
PowerPoint Notes

When Churches are Damaged as the Result of an Isolated Event: *Addressing Recovery and Spiritual Care of the Congregation*

*This document is not a handout. It is intended for use by deployed PDA teams who have responded to a church damage event and will serve as notes when presenting the PowerPoint on this topic. The intended audience of this PowerPoint is pastors, executive presbyters and the leadership of churches. The purpose of the PowerPoint is to provide guidance and support to those who are charged with addressing the recovery and spiritual care of congregations affected by church damage resulting from **an isolated event**.*

Types of isolated events

- Weather/wind/snow damage
- Water damage
- Construction issues
- Fire damage
 - Accidental
 - Arson
- Sinkhole/natural event
- Terrorism or criminal damage
- Other

When a damage event is a part of a larger disaster, some people find it easier to cope with the aftermath. In a sense, the adage “misery loves company” is true. When a church structure is damaged due to a hurricane or tornado, there is a generalized outpouring of support, impact within the community from the same disaster and the commitment to long-term recovery is open and pronounced. When a church is the sole object destroyed, some responses can be ambiguous or even negative and, consequently, much harder to deal with as a congregation.

When a church damage event comes suddenly, it is like a very localized earthquake. It comes without warning, without any possibility of preparation and the loss can be devastating, as there has been no opportunity for anticipation.

When a church damage event is the result of an accident, there is a sense that no ill feeling was intended, that the church is not under ‘attack’ or being singled out for ‘punishment’. Accidents happen to houses as well as churches.

When the damage event is the result of the direct action of a person, especially in the performance of their work, and his or her negligence results in the damage, there can be especially hard feelings. One Presbytery had two churches burned, more than twenty years apart, by the same manner of negligence by the SAME contractor. While some in the Presbytery might have been amused that the same company could make the same mistake twice, with the same consequence in two different Presbyterian churches, those close to both situations were angry, deeply hurt, and experienced betrayal trauma after the second fire. The second church to burn was also historic and, while it could be rebuilt to look like the original, it could not, of course, ever replace the original.

Malfeasance is especially difficult for a congregation. There is a period of anxious doubt about who might have committed the crime and then a period of anguish once the person is known. While such motives such as mental illness or participation in gang behavior may mitigate some feelings, the sense of helplessness and invasion can be acute. The debate over whether, when, under what circumstances and how to forgive the perpetrator(s) can divide the congregation and resurface old conflicts. Some people will be quick to advocate forgiveness, while others will only be able to forgive when there is some expression of contrition on the part of the perpetrator. Some will be agitated and express concern that forgiveness may lessen the application of legal sanctions. The different expressions of views about 'what to do with the person who did this' will in themselves sometimes cause conflict and division in the congregation. People need an opportunity to vent their feelings and be heard by others or the sense of community will be further eroded.

Sacred Space

- Spiritual home
- Site of family rituals
 - Baptisms
 - Marriage
 - Funerals
- Safe place and a refuge from life

A recent national campaign promoting the preservation of historic sites shows a picture of a large self-service gas station and asks the question, "When your kids want to see where you were married, will you have to say, 'Over there by the unleaded?'" This is precisely the problem with church damage. So much of the life of the present congregation is tied up in the sites where significant rituals marking the important transitions in their life and life of faith have taken place that may be difficult for some to get beyond the sense of loss. Baptisms, marriages, funerals, communion, affirmation of faith and confirmation as well as ordinations all take place as central parts of worship within the reformed tradition. Even those that are not sacraments,

carry with them the import of faith commitment. Temporary sites for these rituals are transitory. Those who are principals in the rituals will likely feel the loss, even feel 'cheated' by the lack of the sanctuary they have known, and in the case of marriages and baptisms, may have dreamed about the sanctuary being a central part of the services. Working with these issues will take sensitivity and tact. The question, "I know this isn't what any of us wanted, but is there anything that the church or staff could do to make it better?" is one way to broach the topic sensitively.

