

# Churches Assist Victims of Iowa Floods

*Cedar Rapids pastor Francis Frangipane says the disaster allowed Christians to become 'salt and light' in the city.*



[] Christians are at the forefront of disaster relief in Cedar Rapids, Iowa, where one of the worst floods in the state's history damaged 3,900 homes and left thousands displaced.

Francis Frangipane, pastor of River of Life church in Cedar Rapids, said volunteers from churches throughout the city were mobilized in early June, days before the heavy rains caused the Cedar River to rise above flood stage, and crest at 31 feet—exceeding records set during the 1993 Midwest Flood. More than 1,300 city blocks, including parts of downtown, were inundated with water, flooding Cedar Rapids City Hall as well as its county and federal courthouses.

“There was nothing that we really could fall back on or the city officials could fall back on that gave some sense of, ‘Well, here’s what they did then,’” said Frangipane, a charismatic author and prophetic teacher who has lived in Iowa since 1979. “There was no ‘then’ to look back at.”

Volunteers affiliated with a citywide church network called Serve the City worked closely with local and federal emergency management teams to implement the county's 500-year flood plain disaster plan. “When I first came in here, it wasn't like they were going to use us,” said River of Life executive pastor Steve Irwin, who has become a Serve the City liaison to the emergency teams. “I had to kind of eavesdrop for a while and tell them we had volunteers, how can we help you.”

Late last week, when local officials first realized the floodwaters were going to rise much higher than they thought, Irwin said he overheard the police saying they planned to use loudspeakers to warn residents to evacuate because they

couldn't go to each home. "I said, 'But we can,'" Irwin told *Charisma*. "So they gave us the job of going to every home, door-to-door and notifying them that they needed to evacuate the area. We had it done in 2-1/2 hours."

Serve the City now coordinates all the volunteers for Linn County and area Emergency Operation Centers. "There's not a single entity that's functioning out here with volunteers that's not functioning with our volunteers," Irwin said.

Yesterday volunteers began distributing a daily newsletter with emergency updates to every door in the flood plain area.

Frangipane said his church sustained no damage, allowing him to open the facility to two congregations whose buildings were flooded. He said the disaster has given River of Life—and other churches throughout the area—an opportunity to be "salt and light" in their city. "The promise of Isaiah 60 is arise, shine—when darkness covers the earth in deep darkness, the people arise, shine," he said. "And that is the thing that is most exciting to me—watching how the church has stepped up, has become like Christ to the city, has girded itself to serve, is not promoting itself. It's just being a strength and a help and a relief and a source of compassion, extending ourselves like everybody else."

Federal emergency management teams have applauded the churchwide volunteer effort, Frangipane said. "[They] are saying this is what we've got to have in every city, we have to have the church that's alive, that has faith, that's there for us because we don't know the streets, we don't know the people," the pastor said. "So it's kind of like we're seeing long-term the effect of having credibility with the city—earning it, not just having a nice little slogan on the church board outside with a little proverb or something, but actually gaining the currency of life to write this, speak into people's lives because we've earned their trust. That's what's going on right now."

Irwin said that in emergency response team meetings some joked that the church-based effort shouldn't be called Serve the

City, but Save the City. "They said it as a joke, but they said it with an endearing attitude, so that was encouraging to say the least," Irwin said.

He noted that none of the volunteers were prepared for a disaster of this scope, but he believes they were able to coordinate so well because of years spent uniting in prayer for Cedar Rapids. "The strength of this was cultivated years ago, from the churches coming together to win the city for Christ," Irwin said. "We have churches [from] across denominational lines that are walking together, and it's been the hand of God on us. It's just amazing."

River of Life canceled its on-site ministry leadership training courses, called In Christ's Image, due to the flooding. But Irwin said students from as far as Latvia still planned to come to assist the church with recovery efforts. Frangipane said volunteers, prayer and financial assistance were needed as Cedar Rapids residents seek to rebuild their lives.

As the floodwaters in Iowa began receding and residents attempted to survey the damage to their homes, people along a 280-mile stretch between Illinois and Missouri bolstered levees along the Mississippi River as it began to swell beyond records set in 1993. Mary Marr, director of the Christian Emergency Network (CEN) based in Phoenix, said Christians were poised to assist those communities as well.

"God is waking up the church to be ready for all kinds of disasters," Marr said. "We applaud the ministries and church denominations which have disaster readiness plans in place and response divisions. Many are currently participating in conference calls to share needs, answers to prayer, volunteer coordination and encouragement."

Marr said CEN has been working with the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) and the Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives (OFBCI) to launch a national Ready Church Initiative to further prepare ministries to respond to disasters. "This Ready Church Initiative is being very well

received by the DHS and OFBCI,” she said, “and we are in fact meeting with them again in Washington, D.C., June 26, where the issues facing Cedar Rapids today and the local churches in the future in other cities will be discussed at length.”

President Bush and Republican presumptive nominee John McCain were expected to visit Iowa today to survey the damage, which is estimated at more than \$1.5 billion. On Saturday, presumptive Democratic nominee Barack Obama visited areas of Illinois where floodwaters were expected to reach record highs. Federal Emergency Management Agency teams were on the ground in Cedar Rapids and throughout the Midwest to assist those affected by the flooding.

Cleanup and recovery efforts will likely take years, but Frangipane believes God will ultimately bring good out of the disaster. “We can touch cities and speak into the core of them in a way that is amazing,” he said. “God will take the thing that was meant to destroy us and use it to promote us and to transform us.” **–Adrienne S. Gaines**

To support Serve the City’s disaster relief effort, you can give a tax-deductible gift to Christian Life Missions at or send it to P.O. Box 952248, Lake Mary, FL 32795-2248. Be sure to make your check payable to Christian Life Missions and designate this for Iowa Flood Relief Fund. Your entire contribution will go directly to the relief efforts.