



## **Disaster Preparedness Vestry Papers March 2023**

### **Tips on Preparing for Disasters**

Christopher Rourke

While the thought of having to face hurricanes, fires, floods and tornadoes is bad enough, being unprepared can turn a natural disaster into a tragedy. It certainly isn't possible for religious institutions to be ready for every potential calamity. At [the Church Insurance Companies](#), however, we help Episcopal institutions do everything they can to protect their people and their property.

We've seen the uptick in recent years in the number and severity of named storms, wildfires and other weather-related events. But we remain committed to working side-by-side with the Episcopal Church from a risk management standpoint to make sure Episcopal institutions are well-prepared.

### **What's the difference?**

Religious institutions have special needs and unique circumstances. For instance, unlike with other real estate, a significant disparity often exists between market value and replacement value of church properties. In addition, churches may feature stained glass windows and intricate pipe organs. Buildings may remain unoccupied except for Sunday and mid-week services. Schools may periodically close for vacations or religious holidays. Some institutions are in areas prone to wildfires, while others are in places where hurricanes make landfall.

Thus, no one-size-fits-all approach works for disaster preparedness. Leaders of Episcopal institutions need to determine what suits their specific situations. Yet there are some general guidelines that everyone can follow before, during and after a disaster.

### **Personalize your protection**

Property and casualty insurance policies vary depending on needs, circumstances and geography. Coverage for some risks and types of property may be restricted by caps. Many policies exclude or limit flood and earthquake coverage or restrict fine arts to a specific dollar threshold. Some policies allow you to cover certain types of property, such as audiovisual devices or contractors' equipment, under separate "floaters."

It also may be helpful to conduct periodic inventories of the contents of your buildings by taking and safely storing either videos or photos. This may expedite settlement after a tornado or fire, for example, since you won't have to rely on memory of what was in a particular location.

### **Make a plan**

Every Episcopal institution should have in place clear, detailed disaster response plans, such as one for fire and, perhaps, for hurricanes, floods, tornadoes or earthquakes. Institution leaders should appoint someone, or a group of people, to be ready to act on each plan – and to recruit others to help. Whether you have a phone tree or an email listserv, you should designate an emergency communication system.

One critical element of any plan is a reciprocal building use agreement between your institution and another church, school or camp. Instead of searching for temporary space after a loss, your people can come together immediately.

Maybe your institution is in an area prone to major storms, and you have proper insurance coverage to allow it to serve as a community center during these weather emergencies. Then your response plan should also include having an onsite generator, regularly confirming that it is in good working order and ensuring that your people know to run it only outside (never in closed quarters) to help avoid carbon monoxide poisoning.

Periodically make sure that your people know what to do in the event of an emergency. Having a plan in place to get them to safety immediately can be the most important part of disaster preparedness. Tornadoes, for instance, can hit with little warning. So, if you are in an at-risk region, your plan might include appointing someone to monitor the weather for tornado conditions.

In 2020, one of these violent, fast-moving storms tore through four buildings on the campus of St. Luke's Episcopal Church in Dallas, Texas. The church's well-prepared senior and junior wardens acted right away, keeping everyone safe, and while they suffered damage to their property, we were able to help them repair their buildings quickly.

Wildfires, which can happen anywhere from prairies and deserts to forests and mountains, are another unpredictable scenario that requires swift evacuation plans. Wildfires sparked by droughts or lightning strikes may get most of the attention, but some 85 percent of these outdoor blazes are caused by human hands: unattended campfires, burning trash, malfunctioning mechanical equipment, discarded cigarettes. Your disaster preparedness plan should include immediately following any evacuation orders issued by local authorities, no matter how far away the fire is at the time.

### **Mitigate damage**

Do as much as you can beforehand to lessen potential losses. Depending on your location, consider adding flood or earthquake coverage, if available, to your insurance policy. When you learn that a hurricane is headed your way, sandbag doors and cover windows with plywood. Throughout the year, maintain or reinforce building structures, since unsecured or worn-out components are more susceptible to damage.