Age of the Building

- Historical significance
- Nostalgia
- Architectural significance

Be aware of limitations/implications of a church being an historical site or having historical significance. Historic churches carry with them the sacred stories, not only of the congregation, but also the stories of the ages in which they have existed. They are invested with significance beyond their utility as a building or personal experience of the living members of the congregation. When the Lexington Presbyterian Church in Lexington, Virginia burned the media attention was focused on the fact that a Civil War General, Stonewall Jackson, had been a member and the pew in which he sat for many years was destroyed in the fire. For those in the church and the congregation, this added to the sense of loss and intensified their trauma.

However, even with churches that are not necessarily historic sites, the feeling of nostalgia that comes with living one's life within the wall of a church one week at a time will intensify the loss for members of the congregation. This will be especially true for long-time members and those whose families have been members for several generations.

When a tornado hit an old and architecturally significant (read difficult to rebuild) church in NC, many believed that it could not be rebuilt even to appear similar to the old church because of the size and complexity of the roof beams. This proved to be wrong and the church was rebuilt without any exterior sign of damage. However, the obvious difficulty and the complicated nature of rebuilding added to the difficulties of recovery.

Connection to the Community

Many churches are the central, or nearly central, place of activity for the community. Some churches host community events or weekly meetings that will now be displaced. The community will feel the loss in many of the same ways as the church and will frequently behave like awkward neighbors after a death. Some consideration should be given to a plan for connecting with the community both in spiritual care in the wake of the disaster and in opportunities to participate in the recovery long-term.

Congregational Participation

- **Roles in a church damage event**
 - Eye witnesses
 - Injured/affected persons
 - Responders
 - Clean up/salvage involvement
 - Displaced residents
 - Causal factors associated with an individual

When a church disaster occurs, especially when it is the only building affected in a disaster, then it is likely that members of the church were eyewitnesses and, perhaps, even responders. These persons will have lingering memories when the damage event is discussed, and may even have intrusive memories long after the event when seemingly unrelated objects, smells or context provide a trigger for the memory. First responders such as fire and police personnel who might be members of the church may be more vulnerable as they have both the experience of feeling responsibility for doing something about the disaster and the sense of loss for their place of worship. Additionally, some may feel guilty as others publicly give thanks for everything they did to help keep the event from doing any more damage. The guilt comes from a perception that had they been there sooner or been more adept at their responsibility perhaps even less damage would have been done.

Those who clean up after an event may have problems with the association of smell, touch and sight with the loss of safety in their place of worship. These persons may have difficulty praying, leading worship or singing. However, for many, it is more helpful to talk about the feelings and to assist with clean up rather than to avoid the task. Individuals can be encouraged to 'do what you feel comfortable doing' and let the rest go. This applies to both clean up/salvage work and in leading/participating in worship afterward. However, no one should make that decision for them; it is vitally important that each individual decides for him or herself the extent to his or her involvement; the decision is a very individual and personal one. Many people have the pattern of needing to 'work on something' when they grieve and are trying to deal with a loss. Working on sorting out the salvage may actually help them work through their own grief.

Extent of Damage

- Complete
- Partial
- Smell of Smoke
- Reminders

When a church is completely destroyed, it brings into play a host of other issues: Should we move? Should we rebuild the same building? Does the design of the old one meet our needs? Would building something else be disloyal to the history and tradition of the church? What will the city allow us to do (in the case of historic districts)?

When a church is partially destroyed, the problems become complicated if there is a distance between the temporary space and the rest of the building. At the same time, the damaged structure becomes a constant reminder of the loss for those using the remaining structures. Sensory reminders such as the smell of smoke or the sound of sirens will also likely be an issue. Sensory reminders are present every time individuals walk by the remains. Whatever has been salvaged will likely be a reminder of the disaster every time the item is used. The sights and sounds of restoration and the constant discussion on the topic is an ever present reminder, particularly to staff and the pastor.

