

## U.S. Disaster Program

### Tips & Lessons: Disaster Preparedness

# Tips on Preparing Your Parish to Respond Effectively to a Disaster

## CASE STUDY

When Janine Ungvarsky and the Rev. John Major train congregations from the Episcopal Diocese of Bethlehem to prepare for disasters, they begin by explaining how unprepared they were for the one that hit their community.

On September 8, 2011, the Susquehanna River overflowed its banks in the aftermath of Hurricane Irene and Tropical Storm Lee. The flood displaced thousands of people in West Pittston, PA, stopping a block from Trinity Episcopal Church, where Major is rector and Ungvarsky is missionary for ministries and renewal.

“We did nothing to protect the building,” Ungvarsky recalls. “Had the water come a block farther, our church would have suffered damage that we had done nothing to protect it from.”

Because only home phone numbers were on file, Staff had difficulty locating members who had evacuated. And it took awhile for the parish to determine how it could best respond to community needs.

Over the next two years, Trinity spearheaded a diocesan-wide response to help its vulnerable neighbors rebuild and recover from the flood. And it has added a new tool to its disaster response kit: a parish disaster plan that includes updated contact information for members and a strategy for better mobilizing the church’s assets after a disaster.

Trinity’s experience is informing other congregations in the Diocese of Bethlehem as well. Last year the diocese passed a resolution that all congregations develop disaster plans within the year. So far Ungvarsky and Major have trained about half the parishes in the diocese in creating plans. They offer the following suggestions for planning on the congregational level.

## PREPAREDNESS PLANNING TIPS

### Use a planning guide

Episcopal Relief & Development offers a *Comprehensive Preparedness Planning Guide for Congregations and Parishes* and an accompanying facilitator’s guide to



## Biography

Janine Ungvarsky is missionary for ministries and renewal and The Rev. John Major is rector of Trinity Episcopal Church in West Pittston, PA.



## Fast Facts



**CONGREGATION:**  
Trinity Episcopal Church

**CONGREGATION SIZE:**  
151 members

**LOCATION:**  
West Pittston, PA

**POPULATION:**  
4,846

**RESPONSE:**  
Repairing and rebuilding homes after a flood



lead a congregational committee through the planning process. It also offers abbreviated Silver and Bronze versions of the planning guide. All are free and downloadable from the agency's resource library, [www.episcopalrelief.org/resourcelibrary](http://www.episcopalrelief.org/resourcelibrary).

### Create a disaster leadership team

Disaster preparedness planning is an ongoing process. We are sometimes asked how long it takes a congregation to put together a disaster plan. A small team of three to seven people in a family-size parish can fill out all the information in Episcopal Relief & Development's *Preparedness Planning Guide for Congregations and Parishes* in four to six weekly meetings. After that, the team should meet every six to twelve months to review and update the plan as needed.

### Update your parish contact list

One of the most pressing needs we had after the flood was contacting parishioners, first to check on them, then to keep them informed and recruit volunteers. Our complete parish list was stored only on the computer in the parish office. Providing a few key people with an updated parish contact list in both hard copy and electronic forms will make it easier to reach vulnerable parishioners quickly. It will also allow you to share news and rally volunteers even if you can't get into your church. Because home phone numbers don't help when people are evacuated, the parish list should include cell phone or other alternate numbers as well as email addresses.

### Identify parish and diocesan communication resources

In the planning process, make sure to anticipate how the communication resources that your parish already has access to can help you tell your story and share news in a disaster. We are fortunate enough to have access to a diocesan-wide email list and blog, in addition to a web site and social media presence. From the first days after the flood, we used these tools to share photos and stories of what we were seeing and hearing in our neighborhood. Later, we used these same resources to recruit volunteers and keep the story and the need of our neighbors in front of parishes throughout the diocese. Regular print and electronic newsletters that were already in use at Trinity before the flood provided an easy means to keep parishioners informed of what was going on and how they could help.

### Anticipate ways to listen to your neighbors

Do not underestimate the value of listening and being present for those affected by a disaster. To anticipate this in the planning process, consider the assets your congregation can use to gather people, learn about their gifts and their needs, and connect them to resources. After the flood, Trinity found it was important to be present to our neighbors to listen and identify unmet needs, such as providing a way to clean treasured belongings. More than two years later, we are still listening and providing volunteer help. At a recent barbecue to mark the second anniversary of the flood, we learned of some flood-related needs in the neighborhood that we were still unaware of.

## The Responsibilities of a Disaster Leadership Team

- Developing, reviewing and knowing the congregation's disaster plan
- Leading drills or trainings as needed
- Communicating the plan fully to the congregation and community (through trainings, preparedness Sundays, etc.)
- Helping to resume congregational life as soon as possible after a disaster
- Protecting church assets after a disaster
- Serving the congregation during the acutely stressful time after a disaster
- Mirroring to the community Christ's commitment to truth, mercy, justice and love

Source: *Episcopal Relief & Development's Preparedness Planning Guide for Congregations and Parishes*.

### Additional Resources



For more information on similar topics see the following online resources at [www.episcopalrelief.org/resourcelibrary](http://www.episcopalrelief.org/resourcelibrary)

- **Success Stories: Preparing with Church Partnership**
- **Tips and Lessons: Safeguarding Important Documents**

For more information on the US Disaster Program visit:

[www.episcopalrelief.org/usdisaster](http://www.episcopalrelief.org/usdisaster)