



Disaster relief and the church *by Mary L. Darden*

Early in the morning on Sunday, Aug. 28, 2005, I awoke with a burning call in my heart to mobilize our church, Seventh and James Baptist Church in Waco, TX, to provide a disaster relief shelter.

A Category 4 hurricane was brewing in the Gulf of Mexico. It was projected that, if it continued on its current path, the hurricane could hit the Louisiana coast by Monday.

Very aware of God's prompting in my spirit about providing a relief shelter, I entered the doors of our Sunday worship service praying for one more sign. The sermon was on Moses and the burning bush; I felt I had my answer. I approached the pastor about my sense that we were being called to do this, and he recommended an emergency meeting of the church cabinet, the elected leadership board for our church. As the current cabinet chair, I called the meeting immediately while people were still in the sanctuary. Within minutes, we had a unanimous vote to open a shelter in Waco, a city that is more than a 10-hour drive from the likely landfall location.

Our church sprang into action. We

developed a plan and put out the word to church members asking for bedding, linens, personal items and food. Dozens of church members showed up and transformed three floors of Sunday school classrooms into welcoming rooms with makeshift beds, curtains, comforters and even stuffed animals. I left a voice mail at the local Red Cross office to let them know we were operational if a shelter was needed. I also sent a press release to a few radio and TV stations in Louisiana to tell people we were available.

The Category 4 hurricane did hit the Louisiana/Mississippi coast at 7 a.m. on Monday morning. We waited all day and heard nothing. Late Monday, I received a call from the Red Cross office in Killeen, TX, about 45 minutes south of Waco, that the situation was much worse than anyone had expected and asked if they could send people to us. We received our first family sometime on Tuesday. Johnnie Marchand and her family arrived and immediately ran to the TV in our church to search for any signs of their family left behind, but all communication technology from New Orleans was out.

The original plan was to shelter people just until the water receded and they could return home. It quickly became apparent that we were receiving people who had lost everything. Some had lost family members; all were traumatized.

We established committees to cover every anticipated need: meals, medical, school enrollment, counseling, security, housing, transportation, employment, and even entertainment to help raise their tragically low spirits. Communication centers for each committee were established at round tables in the church's main dining area. Information was distributed and appointments were scheduled to assist each guest. The many volunteers who led these committees – close to a dozen leaders – did outstanding, tireless and cheerful work. Most worked 12 to 18 hour days without a day off, in addition to holding down their regular jobs.

Assistance with other services was provided by many agencies, companies and individuals. Among our biggest supporters were Baylor University (which provided cell phones, laptops, showers, and meal tickets for their cafeterias), the School of Social Work at Baylor (counseling), Caritas and the Salvation Army (food and supplies), and First Baptist Church of Waco (storage of food and supplies and deliveries when needed). Elsewhere in Waco, local hospitals and nursing agencies provided emergency medical support, and the Waco Housing Authority provided additional housing assistance. It was a miracle in motion. The Holy Spirit was blazing throughout our little community.

We filled our shelter within the next 24 hours with more than 50 people. The influx did not slow, and it was quickly evident that

STEPS YOUR CHURCH CAN TAKE TO PREPARE:

- Assess what governing bodies in your church exist that could take action quickly if disaster relief is necessary. Do you have a process for this response? Who knows what to do?
- Does your church have concerns about liability, damage to facilities, or cost involved in participating in a coordinated disaster relief response? If so, address these concerns as soon as possible.
- Select a liaison from the church to contact local city, county and Red Cross offices. Develop these relationships and confer with them about coordinated response.
- If other churches in your community are not involved in this planning, contact, organize and engage them.

local government offices and the local Red Cross office were not prepared for the numbers of people coming our way.

Waco-area churches became the only immediate option. On Wednesday, we issued a call to area church leaders to meet the next morning and about 50 leaders from at least a dozen various denominations responded. Ten churches agreed to set up shelters, and the rest agreed to provide additional support. They were trained

at our site by the leaders of our committees who now had nearly a week of experience on the frontline along with a few emergency professionals who had volunteered once the shelter opened. Within a few days of each other, the new shelters opened one at a time until all 10 were filled with evacuees. Collectively, we had space for a little more than 500 guests and we had 511 arrive. God was clearly in charge.

In many circumstances, churches are the best resource to provide immediate and personal care. In fact, I would argue that they may be the only viable option for personal, holistic and restorative care in a large catastrophic disaster. Many churches are service- and mission-driven. Most have available space that could be utilized in the event of a disaster. Most have leadership structures that could be mobilized to organize whatever services may be needed. Their membership contains significant volunteer forces with individuals from many different professions. They already have many desperately needed resources readily available and, with some support from other agencies, can help meet the significant needs of a population experiencing a disaster. They are already connected to support services such as electricity, water, telephones and the Internet. Many have

kitchens, and a good number have commercial kitchens where food may be prepared and served. Some have shower and laundry facilities.

Our church did not hesitate to ask how we would provide relief. We saw the need and dove in on blind faith. We did not know where all the resources would come from, but they arrived. Although we only had a very small discretionary fund reserved to assist people in need, our church received designated donations from all over the country, enough to not only meet the immediate needs, but many long-term needs as well. With initial help paying, relocating and covering start-up expenses, all of the families that were assisted by Seventh and James were able to make successful transitions to independence within a year.

This summer we have seen unprecedented flooding in the Midwest and a consistent crop of tornadoes stretching from the Mississippi River eastward. With global warming, none of these conditions is expected to ease; on the contrary climatologists predict weather-related disasters will escalate in quantity and severity. Nor is the weather the only threat that would require a public response. We continue to hear about the Avian bird flu and other antibiotic-resistant illnesses. And since 9/11, we all live with awareness of potential terrorist-caused catastrophes.

Churches need to prepare. Churches should begin immediately to organize with other regional churches to form a disaster relief coalition, then partner with the various city and support agencies in their area to provide food and supplies.

Since our church's response to Hurricane Katrina, I have been approached by various governmental and agency representatives seeking volunteer assistance and advice on involving churches in an overall disaster relief plan. These governmental and support agencies learned from Katrina that there may be situations that exceed their ability to handle independently.

Additionally, as they have so painfully learned, the existing plans for dealing with

such catastrophes are riddled with unforeseen problems. In the case of a major disaster on the Texas Gulf Coast, our county – more than 300 miles north – is slated to receive more than 20,000 evacuees. There are not sufficient government buildings in the entire county, however, to house this many people, and there certainly are not anywhere near that number of needed staff. Just recently have some leaders finally recognized that they must turn to the churches to find a solution.

Only in partnership is there hope that high quality, personal and empathic relief may be provided to all in the event of most currently imaginable disasters.

We do not know what the future holds, of course, but it is past time to be planning for what might occur. I encourage church leaders to meet now, in every community, and to develop a disaster relief response plan. I believe with all my heart that the churches are the only answer, and they must take the lead in preparing a relief plan for the future.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION:

⇒ Should Matthew 25: 14-16 inform a church's decision to become involved in disaster relief?

⇒ Discuss the pros and cons of a church leading out in a disaster relief effort in your community. Consider spiritual, financial, civic and government implications.

⇒ How should a church decide its involvement or level of involvement in disaster relief?

Mary Landon Darden has an EdD in educational administration from Baylor University, where she serves as an adjunct faculty member. Since Darden's active role in her church's response to disaster relief, she has been asked to lecture and present on this topic regionally and nationally. She is the chief executive officer of Darden Consulting in Waco, TX.

