

At its October 14-15 meeting in Des Moines, Iowa, the Lutheran-Episcopal Coordinating Committee heard reports regarding ecumenical disaster relief efforts in the wake of last June's floods in Iowa.

The information shared was both inspiring and challenging. In some communities there were immediate ecumenical teams at work coordinating services to displaced families. Waverly was an example of a small town where the local ministerium hit the ground running, coordinating assistance to victims without regard to church affiliation. In other places ecumenism struggled; one city's church leaders couldn't even agree on where and when to hold a prayer service.

Partly due to daunting paperwork, federal disaster relief funds have been very slow in arriving. One priest told of driving past a block of severely-damaged homes in Cedar Rapids. One house in the block stood out because there were flowers blooming and a neatly-mowed lawn. Upon closer scrutiny he realized that he could see completely through the walls of the house itself; the property obviously hadn't been abandoned, but its owners were waiting to receive FEMA money before they could afford to repair it.

There were wonderful stories about relief teams from all over the country who came to help clean up as the waters receded. Katrina survivors sent money and materials, and college students gave up their summer breaks to remove moldy plasterboard and build new walls. However, it has been estimated that it will take at least five years for the affected cities to repair all the damage.

Meanwhile, there are flood-displaced families who have been living in their cars or in camp grounds through the summer and fall because every dollar that they pay out in rent reduces the amount of FEMA aid they can receive to repair their damaged homes. The reality is that in Iowa winter is just around the corner, and there are hundreds of flood-ravaged homes that still have no interior walls, no insulation, and no furnace.

Unlike after Katrina, where relief by the two denominations was institutionally joined, the process has been different in Iowa. Lutheran Disaster Response has been handling federal case advocacy, and Episcopalians have been "filling in the cracks," receiving and administering private donations. The need for funds is still huge, especially as winter approaches. Donations should be sent to: Episcopal Diocese of Iowa, 225 37th Street, Des Moines, IA 50312 and marked specifically for Flood Relief or the Lutheran Disaster Response earmarked for Iowa Flood Relief.