Reminders of the event will be everywhere. That is part of the challenge of recovery. The goal is not to 'forget it and move on' but rather to 'move on' and make the church damage event a part of the story of the church, but not THE story of the church.

Adaptability and Resilience

- Length of membership
- Involvement in the church
- How well people are listened to
- The patience of the leadership

The pace and trajectory of recovery depends in large measure on the manner in which the church leadership as a whole manages the process of recovery. Some external factors affect the pace will be how long people have been members and how attached they feel to the building. The longer term the membership, the greater need for spiritual and pastoral care in moving forward with recovery. Another external factor will be how involved the majority of the congregation has been in the life of the church. A large church with a small core of participants may have difficulty as it deals with both the reintegration of large numbers of persons and the feeling of loss of those most involved in the life of the church.

Two issues the leadership does have in its control are how well it listens and how well it is able to work together. Open, honest dealing with stress, compassion fatigue and conflict will enable the leadership to help the congregation move forward. Factions, impatience and the development of 'sides' will not only slow the process of recovery, but also leave lingering problems and hurt feelings which will need resolution at a later time.

It may be helpful to remind people that taking care of one another is more important than taking care of business. Putting the church back together physically is much easier than restoring the community that has been traumatized.

Patience on the part of the leadership is essential. Some people will be anxious and ill at ease with the seeming spiritual vacuum left by the loss of sacred space. These people will need to be able to both vent their discomfort or dissatisfaction and have a non-anxious presence to weather the very real present...because you can't 'put it back right now!'

Traumatic Stress

Traumatic stress is the result of sudden, unpredictable and overwhelming events that threaten our lives, our identity, or our core values in a setting where we feel we are no longer in control of the outcome of the experience.

Look at this definition. How does this fit the current situation?

Could some people be affected by traumatic stress? Who would be more vulnerable to having this sort of experience? [Make a list on flip chart paper]

Signs of Traumatic Stress

- Persons may express the effect of the damage to the church on their spiritual lives by either:
 - A flattening of expressions of the centrality of their spiritual lives
 - A hypersensitivity to spiritual expressions – their own or someone else's
- Individuals may
 - Ask questions such as "why did God do this?"
 - Question justice and meaning
 - Feel a need to be cleansed
 - Close oneself off from loved ones
 - Feel despair and hopelessness
 - Feel guilty
 - Wonder about life and death

- Feel shame
- Reconsider core tenets of spiritual beliefs

When people make statements such as *Since the fire, I really haven't felt much like going to church* or *It feels as though I have a reason to be involved with the church that I haven't had before*, it is important to listen carefully and attentively. Either of these may be an expression of traumatic stress. Managing traumatic stress requires time, a feeling that one has a safe place to share feelings and thoughts, and the support of understanding friends who will listen without giving judgment. A few weeks following a church damage event, the majority of the congregation should be back to regular sleeping habits, able to get through the day without being constantly distracted by the intrusive memories of the disaster, and have things in their lives to look forward to. Yet, a small minority will still be struggling. How they move on will depend upon the kind of support they get in their spiritual as well as their everyday lives. Everyone recovers from a traumatic experience differently and on a different time schedule.

The Recovery Process: Challenges and Issues

- Trauma of leadership
- Leadership burn out
- Compassion fatigue
- Complex / Cumulative Trauma / Unresolved Conflict
- Making assumptions
- Being unrealistic about expectations
- Unorganized response
- Delayed response
- Moving Too Fast

Trauma of Leadership

- Leadership showing symptoms of traumatic stress
- Focus on the trauma, not the 'steps' of recovery
- Conflict cannot be resolved until the traumatic stress is dealt with... the story is heard

When leadership has not had an opportunity to support one another in dealing with their own feelings and difficulties in deal with the aftermath of the disaster, the congregation will remain anxious about its own ability to cope. It is not unusual for members to 'flee' both conflict and lack of direction by the leadership. But even with effective leadership, some will leave to attend other churches and, sometimes, they may return. For some, there is a need to avoid the sense of loss and grief; for others, it may be the inability to be in the presence of those who are hurting. In addition, some people select a church like they pick a restaurant or a vacation spot; they choose one depending upon how it fits their particular needs. They may decide to go where the music is good and the Sunday School doesn't smell like smoke. Other than expressing sadness over their departure, there is little the church leadership can do.

