

Churches Trained to Respond to Disaster

Feb. 5, 2009 – As the number and magnitude of natural disasters increase, a Christian organization is training churches and faith-based groups to reach out to their communities before, during and after a crisis.

“[Natural disasters are] a terrible time for society and the victims of these disasters, but it also is a window of opportunity for the church to step up and assist, to work together for the common good of their communities and to offer a message of hope,” said Mary Marr, founder of the Christian Emergency Network (CEN), a Phoenix-based organization that provides disaster-response training to churches.

According to a recent report from the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, extreme weather-related disasters during the last decade have directly impacted a third of the world’s population. In December, a cholera epidemic was threatening the entire population of Zimbabwe. And a United Nations report also issued that month said Chad, too, is at risk of a waterborne disease epidemic. In 2008 alone, the United States was struck with severe flooding in the Midwest, wildfires in California and a rash of hurricanes.

Marr, who founded CEN after the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, said the Department of Homeland Security is increasingly recognizing churches as a major player in disaster response.

In September, Christian groups such as Somebody Cares America and Good News Galveston, both based in Texas, were among the first to respond after Hurricane Ike swept through Galveston, Texas, causing billions of dollars of damage.

In Cedar Rapids, Iowa, a coalition of churches known as Serve

the City was at the forefront of disaster relief in June when one of the worst floods in the state's history damaged 3,900 homes and left thousands displaced.

And after the Myanmar cyclone in May and the massive earthquake in China, Christians covertly assisted disaster victims by providing food and supplies.

But Marr said many ministries still need to be trained in the basics of disaster response. To help local churches better respond to disaster, Marr launched the Ready Church Initiative in August after presenting the plan to leaders within the Department of Homeland Security, the Federal Emergency Management Association (FEMA) and the Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives.

A four-week pilot project began in August in Santa Rosa, Calif., which sits on a fault line that makes it vulnerable to earthquakes. Sam Tillery, a longtime pastor and leader of the citywide group Together in Christ, said the pastors in his area had been looking for a resource like the Ready Church Initiative.

"We had been praying for 17 years to be an influence across our nation for Jesus Christ through a unified citywide effort," Tillery said. "More recently, we had a vision to do this through a strong prepared emergency response. We fasted and prayed for something like CEN's Ready Church Initiative, having already recognized the community's felt need for such an effort."

Before launching the Ready Church Initiative, CEN helped develop a faith-based disaster-relief checklist in cooperation with the Centers for Disease Control, and in 2007 the nonprofit organization worked with FEMA teams in Florida to develop a replicable pilot project for establishing a faith-based disaster-relief reception center.

CEN also helped New Jersey officials provide faith-based

“first responder” Certified Emergency Response Training.

CEN currently partners with 7,000 Christian ministries, including the Christian Broadcasting Network, Campus Crusade for Christ and Samaritan's Purse. Its Ready Church curriculum and disaster-training materials are sent to 47,000 churches in the U.S. and abroad.