Maintain easily accessible contact information for clergy and lay employees. Keep up-to-date copies of your important files offsite, storing them on flash drives or external hard drives, for example. Consider storing valuable onsite records and papers, such as Bibles, in waterproof or fireproof containers.

Compile an emergency kit containing items ranging from local maps marked with evacuation routes, flashlights, a radio and extra batteries, to blankets, a three-day supply of water (one gallon per person, per day) and non-perishable food.

You might arrange with your fire department to use your parking lot as a staging area during wildfires. Not only will you be helping your community, but with firefighters on location, your property is likely to be better protected.

### **Act fast**

We encourage institutions to contact their Church Insurance Companies representatives immediately after a disaster. Delaying could compound any damage. However, being in touch right away is not always possible, so we try to be proactive.

Before Hurricane Ian touched down in Florida and the Carolinas in the fall of 2022, we were already poised to dispatch our network of claims professionals and contractors. While we

received some 30 claims by the time the storm subsided, we realized early on that a few clients in the storm's path had not yet contacted us.

Those on Florida's barrier islands had no access to their buildings because of washed out causeways and bridges, including St. Michael and All Angels Episcopal Church on Sanibel Island. Together with its rector, a claims adjuster and a remediation contractor, we traveled there by boat, and four hours later we had completed a preliminary estimate and the contractor was preparing to start working.

While no one can ever be fully prepared for the unknown, there are ways to mitigate risk. For nearly a century, the Church Insurance Companies has been protecting the people, property and finances of the Episcopal Church, and we intend to do so for the next 100 years and beyond.

To learn how the Church Insurance Companies may be able to serve your Episcopal institution, including guiding you from risk identification and management to risk monitoring and adjustment, visit [cpg.org/CIC](http://cpg.org/CIC) and peruse our [Safety & Insurance Handbook](#).

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**Resources:**

- [In Case of Disaster](#) by Demi Prentiss, an ECF Vital Practices tool
- [Disaster Prep: Before, During, & After](#) by William V. (Bill) Livingston, an ECF Vital Practices tool
- [Crisis Preparedness: Making a Plan](#) by Linda Grenz, an ECF Vital Practices tool
- [Be Ready](#) by Anne Ditzler, an ECF Vital Practices blog, September 8, 2011

## **Mapping Assets Builds Resilience**

Tamara Plummer

*Connectedness is fundamental to our reality. No matter which sphere of life we observe, from the physical to the spiritual, we are connected to others...Many of the social and ecological problems that confront us today stem from our delusion that we are separate from, better or more significant than, other members of creation – from other groups of people we encounter to the air we breathe. Our lack of openness to all may very well mean our demise.*

– Judy Cannato, [Center for Action and Contemplation](#)

At the heart of community mapping is connectedness. Mapping outlines the gifts and resources of communities to visually represent its concerns and strengths: food pantries, schools, women’s groups, advocacy organizations, worshipping communities and more. The [Episcopal Asset Map](#) project does this on a large scale and includes all Episcopal institutions within the denomination. Naming the assets and capacities of different places in one place helps tell our story as a Church and builds a database for deeper connection.

So why does the Episcopal Relief & Development US Disaster Program care about leading this project? What does asset mapping have to do with disasters? The answer is, *everything*.

### **What do you have in your house of God?**

My favorite Bible study to use in disaster training is from Second Kings. It’s about a widow whose husband has left her and her children in debt. When she goes to the prophet Elisha to ask for help, Elisha replies, “What do you have in the house?” Instead of performing a miracle, starting a fundraiser or berating this woman, Elisha first supports her in knowing that she might already have the answers in her own home. God is already up to something in her house.

It is the same thing that we do with partners after a disaster. We want to know what it is that you already have in your diocese to support a response. What communities, institutions, individuals or resources are you connected to? When and how do you worship? What languages are spoken? What ministries are you engaged in? At times, people would say, much like the widow, “I have nothing in the house, except a jar of oil.” But it is the jar of oil (e.g., a homeless ministry, a knitting group, food pantry, a large parking lot or an empty parish hall) that can often become the greatest source for an amazing disaster response.