It should be made very clear, however, that unaddressed conflict and lack of pastoral care absolutely will drive people to go to other churches, especially if they begin to feel the church cannot ultimately make it through this difficulty. Therefore, the more the leadership works on relationships, listening to people's stories and communicating their own work, the more the church will come together, rather than become torn apart, following a disaster.

Conflict is a normal part of any large decision making process. Disagreements come up in the daily work of the church. But, serious conflicts cannot be resolved until the traumatic stress of leadership and members is addressed. People who are anxious are more likely to be in conflict. People who feel their expectations and needs are not being heard will continue to 'up the ante' on the disagreement until they leave, resolve their anxiety or force a change in leadership.

Leadership Burnout

- Signs
- How to avoid
- Non-anxious presence
- Patience

There are several signs that should be actively identified if they emerge in leadership. Persons may have difficulty getting assigned work accomplished on time. They may develop uncharacteristic conflicts over issues that would not have been a problem prior to the trauma. Persons may be reluctant to accept new work or do previous work in new ways. They may evidence a flat affect or negative outlook. They may show display distress such as emotional outbursts long after the trauma, have difficulty maintaining relationships or share that they have personal issues with sleep, eating or their thoughts.

Avoiding leadership burnout requires the development of a team response to recovery, a willingness to address issues without a judgmental attitude, and an outlook that recovery will come in its own time and not before.

Leadership that is able to provide a non-anxious presence and a sense that recovery will be long-term and achievable, while keeping up a sense of hope and confidence in the future, will weather the storm of recovery and also develop a stronger leadership team and sense of community. The difficulty is that most leadership does not have the experience of a successful long-term recovery and, therefore, finds it difficult to keep 'an eye on the prize'.

Compassion Fatigue

- Secondary Traumatic Stress
- Serious and requires intervention
- Can be difficult to identify and maintain boundaries

The process of recovery can be exhausting, frustrating and conflict-ridden. The risk of compassion fatigue, a kind of secondary traumatic stress, is high when one person or a few people are asked to assume too many responsibilities. The secondary trauma in a church disaster comes from the need to be intimately involved with the consequences of the disaster for the long-term.

Compassion fatigue can be serious. The erosion of boundaries and the assumption of others' expectations beyond one's ability to cope or manage can result in internalizing blame for failure, recurrent intrusive memories, and aversion to working on the recovery. Often, affected persons develop a sense that they are indispensable to the successful recovery of the church. The leadership team of the church should intervene to provide support, respite for those affected, reestablishment of eroded boundaries and clarification on realistic expectations. Compassion fatigue should be actively looked for in persons who have been highly involved in the disaster recovery process.

If people begin to behave as though they are being asked to do too much, they probably are. One helpful leadership response is to reduce expectations. Recovery takes time, patience, and teamwork to solve problems that arise. Other expectations about church programs or large new endeavors will need to be rescheduled and/or delayed.

Complex / Cumulative Trauma / Unresolved Conflict

- Previous unresolved traumatic stress
- Previous and underlying conflict that do not have anything to do with the trauma
- These will be difficult to resolve unless acknowledged
- Often, previous trauma stress and unresolved conflicts cannot be dealt with until the current trauma is dealt with
- Disagreement escalates to conflict quickly
- Disaster sometimes an opportunity for mischief
- “Secrets” complicate conflicts
- “Hidden agendas” also hide trauma resolution

Churches, like any system, has a history and included in that history is always a past with both positive and negative or challenging experiences. There may have been issues or conflicts revolving around the facility, with or between staff members, with the greater governing organization (presbytery/PCUSA) or between individual members or member subgroups. Many times, the difficulties have been acknowledged and appropriately addressed; the wounds may remain, but they are essentially healed and the congregation and church has moved on in a healthy way. However, at times, the difficulties or conflicts have been inadequately addressed or not even acknowledged, leading to festering unrest, division between staff, the governing organization and/or members. Whatever conflicts under the surface have been left unresolved will erupt with greater force during the recovery period. Such dynamics negatively impact the recovery process; this often goes unrecognized by those involved and the leadership. As recovery lags the discontent with leadership may also lag and divisions within the congregation will become more serious. Loss of membership is typical.

