

Engaging the Faith-Based Community

By David L. Maack, CEM, CPM, WCEM, Racine County Emergency Management

I had the privilege of being a plenary session keynote speaker at a “Faithful Readiness: Communities United to Prepare for, Respond to, and Recover from Disaster” conference sponsored by the U.S. Department of Homeland Security Center for Faith-Based and Community Initiatives. The purpose of the conference was to engage the faith-based community, looking at ways that they could participate in emergency preparedness and response efforts.

In my address to the group, I explained that I have received two types of calls from churches, queries asking how an event will impact them or asking how they can help the community. In most cases, both require the church or organization to spend some time preparing on the front end, either to limit their exposure to a particular threat/event or to assist them in reaching out in the aftermath of a threat/event.

Challenges in Reaching the Faith-Based Community

While I have worked with a few church groups in my community, there are challenges to reaching the faith-based community.

■ First, it is a diverse group. Although there may be some denominations that have multiple churches within a community, there are many more that don’t. Generally, there is no one ministerial association to which all churches belong; while some pastors may belong to one or more, many don’t. Simply stated, there is no “one-stop shop” to reach the faith-based community. Instead it takes time, effort and desire to identify churches and to reach out to them.

■ The second challenge is that many churches already have a mission, and it does not include

emergency preparedness. Not that they are opposed to it, but in many cases, it is not on their radar screen. In addition, active churches have multiple programs and activities that compete for time and attention.

Dan Reiland, Executive Pastor at 12Stone Church in Lawrenceville, Ga., wrote, “I often say, ‘We’re not a Christian cruise ship.’ We’re not here to bring you all the great programming you can think of. If we did everything we were asked to do, we’d have dozens of programs from baseball leagues to classes in CPR. It’s all good and worthy stuff, but the church not only shouldn’t do all of it, it can’t. All these things and more exist in the surrounding communities. Encourage your people to go out and join in...”¹

While I agree with Pastor Reiland that congregants can attend CPR classes out in the community, there are some churches within a community that have special relationships with certain populations, and sometimes the most viable way of reaching those populations is through these churches.

In addition, we are not asking them to add another program to their menu, although we would be willing to partner with them if they choose, but instead to take the steps necessary to be prepared when disaster strikes. Whether or not a church decides to host CPR training or a CERT class, the bottom line is that churches, as institutions that often have large facilities and often play an important part in the lives of their communities, need to be prepared for emergencies.

Emergency Response Plans

In January 2008, a rare winter tornado slammed into our church, Prayerhouse Assembly of God in Kenosha, Wisc. The tornado

occurred late in the afternoon, and fortunately no one was in the building. Other churches have not been so lucky.

On Mar. 27, 1994 (Palm Sunday), an F4 tornado hit Goshen United Methodist Church in Goshen, Ala., at 11:39 a.m. Twenty people died in the church, while another 90 were injured. The people in the church never heard the warning.

Each church should have a plan on how to respond to the various emergencies that they could face on any given Sunday. These include severe weather, medical emergencies, fire, intruders/disruptive people, and bomb threats, to name a few.

As emergency managers, we should be willing to help them begin that process. Like any other business or household for that matter, if they can quickly recover and care for their own, our emergency responders can concentrate on more critical areas of need in the aftermath of an event.

Church “Business” Recovery Plans

After the tornado hit Prayerhouse Assembly of God, the church had to relocate for about 10 months until the church building was rebuilt. As with businesses, we should be encouraging faith-based organizations, including churches, to have a church “business” recovery plan. That plan should include ensuring that the organization/church has enough insurance coverage, identifying an alternate location, and backing up important documents and computer files and storing them off-site, to name just a few components.

As I shared with the group gathered for the Faithful Readiness conference, natural and man-made events are not the only potential emergencies. The death of a pastor,

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¹ The Pastor’s Coach - November 2010, Issue 1 (e-newsletter)

IAEM: Working for You

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Also appointed is a new National Representative for Denmark, Martin Thomsen, mth@brs.dk.

■ **New IAEM-USA National Homeland Security Consortium Representative Named.** IAEM-USA President Eddie Hicks, CEM, has been named as the new IAEM-USA representative to the National Homeland Security Consortium (NHSC). That position was previously filled by Larry Gispert, a Past President of IAEM. IAEM CEO Beth Armstrong, MAM, CAE, is IAEM's second representative on the NHSC.

■ **New IAEM Liaison Appointments Announced.** The following liaison appointments have been announced:

- *Disaster Resource Guide Advisory Board* – Beth Armstrong, MAM, CAE, IAEM CEO.
- *International Disaster & Emergency Resilience (IDER) Liaison* – Clay Tyeryar, MAM, CAE, IAEM Deputy Executive Director.
- *The International Emergency Management Society Liaison* – Clay Tyeryar, MAM, CAE, IAEM Deputy Executive Director.

CEM® Corner

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In this article, we have looked at five different professional contributions to meet the requirement of six different contributions. In the next issue of the *IAEM Bulletin*, we will look at more professional contributions to meet the CEM®/AEM requirement.

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Source: IAEM CEM® Application, www.iaem.com/CEM, 2010.

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key employee or parishioner, a serious reputational issue, or damaging press coverage of the church/organization all can adversely impact a church. Some churches are large enough to weather the storm (no pun intended), and others are not. But having a plan in place can lessen the overall impact.

A church, organization or business can either put time in on the front end, or else spend considerably more on the back end. In my case, I would rather invest some time on the front end than have to deal with a multitude of issues for the first time on the back end.

Church Outreach Plans

After major events like Hurricane Katrina, the Haitian earthquake and even localized events, many people want to help. Too often than not, that means they want to donate food, clothes and stuff. Unfortunately, food, clothes and stuff are usually the last thing needed and can easily overwhelm relief efforts.

I have encouraged churches in my community to work with a sister church in the region or area affected and to ensure that they have already identified a legitimate need and are taking responsibility for those efforts. As I told the group, nobody needs a prom dress when they have just lost everything. But unfortunately, it seems that the prom dress is the first item donated.

Locally, churches and faith-based groups can help bridge gaps in the community. First, churches are in a good position to help meet the needs of their own congregants. Second, they can be a great help by reaching out to a recovering community. In addition to the spiritual care that churches may

offer, they also can assist in addressing the felt needs of the community.

Many churches have large buildings that sit empty during most of the week. Some could be used as shelters, while others could be reception or family assistance centers. Churches could provide day care or elder care, assist in making meals, and provide housing to outside volunteers. In addition, churches could organize volunteers to help survivors salvage personal property or clean up damaged property.

Conclusion

What a church can do will depend on the church's size, mission and skill set. Some may do more than others, but every little bit helps. If a church even offers to reach out to its surrounding community, it contributes to that area's recovery effort.

By working together with the faith-based community, we can help our communities become truly united in preparing for, responding to, and recovering from disaster.

SOME TOOLS

■ **Light Our Way:** A Guide for Spiritual Care in Times of Disaster for Disaster Response Volunteers, First Responders and Disaster Planners: www.nvoad.org/articles/Light_Our_Way_LINKS.pdf

■ **Open for Business:** www.disastersafety.org

■ **Be Ready Sunday:** www.readyalabama.org/be_ready_sunday.html

CEM®/AEM Prep Course Webinar On-Demand

Available to watch at your convenience, this four-hour on-demand webinar can be watched in multiple sittings. Instructor is Daryl Spiewak, CEM, IAEM-Global Professional Standards Director and CEM® Commissioner.

www.iaem.com/certification/CEMPrepCourse.htm