

CHAPTER I: GETTING ORGANIZED

Establishing a Matthew 25 Disaster Planning Committee

The Bishop has asked each pastor to appoint a Matthew 25 Disaster Planning Committee. Each pastor may approach this step differently depending on the makeup of his parish. Some pastors may appoint only a Matthew 25 Volunteer Coordinator, relying on this coordinator to identify and appoint the other committee members, while other pastors may appoint several key persons to the committee, allowing the committee members to appoint a coordinator.

This section is designed to help the pastor and/or the designated Matthew 25 Volunteer Coordinator work through the steps of setting up a disaster committee in each parish, school, or institution. It will help them make decisions such as who should be involved in preparing the parish for different types of disasters and how to tap already existing resources in the parish. It also will help them determine what roles a parish should play in serving the community after a disaster has occurred.

Appointing Committee Members

The first step in developing a parish Matthew 25 Disaster Preparedness and Response Plan is to establish a Matthew 25 Disaster Planning Committee. The pastor and/or the disaster coordinator may either create an entirely new committee composed of parishioners having disaster response planning experience and specially chosen parish staff members, or they may want to utilize existing committees such as a Building and Grounds Committee, Parish Social Ministry, Community Outreach, or Respect Life Committee.

It is useful to recognize that many parishes have historically participated in disaster relief activities (i.e. cleaning out homes after floods, cooking food for disaster victims, distributing donated goods, providing for emergency expenses, etc.) in informal ways. Therefore, a good place to begin the committee process is to recognize which activities are already taking place at the parish, assess their utility, and include them in the formal plan.

Although a large group may want to participate in disaster preparedness and response planning, larger groups tend to lose focus. Keep the initial disaster committee to approximately 6-10 persons, since the group will be initially functioning as a steering committee. Later, once goals are established, including more members of the parish may be necessary.

Including representatives from the following groups may enhance your parish's ability to prepare for and respond to disasters:

- Youth Group Leaders
- Boy Scouts/Girl Scouts
- Spanish-speaking Representatives
- Knights of Columbus Councils
- Men's Organizations
- Catholic Daughter Councils
- Saint Vincent DePaul Society
- Parish Social Ministry
- Parent/Teacher Organizations
- Other Service Groups

CHAPTER I: GETTING ORGANIZED

The Importance of Having a Matthew 25 Volunteer Coordinator

When establishing basic roles for the committee members, it is important that the key position of Matthew 25 Volunteer Coordinator is appointed early on. Parishioners' hidden talents are a goldmine of potential for aiding the community after a disaster. The parish may have doctors, nurses, crisis counselors, childcare workers, skilled contractors, boat owners, etc. All of these areas of expertise can be utilized after a disaster.

The role of the Matthew 25 Volunteer Coordinator is crucial for collaboration with neighboring parishes. A small disaster that may affect either one or two parishes can be better addressed when two parishes join forces to help the community recover.

The Matthew 25 Volunteer Coordinator also can be responsible for setting up activities such as canvassing neighborhoods for vulnerable parishioners or assembling baby care kits to give to families who have lost everything in a flood.

Appointing a person to and determining the scope of this position prior to a disaster is a critical step. Without a Matthew 25 Volunteer Coordinator it will be nearly impossible to coordinate a parish-wide effort to help those in need.

Goal Setting

It is important to set realistic goals in planning for and protecting the parish from disasters, as well as when responding to the community's needs after a disaster. ***It is impossible for one parish to "do it all" during a disaster.*** Use this section to explore the programs the parish might already have in place that are related to disaster response as well as to determine the most important disaster response activities that the parish needs to address.

What programs does the parish have that could be used to help the community during disasters? (For example: a home repair program for senior citizens, a clothing drive, etc...)

Using previous disasters as a guide, examine the parish's current level of preparedness and ability to provide community outreach. This will aid the committee in determining the most important steps to be taken before, during, and after a disaster occurs as well as in determining what types of community outreach the parish could provide after future disasters.

Examine what actions taken made "surviving the storms" easier. For instance, did the parish function as a shelter during flooding? Were people stranded at the parish, unable to get home as a result of flooding? Was there liturgical staff accessible for prayer at the Church?

Discuss the activities that took place at the parish during previous disasters that allowed of the parish to adequately handle the situations. (For example, the parish had an adequate supply of food, water, and blankets for stranded staff to remain at the parish for at least 3 days after the floods).

Examine the parish's ability to respond after the disaster occurred. Was the pastor adequately able to contact parish staff after these events to make sure that they were ok? How long did it take the parish to re-establish its normal routine? Was the parish able to provide community outreach immediately after these events?

CHAPTER I: GETTING ORGANIZED

Discuss any action taken that facilitated a quick response to the disaster by the parish. (For example, because the parish had an updated phone tree, the pastor was able to contact parish staff to tell them to stay home for a few days).

List the problems encountered that made it difficult for the parish to either re-establish its normal routine or respond to the community. (For example, parishioners came to the church hoping to volunteer after Hurricane Katrina/Rita/Gustav/Ike but the parish could not coordinate volunteers and sent them home.)

List outreach activities that the parish undertook after these disasters to help the community. List the outreach activities that were needed after these disasters. List the things that the committee would most like to accomplish in order to prepare the parish to help the community after a disaster.

Volunteer Units and Roles

Using the information gathered above and the “Matthew 25 Disaster Response Plan Volunteer Unit Roles and Responsibilities” documentation found in Chapter V, determine which volunteer units would best fit the needs, resources and talents of the parish and begin identifying parish volunteers that could fill the roles within these volunteer units. Submit a copy of your parish plan and membership to the Matthew 25 Program Manager so that your parish information can be available in the overall Diocesan plan.

Disseminating and Documenting Information

It is important to make sure the parish community is informed of the activities of the Disaster Planning Committee. Parishes with active disaster preparedness and response planning have often lamented that with each disaster they are “reinventing the wheel” because of a lack of documenting what was done during past disasters, making it difficult to learn from past mistakes and successes.

In order to keep the parish informed and up-to-date on disaster planning, consider distributing a copy of the committee’s goals to the pastor, parish council, and parishioners. Some recommendations include putting the minutes in a weekly bulletin, making announcements on Sunday, or posting notices on a bulletin board.

During the entire disaster planning process, it is important to keep records of the committee’s activities since the roles and responsibilities of the committee and its members may evolve over time. Information should include (but may not be limited to) types of activities undertaken (what type of assistance was provided, who was helped, etc.) and not undertaken, and why. It is especially critical to keep a concise record of activities during and after a disaster so that future disaster relief efforts don’t need to be organized from scratch. Appointing a record keeper will facilitate this important step.

Training and Exercises

Disaster preparedness and planning is not a one-time event or exercise. It is a process that must constantly be reviewed and updated. The Diocese of Houma-Thibodaux, upon request, will assist in providing training for all parish staff and volunteers for emergency situations. The Diocese will also provide scheduled training for various units and roles identified within the overall plan.

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