists, call a meeting of religious leaders in a ministerial association or an already established interfaith group to discuss how the organizations can work together in a disaster. Through this group, along with other churches or religious organizations, develop a plan to reach out to the most vulnerable people in the community – elderly, single parents with children and those with special needs. Federal, state/provincial and voluntary agencies respond in various ways following a disaster. MDS will assist your congregation in working with these agencies. The community may form a LTRC to coordinate meeting immediate needs through various disaster response organizations. Local religious leaders are encouraged to be actively involved with the VOAD (Voluntary Agencies Active in Disaster) or other volunteer agency coalitions. These organizations, with help from religious leaders, assists survivors in registering with FEMA (USA) or EMO (Canada). This kind of support is especially critical for disaster survivors to effectively manage the insurance or government forms.
- Develop a plan to receive, organize and distribute food and other needed items including cleaning supplies, hygiene supplies and baby supplies. Rarely is clothing needed; usually all clothing needs are easily met locally possibly through a church or church agency operated thrift store.

- Every Mennonite/Anabaptist related church should have an MDS congregational contact person. This person can help to organize volunteer work crews in your area in times of disaster.
- Work with other Mennonite/Anabaptist related congregations in your community. Form an agreement to work together in response to disaster.
- Identify the resources (including human resources) that can be used by your congregation in time of disaster.

8. How to Assist Neighboring Communities

- Check with the MDS area coordinator/Unit officer/CCP to determine what is needed before doing anything.
- Don't just go! Unexpected or uncoordinated volunteers only add to the problem. Offer to send volunteer work teams as they are needed and can be scheduled. Volunteers are often needed to assist with clean up, debris removal and preparation of meals for volunteers. Skilled volunteer construction workers are always a critical long-term recovery need.
- Don't send "stuff!" Clothing, furniture, and other "stuff" often cause major problems for recovering communities. Make certain you have discussed your collection efforts with on-site emergency managers or volunteer organizations before you attempt to collect goods. If you are asked to send specific items, respond only to the specific request and know how to prepare and ship the goods. Most communities are not equipped with unloading, storage, sorting and distribution facilities for goods that are shipped in by well-intended groups. Staff to handle these goods is often very limited. Survivors may not have a place to store these goods because their homes have been destroyed. Too often, unsolicited goods end up in a landfill.
- Send cash! Cash contributions through the church are the most effective way to help survivors if it is a localized disaster response. If it is a major disaster, send donations directly to the appropriate MDS office (USA or Canada). Cash contributions allow trained case managers to help survivors with their most pressing needs in a timely way. Cash contributions also help stimulate the local economy through local purchasing.

9. Your Congregation's Ministry during Disaster

a) Rescue Response

- Contact is made through your local MDS congregational contact person (CCP), Unit officer (chairperson or board member), or an MDS area coordinator.
- Church buildings close to the disaster area may be used as temporary shelters. Your facility must be pre-approved by the Red Cross.
- Unaffected members may respond by serving at shelters, feeding centers and clean-up sites.
- Your pastor or lay people may respond to needs of people suffering injury or families mourning losses.
- Survey the staff and church members to determine those affected and assist their immediate needs. Care of the most vulnerable will be a priority.

b) Relief Response

- The MDS Unit officer or area coordinator will help congregations respond to disaster by organizing the efforts of responders.
- Volunteers are needed to work at clean up, at feeding centers and shelters.
- Listeners are needed to attend to those affected. People have the need to tell their story again and again to help them through the trauma and grief.
- People can help those affected to apply for assistance. Publicize disaster assistance help numbers.

c)Recovery Response

- The church stays in disaster response and recovery ministry for several months, sometimes several years. People affected have the chance to improve the physical, social and spiritual dimensions of their lives during reconstruction.
- Contact the MDS unit, regional or national contact people to volunteer to help with rebuilding homes and lives.

10. Helping Your Members Prepare for Disaster

For further reference, *see Appendix B: Congregation Safety Checklist; Appendix C: Family Disaster Plan; and Appendix D: Putting the Disaster Plan into Action.*

- Prepare members/families for disaster by encouraging family disaster preparation plans. Conduct disaster preparedness training, which would include the preparation of survival kits.
- For additional disaster preparation checklists, see:
 - Red Cross web site at www.redcross.org
 - Church World Service web site at <http://cwsglobal.org/>
 - FEMA web site at www.fema.gov
 - Public Safety and Emergency Preparedness Canada (PSEPC) <https://www.publicsafety.gc.ca/index-eng.aspx>
 - Provincial Emergency Management/Measures Organizations (example: Manitoba EMO www.gov.mb.ca/emo)

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By Carolyn Yoder

Publisher: Good Books, 2005

Leading People Through Disasters - An Action Guide: Preparing for and Dealing with the Human Side of Crises

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In the Wake of Disaster: Religious Responses to Terrorism and Catastrophe

By Harold G. Koenig

Publisher: Templeton Foundation Press, 2006

Appendix A: Congregation Facility Safety Checklist

1. Exits

- Are they marked and lighted?
- Are they free from obstruction?
- Are any doors or passages locked?
- Are there any obstructions that may impede evacuation?
- What are the plans for upper floor evacuations?
- Are there contingency plans for handicapped persons?
- Are emergency lights tested regularly?