### **Asset mapping helps ERD partner with other Episcopal entities when disaster strikes**

You can see this in past [Episcopal Relief & Development](#) (ERD) partnerships with Episcopal places. When there was a large apartment fire, an empty air-conditioned church parish hall across the street became a place of respite for firefighters that needed health checks while containing the blaze. A feeding ministry and a congregation’s dentist became a denture replacement program for many un- or under-insured people after tornadoes hit their homes in the middle of the night, and their dentures had been left on the nightstand. An enthusiastic diocese has worked with a strong pastoral priest, a hospital and many volunteers as part of a multi-year program responding to multiple disasters (hurricanes, an earthquake and COVID-19).

Often people ask me to tell them stories about how the Episcopal Asset Map was particularly useful in helping after a disaster. I could tell you about how we pulled data on congregations with a [Stephen Ministry](#) after Hurricane Harvey to gather volunteers that could support going into disaster shelters to do a needs assessment. Or I could write about the ways that Episcopal Relief & Development staff track hurricanes and fires so that we understand what congregations might be impacted. This information, while tactically useful, isn't the point.

There is a lot of uncertainty in the world today, and we know that disasters are on the rise due to a changing climate. We know that marginalized populations are disproportionately impacted



by these increased disasters. We know that the Church is uniquely positioned to support and transform the world, because we are followers of a loving, liberating and life-giving Christ.

### **Your faith community's assets are important to the Church's preparedness**

Some of the best disaster preparedness we can do as a denomination is to take stock of what we have in-house. We need to take a moment to see what God might already be up to in our communities, congregations, schools or other Episcopal institutions. When we know what we have, when we intentionally form relationships with those on the margins of our societies by joining Christ's work in those places, then we will be able to rapidly answer the call after a storm or other disaster. For it is our connections that make us more resilient.

How can you participate in helping the Episcopal Church grow more resilient? Update your Episcopal place on the Asset Map. The Episcopal Church is more resilient and better positioned to respond to the needs of vulnerable communities after an event when we are aware of the resources and connections that already exist. This task will not even require you to leave the laptop, phone or digital device where you might be reading this article. You don't have to form a committee; you don't need to seek permission. You know your church, you know what kinds of ministry, worship and community connections already exist, so share them.

Visit [episcopalassetmap.org](http://episcopalassetmap.org), search for your Episcopal place and add some information about how you all are connected to God and your neighbors.

*Tamara Plummer is a Program Officer in the US Disaster Program at Episcopal Relief & Development where she supports church leaders as they prepare for and respond to disasters. She is a passionate leader with more than 20 years of experience in training and facilitation, curriculum development and spiritual formation. Tamara holds an MA in practical theology from Union Theological Seminary.*

## Resources:

- [Preparing for Disasters](#) by Annette Buchanan, an ECF Vital Practices blog, November 7, 2017
- [Avoid Unhappy Surprises](#) by Steve Follos, Vestry Papers, May 2005
- [Your Church Needs an AED](#) by Richelle Thompson, an ECF Vital Practices blog, January 11, 2023
- [Asset Mapping as Evangelism](#) by Tamara Plummer, Vestry Papers, May 2017

### *Security Planning for Your Faith Community*

Mark Stevens

When I began work in church security, I immediately recognized a critical gap between the typical security conferences and security information for churches. There's a lot of information on what churches should do, but very little about how to go about doing it. Most information tends to be too generic to help churches with unique needs.

To address that gap and help congregations create security programs that address their unique needs, I developed a program that helps churches:

- conduct an initial hazard assessment specific to their activities, resources and location
- develop an emergency action plan based on the assessment
- create needed programs and documents
- establish training and education programs.