Sometimes, those helping to lead the recovery are unaware of these dynamics and conflicts and are caught unaware by new divisions or conflicts that come to the front during recovery. Those guiding the recovery process should be mindful of addressing conflict openly and honestly, rather than seeing it as an inevitable situation that must be endured. Disasters and the ensuing changes evoke strong emotional responses. People are more sensitive, more vulnerable and more reactive. Thinking may be impacted by these emotional responses; very often, those persons who are most affected are unaware of the depth of their emotional reactions. This is a time for understanding, for clear communication, and for every opportunity to discuss the issues which are the basis for the conflict. Sometimes, trained individuals, perhaps from presbytery or a group such as Presbyterian Disaster Response, can be helpful in diffusing conflict and identifying or addressing the underlying issues. At times, the unsettledness of the

situation and the confusion that often follows a disaster provides the opportunity for mischief. That is, sometimes persons with mal intent take the opportunity to launch an agenda or to make an impact that they otherwise would not have made upon the church or community at large. While it is important to listen to each person's thoughts and concerns, it is wise to be mindful of hidden agendas, subversion tactics, and negative actions so that they can be avoided.

Making assumptions

- Nothing is Obvious after a Disaster
- Affected Communities in Shock

Any statement that begins "It's obvious that...." may be proven to be wrong later. Refrain from making assumptions about damage, prospects for recovery, or resources needed until after an assessment can be made of the damage and the capacity of the community to respond. The only safe assumption is that a disaster requires careful attention.

Where there has been widespread damage and loss of life, individuals and communities will be in shock initially. Whatever information a governing body wishes to impart will likely be lost, misinterpreted and misunderstood immediately after the impact of the disaster. Encouragement without providing false hope and repetition of factual information is best.

Being Unrealistic about expectations

- ◆ Disaster is a Systemic Event
- ◆ Time does not heal all wounds
- ◆ Recovery is a long term goal

Disaster affects the whole Presbytery, even if the damage isn't widespread. Affected communities and churches are less able to support the general mission of the Presbytery, pastors may decide to relocate, and key lay leadership may be lost because of other concerns, disaster loss, or their own relocation. The loss of a church building is seldom the only loss sustained after a disaster. The loss has repercussions that are wide-reaching as well as long-term in nature. It is important to view the impact of the disaster with a wide lens as a systemic event.

At some point, people will begin to acknowledge that nothing will ever be the same. This sense of loss is very real and can be disheartening or even lead to despair. Support is needed so that the congregation and leadership begin to understand that change is inevitable and, while it is uncomfortable, change can bring good things. The goal is not to put things back exactly as they

were, although many individuals may believe that is the goal. The goal is to recover and to find a “new normal”.

Recovery takes much more time than most people realize, particularly while in the initial clean up stage when volunteers are enthusiastic and progress is notable. As recovery slows, it is important to remember that it is a process and a long-term goal. Also, recovery is hard work; it takes much manpower and can consume many resources. Time does pass and, while many things improve with time, there will be a lasting impact upon the congregation.

Unorganized Response

- Administrative committee may be needed
- Presbytery has significant role
- Leadership needs to communicate
- Involvement of affected communities

In smaller, more local circumstances, church leadership and Session may wish to create a building committee to deal with the actual church recovery plan which may include reconstruction of the building. This lightens the load on the pastor and the current leadership who must maintain the day-to-day operations. Disaster Recovery needs to be a coordinated process including the Committee on Ministry so that support is both sufficient and timely. Following a disaster in which a large Presbytery role is necessary and desired, a special committee may be needed.

