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An ELCA Congregation Discovers That Having a Disaster Plan Works
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CHICAGO (ELCA) -- As the flood waters rose in and around the town of Mason City, Iowa, in June 2008, members of Trinity Lutheran Church there were prepared. Having developed a disaster preparedness plan a year ago, members of Trinity were able to be an active and important part of the community's early flood recovery work.

Heavy rains produced floods in Mason City, affecting businesses and homes, according to the Rev. Michael R. Stadie, Lutheran Disaster Response (LDR) coordinator, Davenport, Iowa. LDR is a collaborative ministry of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) and the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod.

Stadie said residents of the city were without running water or sewage removal for about a week. The elderly and low-income communities were severely impacted. While immediate cleanup of the town is nearly complete, residents are now moving toward more detailed cleanup of households. Mold is starting to surface, he said.

Trinity Lutheran Church, a congregation of the ELCA, was able to engage in relief efforts immediately because of its disaster preparedness plan, said Stadie.

Preparing for a natural disaster started at Trinity one year ago, when Stadie led a disaster response workshop at the church. About 15 members of Trinity attended the workshop which focused on a variety of preparedness activities, including drafting a plan should a natural disaster strike Mason City.

"It's important that congregations develop a disaster plan, because then they will know how to take care of the needs of their own members and those of their community," said Stadie. A critical component of the workshop is "asset-based planning, where a congregation assesses its own abilities in learning how best to respond to the needs of the church and community," he said.

Following the training, Trinity formed the Disaster Emergency Response Team (DERT) to implement the congregation's plan, which includes an evacuation strategy, building lockdowns and evacuation routes for all church rooms. DERT evaluated the congregation's insurance coverage plan, conducted safety equipment checks, and designed a "phone tree" so that communication can happen quickly and effectively in a time of need. DERT signed an agreement with the American Red Cross to serve as a shelter or food distribution center in times of disaster.

Through Lutheran Social Services of Iowa, Davenport, an LDR affiliate, Trinity received a grant to help coordinate its preparedness activities. A stipulation of the grant required members of Trinity to volunteer in relief efforts elsewhere in the United States.

When floodwaters struck Mason City in June 2008, Trinity put its disaster plan into effect. About 35 members from Trinity volunteered to clean up 15 homes in Mason City. Although the Red Cross did not need to set up a shelter at Trinity for evacuees,

the Salvation Army used the church's parking lot to set up a mobile food distribution station. Trinity's fellowship hall served as a dining hall, with members of the church serving as hosts.

Craig Pross, a member of Trinity and leader of DERT, said, "Perhaps the most important role of DERT was to take stress and responsibilities away from the (congregation's) pastors. Because the pastors knew that we were responding actively to the physical needs (of the community), pastors could do their important work of being with people, praying with them and caring for their spiritual needs."

DERT is made up of Trinity's parish nurse, custodian, office manager and three congregants, said Pross. "Not only did members of DERT respond. We had members of all ages, from youth to adult, men and women, who helped clean out households, hauled water-soaked appliances and other materials out onto the street and, on some occasions, pumped out water from basements. We also visited with folks affected by the floods, so they could talk about their experiences." Members of Trinity also helped distribute water bottles to the community.

"People are talking about the good things happening at Trinity Lutheran," said the Rev. James M. Magelssen, pastor of Trinity. After the flood DERT responded immediately to identify the needs of the congregation and community, particularly people "who are most vulnerable," he said.

"We contacted homebound members to determine their needs," said Magelssen, and "folks were amazed that the church called to see if they were okay."

People displaced from their homes are also facing some huge financial issues, said Magelssen. "They still have to pay their mortgages while living somewhere else. Many are not sure whether or not they should go back home and make their homes livable again," he said. Decisions about property may not happen until a year from now.

To date "members of Trinity contributed about 100 hours of volunteer time," said Magelssen. "We learned that our people were better prepared to deal with the emotional and spiritual needs of people. I'm happy that, as a congregation, we're doing something significant in the community. The way the church responds or doesn't respond will make a huge difference on how people see the church and their faith in the future," he said.

Before the floods struck Mason City, groups of volunteers from Trinity were set to participate in cleanup efforts in Parkersburg, Iowa, following a May 25 tornado that leveled nearly half the town. Heavy rain kept the group from working in Parkersburg.

The interest to participate in recovery work in Parkersburg was inspired by a volunteer trip members of Trinity took last year to Long Beach, Miss., to help with the ongoing response to Hurricane Katrina. The volunteers took part in rebuilding homes and meeting survivors of the hurricane. The work in Long Beach fulfilled the LDR grant stipulation and inspired the congregation to serve in other disaster response areas across the country, said Magelssen. As a result of the Long Beach volunteer experience, "folks at Trinity became aware of the kinds of things that need to happen" when responding to a natural disaster, he said.

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