As the program has matured, it has grown to help assisted living facilities, day schools, nursing homes and other organizations. My team consists of military, law enforcement, fire department

and emergency medicine veterans who want to use their skills to help protect others. We also conduct “in-house” training on most of the subjects associated with church safety. While we have to be on site to do a detailed assessment, there’s a lot that we can do remotely.

### **Detailed documents for developing a security plan**

The linked documents described below provide detailed information that your church can use to consider and improve its current planning around security. The information they provide is mostly generic and meant to be adapted to the specific needs of your congregation.

- [Church Security Handbook](#)

The Church Security Handbook lets members know the church’s security plan and the role everyone plays in keeping their faith community safe. It provides information on the work of the security team, evacuation procedures, what to do in an active shooter situation or a medical emergency or when a child is missing or a suspicious package or bag shows up, along with the church’s policy on carrying weapons. It includes a staff and leader handbook outlining the specific responsibilities of the staff and security team.

- [Policies and Procedures Manual – Generic](#)

The Policies and Procedures Manual describes the elements required for a church safety and security program – from its purpose and method, authority and oversight, to the composition, training, duties equipment, etc., for the congregation's security team and information on conducting regular safety surveys. Further information is available in a series of additional documents called “Annexes.”

- [Annex A – Emergency Action Plan – Generic](#)

The Emergency Action plan offers specific and detailed procedures to enable your

congregation's "Staff and Security Team to respond to threats, hazards, and contingencies" that might occur.

- [Annex G – Security Training Program](#)

The Security Team training Program describes the broad skills from weapons training to first aid, fire safety and that team members might need to "respond effectively to adverse situations that might arise during church services."

- [Annex J – Fire Safety](#)

The document on fire safety describes the security team's responsibilities for fire safety training and equipment, fire drills and burn training in addition to routine surveys.

- [Safety Survey Checklist - Generic](#)

This Excel document gives an example of a straightforward way to note any hazards in classrooms, offices, worship and other spaces in your building.

*Mark Stevens is a 40-year retired veteran of the Army whose service specialized in aviation operations, intelligence, safety and security. He currently serves as the Security Director for Harrisburg Baptist Church in Tupelo, Mississippi, and is the regional coordinator for non-denominational, semi-annual safety and security conferences in the north Mississippi and west Alabama regions. He is the president of Centurion Safety Associates, a firm that specializes in tailored, site-specific organizational safety and security programs for churches, schools and medical facilities. Centurion Safety employs a small team of medical, security, safety, law enforcement and fire experts who discretely assist organizations in establishing or improving their safety and security programs with respect to their specific needs. He can be contacted at [mstevens376@gmail.com](mailto:mstevens376@gmail.com).*

## Resources:

- [Faith Forged in the Fire](#) by Diana B. Henriques, Vestry Papers, January 2002
- [Flames and Faith](#) by Judy Hoover, Vestry Papers, November 2002
- [Helping and Healing Resources \(Children\)](#), an ECF Vital Practices tool
- [Doing the Advance Work](#) by Tilly-Jo Emerson, Vestry Papers, January 2002

### **Gentle as a Dove, Wise as a Serpent**

Haley Bankey

*“Behold, I am sending you out as sheep in the midst of wolves, so be wise as serpents and innocent as doves.” -Matthew 10:16, ESV*

The shooting at First Baptist Church of Sutherland Springs took place less than an hour from where my family lives. In November 2017, 26 lives were ended inside a house of worship in just a few short minutes.

The shooting at St. Stephen’s Episcopal Church in Vestavia Hills, Alabama, and at Robb Elementary School near St. Philip’s Episcopal Church in Uvalde, Texas, in 2022 felt just as close as I know the rectors and associate rectors personally and these heinous acts took lives from my beloved denomination.

Mass shootings have been a part of American life for decades, but when the travesty happens in a house of worship, those who are faithful are left in disbelief. As leaders in the church, it is our responsibility to be aware of warning signs *and* to be as hospitable as Jesus.