2. Electrical and Gas Equipment

- Where are the breaker switches or fuse boxes?
- Are all breakers marked?
- Are switches and outlet boxes covered?
- Are electrical units grounded?
- Are any circuits overloaded?
- Is any equipment in use after hours? Where?
- Where is the gas main or meter shutoff valve?
- Where is the gas wrench located?

3. Firefighting Equipment

- Are extinguishers fully charged, inspected and tagged?
- Are extinguishers appropriate for a particular type of use?
- Are fire alarms maintained and checked regularly?
- Who is responsible for maintaining them?
- Are smoke detectors maintained and checked regularly?
- Who is responsible for maintaining them?

4. Chemicals

- Are there any combustibles stored in the facility?
 - Paint?
 - Solvents?
 - Cleaning fluids?
 - Thinners?
 - Toner?
 - Propane?
 - Toxic or corrosive materials?
- Where are they? Are they stored correctly?

5. Emergency Phone Numbers

- Is the list current and posted and clearly visible?
- Does the EMS and fire department know the different areas of your facility to enable them quick access?

6. Miscellaneous

- What is the location of keys for all doors and buildings?
- What is the location of first aid kits in the building?
- Are the first aid kits fully stocked?
- Who is responsible for maintaining the first aid kits?
- What is the location of the wheelchair and stretcher?
- Who is responsible for maintaining them?
- What is the location of the battery-operated radio?
- Who is responsible for maintaining it?
- What is the location of emergency water and food supply?
- Who is responsible for maintaining it?

Appendix B: Congregation Safety Checklist

- Identify the storm shelter of the church.
- Post clear directions in the church as to what to do and where to go in case of severe weather.
- Talk about these preparations with the congregation.
- Perform a storm drill to a place of shelter.
- Ensure that someone is listening to a radio during church functions while storm warnings are present.
- Arrange for a first aid/CPR class to be held at the church, especially encouraging leadership in the church to attend.
- Let members know the location of emergency lights, flashlights, first aid kits, blankets, battery-operated megaphones.
- Make sure that a phone is accessible in each area of the building at all hours.
- Create phone calling trees in the congregation to let people know of needs and for prayer.
- Designate someone to be responsible for administering the disaster plan for the church.

Appendix C: Family Disaster Plan

1. Be Knowledgeable

- Contact your local emergency management office or local Red Cross to find out the potential threats.
- Request information on how to prepare for each kind of disaster that could occur in your geographical area.
- Know first aid/CPR.
- Learn about your community's warning signals: what they sound like and what you should do when you hear them.
- Teach each member of the family how and when to dial emergency numbers.
- Teach each member of the family how to use fire extinguishers and where they are located.
- Teach each member of the family how and when to turn off the water, gas and electricity.
- Find potential hazards in your home, such as objects that could fall or items too close to the fireplace.
- Find out how to help elderly or disable persons, if needed.
- Find out about the disaster plans at your workplace, your children's school or daycare center, and other places where your family spends time.

2. Prepare Your Home

- Post emergency numbers by all phones.
- Equip your home with fire extinguishers and smoke detectors on all floors of your home.
- Stock an emergency supply kit: food and water for three days, flashlight, copies of important papers, first aid supplies, medications, battery-powered radio, flashlight, change of clothing, extra set of car keys, etc.
- Make sure there are two escape routes out of each room.

3. Create a Disaster Plan

- Make sure you have adequate insurance coverage.
- Discuss the need to prepare with your family.
- Plan to share responsibilities in preparation for a disaster.
- Discuss the types of disasters that are most likely to happen and explain what to do in each case.
- Pick two places to meet – right outside your home in case of a sudden emergency and outside the neighborhood in case you can't return home.
- Ask an out-of-state/province relative or friend to be your contact person in case of emergency and make sure everyone knows the phone number.
- Discuss what to do in the event of an evacuation and plan what to do with your pets.

Appendix D: Putting the Disaster Plan into Action

If disaster strikes:

- Remain calm and patient.
- Gather family members in a place of safety until it is safe to emerge.
- Use caution when entering a damaged building.
- Check for injuries.
- Give first aid and get help for seriously injured people.
- Listen to your battery-powered radio for news and instructions.
- Shut off any damaged utilities – water, gas, or electricity.
- Use the telephone only to report life-threatening emergencies.
- Check on neighbors if it is safe to do so, especially elderly or disabled persons.