



DISASTERS AND THE LOCAL CHURCH

Guidelines for church leaders
in disaster-prone areas

tearfund

**Disasters and the local church:
Guidelines for church leaders
in disaster-prone areas**

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Preface

Disasters are a regular fact of life for many parts of our world. Christians are not immune to such disasters, and the areas affected often include networks of local churches. For example, the South Asian tsunami of December 2004 affected the Catholic churches of Tamil Nadu (India) and the Pentecostal churches of the Andaman Islands. When Cyclone Nargis hit Myanmar in 2008, many Baptist churches lay in its path. Annual flooding along the Brahmaputra river (Assam) affects scores of local congregations. In January 2010, the churches of Haiti's capital Port-au-Prince, including its cathedral, were badly damaged by a powerful earthquake.

These disasters have left a trail of death, sorrow and destruction, but there have also been amazing stories of churches taking the opportunity to demonstrate the love of Christ in very practical ways.

During Hurricane Mitch in 1998, large areas of several Central American countries suffered severe damage and loss of life. In Honduras, a small community near the river Choluteca was cut off by the rising flood waters for nearly two weeks. The local church decided to feed and look after the entire community. They mobilised a group of women to prepare and cook food, and motivated the youth of the church to deliver it to elderly people and the house-bound. The church leader organised groups of men to repair houses and to collect firewood and food. This was stored in the church. After 14 days, a team from an NGO arrived by boat with supplies: they were amazed to see how well the community and church had organised themselves.

When the team met the pastor, he said, 'We were here before the disaster, we were here during the disaster and we are here after the disaster. Agencies like yours will come and go, but the church will always be here.'

In 2008, Andrew Bulmer, former head of Tearfund's Asia Team, produced 12 case studies of situations worldwide in which local churches had engaged effectively with various types of disaster, both natural and man-made. He followed this in 2009 with a publication called *The Local Church and its Engagement with Disasters*, in which he highlighted seven strengths or 'niche areas' which the local church can deploy in the face of disaster. If recognised, developed and used, these strengths could do much to reduce the suffering and distress normally associated with disaster events.

The purpose of this manual is partly to increase understanding of disasters, but more importantly, to give guidance on the practical things a church and its community can do to prepare for a disaster, respond effectively to it and reduce the risk of it happening again.

1	The local church and disasters	9	1
2	Organising ourselves	37	2
3	Risks, needs and capacity assessments	69	3
4	Displaced people	95	4
5	Floods	133	5
6	Windstorms and landslides	151	6
7	Drought and food insecurity	175	7
8	Earthquakes	203	8

Contents

Preface	2
How to use this resource	8
1 The local church and disasters	9
Introduction	10
What is a disaster?	11
How do we respond to disasters?	12
Emergency response	13
Rehabilitation	15
Disaster mitigation	17
Disaster preparedness	19
Different types of disaster	22
The role of a church leader in disaster management	23
The strengths of the church in facing disasters	24
A checklist for responding to disasters	30
Community development and disaster management	32
Activity: Using our own resources	33
Bible study: Why does God allow suffering?	34
Review of this chapter	36
2 Organising ourselves	37
Introduction	38
The disaster management committee	39
Using volunteers	41
Managing meetings	46
Working with others	48
Securing additional help	54
Basic planning and monitoring skills	54
Health and safety	61
Dealing with casualties	62

Bible study: Delegation of leadership	67
Review of this chapter	68
3 Risks, needs and capacity assessments	69
Introduction	70
Risk assessment (pre-disaster)	70
Risk mapping in rural areas	70
Risk mapping in urban areas	77
Needs assessment	80
Capacity assessment	85
Use of church and community buildings in emergencies	89
Bible study: Assessing the city	91
Review of this chapter	92
Next steps	93
4 Displaced people	95
Introduction	96
Church response to displaced people	98
Code of conduct for churches	99
Case study: Tsunami response in the Andaman Islands	100
Responding to displaced people	100
Assessing the situation	101
Registering the displaced people	101
Providing for physical needs	104
Food	104
Water	106
Sanitation	113
Shelter	119
Providing for spiritual needs	124
Restoring the environment	128
Case study: Working together	129
Bible study: Overcoming prejudice	130
Review of this chapter	131