There are a wide variety of resources available from Episcopal Relief and Development, the FBI, and others that will help any vestry or leadership body hold these difficult conversations and develop an action plan in case of need. However, the best advice I can give is to connect directly with your local first responders to engage in the conversation.

### **Who am I?**

I'm putting this article together, not as an expert, or even someone who has survived a mass shooting event. I am an active member in the life of the Episcopal Church, and when I served in the Congregational Development Department in my home diocese, we worked with the San Antonio Police Department and multiple congregations to put together a brief and comprehensive resource, the "CRASE Conversation Guide," to help church leaders make a start on their church safety plan. CRASE stands for Citizen Response to Active Shooter Events, and here in Texas, it is the approved training course offered by first responder agencies to learn how to prepare for Active Shooter Events.

The resources below are offered to help you navigate the difficult conversations that need to take place in order for your community of faith to be as prepared as possible, while still extending grace-filled hospitality to all who seek God's love in your community.

### **Learn the Need**

Before any congregation or community of worship begins to build their own Active Shooter Preparedness Plan, we learned that the first step is to contact their local first responders. This step is essential to building relationships with those who protect your community, and to learning specifics about your area and your local resources. For us, that was the San Antonio Police Department; for others, it might be the sheriff or volunteer Fire Departments. Knowing your local laws is essential to being prepared. Does your community allow for open carry of

weapons? Concealed carry? Are all firearms banned from houses of worship? Have you as a leadership body decided on how to address these differences?

Next, ask your church leadership to research and learn more about what to do during mass shooting events. This might be having your local first responders offer CRASE training during a Vestry meeting, or it may be watching the “Run, Hide, Fight” video produced by the FBI.

### **Share Love**

Research shows, as shared in the CRASE training, that one of the first ways to help prevent an active shooting event is through hospitality and kindness. As communities of faith, this should be one of the first things we consider as we build our plan.

By building community and relationships, all members of your faith community should be able to recognize new individuals. By making eye contact and greeting all newcomers, you share a welcome that a potential shooter may not have felt in a long time. This eye contact and conversation could also make you aware of any strange behavior that may be coming from a new individual.

### **Have the Conversation**

As challenging as it is, church leadership needs to hold these tough conversations and make difficult decisions specific to your congregation and physical layout. In coordination with the San Antonio Police Department, a “CRASE Conversation Guide” was built to assist Vestries, Bishop’s Committees, and Safety Teams build a plan that makes sense for them. The steps include the following topics along with a description of what to do and action steps needed to build the plan:

- Walkthrough Your Campus and Sanctuary
- Consider Creating a Safety Team
- Train Staff and Volunteers
- Train Your Children and Youth Caregivers
- Inform Your Congregation
- Continue the Conversation

### **Did I Mention Love?**

Time and time again, Jesus loves the outcasts. He heals the leper, he forgives the prostitute, he eats with those who society has deemed sinners. Jesus loves, and so should we. People who carry out such acts of violence are God's children too. And they are hurting. We cannot accept their actions and we cannot stand aside while these shootings take place, but we can offer love, forgiveness and healing for those so lonely, hurting and desperate that they feel this is their only option.

### **Additional Action**

If you feel moved to explore more ways you can make a difference and work to effect change, I encourage you to learn more about Bishops United Against Gun Violence. Bishops United advances four priorities in its work against gun violence: Public liturgy, spiritual support, sound teaching and persistent advocacy. Their website includes resources on liturgy and prayer, and education and advocacy.

### **Links to Resources mentioned in the article above:**

[CRASE Conversation Guide](#)

[CRASE Training Video](#)



[FBI](#)

[FBI Run, Hide Fight Video](#)

[Episcopal Relief and Development](#) (ERD)

[Bishops United Against Gun Violence](#)

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**Resources:**

- [Crisis Preparedness: Making a Plan](#) by Linda Grenz, an ECF Vital Practices tool
- [Helping and Healing Resources \(Children\)](#), an ECF Vital Practices tool
- [Supporting First Responders](#) by Bruce Barnes, Vestry Papers, November 2015