1

2

3

4

5

6

7

8

5	Floods	133
	Introduction	134
	Preparing for floods	135
	Awareness-raising activities	135
	Monitoring and warning systems	137
	Preparing at family level	138
	Preparing at community level	139
	Preparing the church	140
	Emergency response – saving and preserving life	141
	Discussion questions	142
	Flood mitigation	143
	Case study: The church prepares for annual floods in north-east India	147
	Bible study: The Flood	148
	Review of this chapter	150
6	Windstorms and landslides	151
	Introduction	152
	Impact of windstorms	153
	Preparing for windstorms	154
	Mitigation measures	160
	Location of new buildings	160
	Design and construction of houses	161
	Agricultural practices	162
	Embankments and dykes	165
	Landslides and mudslides	166
	Case study: Cyclone Nargis response in Myanmar	171
	Bible study: Fighting injustice	172
	Review of this chapter	173
7	Drought and food insecurity	175
	Introduction	176
	Causes of drought and food insecurity	177
	Household food security assessment	179



Emergency food distribution	182
Drought mitigation	184
Cultivation methods.	184
Water management	189
Crop management	189
Food storage and cereal banks	191
Case study: The Ateli grain bank, Burkina Faso	194
Food security in urban areas.	195
Managing livestock in drought	197
Bible study: Famine and a future king.	200
Review of this chapter.	202

8 Earthquakes

203

Introduction	204
Preparing for earthquakes	206
What to do during an earthquake	208
What to do after an earthquake	209
Church response to an earthquake	210
Earthquake damage mitigation	211
Building houses, building community.	215
Case study: Earthquake-resistant housing in Peru	216
Bible study: The Philippian jailer	217
Review of this chapter.	219

How to use this resource

This book is written to give guidance to church leaders and church members in areas where disasters are a common occurrence. Some areas may see themselves as relatively free of extreme weather, but this may change in future with the advance of climate change. Disaster management is not usually taught in seminaries or Bible colleges, yet members of churches will instinctively look to their spiritual leaders, as well as to local government, for help and direction. This book will provide the knowledge and skills which a leader may need in order to respond to these requests.

Churches usually have significant resources which can be used in times of disaster – their buildings, their compound and the resources of their members. They also have a committed group of people who are motivated by compassion and can be mobilised to respond to a crisis. The church often has strong sub-groups which can be used to raise awareness of disaster risks, and can bring communities together to make plans and reduce those risks.

This resource has eight chapters, four of them relevant to all disaster types and the other four dealing with specific types of hazard. The earlier chapters explain the particular strengths of the local church in facing disaster, and give some guidance on how to set up disaster committees and volunteer teams. There are also tables and templates for planning small projects, carrying out needs assessments and analysing the risks facing the community. These can be photocopied for use. Some practical guidance is given on how to meet the needs of displaced people – particularly the more vulnerable groups – for food, water, sanitation and shelter. The church's role in providing emotional and spiritual help is also explored.

The four specialised chapters give more information on preparing for and responding to particular types of disaster – floods, storms and landslides, droughts and earthquakes. There are also suggestions on actions to take to reduce long-term risks.

The church leader or pastor is a busy person with many responsibilities, and it is not intended that he or she alone uses this book. It would be far better for a leadership team to study relevant chapters together, perhaps copying and reading them beforehand. Each chapter provides Bible studies, case studies and discussion questions, as well as practical 'how-to' material.

Another approach would be to form a disaster committee and ask it to study relevant chapters and develop plans to prepare for expected hazards. The committee would need the support of the leader or pastor, but he/she may choose not to be a member. The book also contains material on working with others – with government, NGOs or other churches. Their representatives could be invited to these committee meetings.