Communication between church leaders, the congregation, and the staff is essential to a good outcome. Misinformation, rumors and honest misunderstandings can be greatly reduced by systematic and ongoing communication. A variety of communication forms should be utilized with the goal of repeated and clear messages to a wide range of audiences. Forms can include electronic (website, social media, email blasts), print (flyers, newsletters), signage, verbal (from the pulpit, in meetings), and media (TV, newspaper, radio). Audiences should include all subgroups in the church ranging from Christian Education teachers to senior citizens, from seasoned staff to new members, and from staunch supporters who attend weekly to members who come on holidays.

Delayed Response

- Emergency plan needed
- Immediate, willing help is needed
- Lost opportunities
- Lost resources
- Lost energy
- Lost goodwill

Many churches and presbyteries have developed emergency plans. If a church has not considered developing a plan, it should be considered. If a plan is not in place, there may be a delay as leadership determines the extent of the impact of the disaster upon the church facility and its people and plans the first steps of a response. Once a disaster hits, volunteers usually come forward to assist and this resource must be tapped into as soon as possible to meet the initial needs. Delays result in confusion, misinformation, and increased stress for all involved. Tangible implications, such as lost opportunities and resources in the form of grants, volunteer assistance, invitations to join recovery groups and such, may result and can have a negative impact in the long-term. Intangibles, such as enthusiasm and energy to participate, a forward momentum to lead the recovery, and positive relationships and goodwill, are also affected negatively when delays ensue. When energy is expended on tasks that are slow-moving, frustrating, and show little results, people are reluctant and unwilling to continue to put their energy into those tasks. While recovery after a disaster may be slow, it must be purposeful and demonstrate clear progress to keep the momentum going.

Moving Too Fast

- Respond quickly, but move deliberately on issues of pastoral moves and conflict
- Recovery needs to move along, but cannot be rushed
- Take time to consult with the affected communities

While avoiding delays is important, churches must also avoid the pressure to move too quickly. Most people do not understand that recovery takes time and cannot be pushed through rapidly. For most people and congregations, recovery from a disaster is uncharted territory and so a thoughtful, informed, stepwise response is not only prudent but it is necessary. Emotions run high following a disaster; thinking is not at its clearest. Deliberate actions following open discussions with stakeholders considering options and long-term implications will reduce the

urge to respond impulsively and, perhaps, unwisely. Again, including subgroups in the congregation, staff and the community leaders and agencies will assist in developing an all-encompassing and thoughtful response.

Spiritual Responses

- Joy is inaccessible because of grief, bereavement and shock – joy may even be seen as irreverent, obscene, cruel or socially unacceptable
- Distorted meaning of one’s own life, either expressed as a feeling of purposelessness or an inflated belief in one’s own purpose
- Isolation from community rooted in shame, guilt, depression
- Sources of awe (power of nature, ‘acts of God’) seen as a threat
- Relation to the God or spiritual beliefs may be expressed as anger, betrayal, doubt, rejection of the concept of a higher power or a disavowal of earlier relationship

Spiritual Care

Spiritual Care is anything that assists an individual, family or community in drawing upon their own spiritual perspective as a source of strength, hope and healing. It nurtures the human spirit in coping with the crisis (Light Our Way).

Goals of Spiritual Care

- Support for persons to find a balance in their spiritual life
- Safety for the expression of spiritual distress without judgment
- Opportunity for beginning the narration of this part of one’s spiritual journey
- Help the person identify and reconnect to his/her spiritual support resources and, sometimes if appropriate, introduce new ones
- Special opportunities for children and youth

Basic Standards and Principles

- Offer presence and hospitality
- Meet, accept and respect persons exactly as they are
- Do No Harm; never evangelize, proselytize, or exploit persons in vulnerable need

Roles for Spiritual Care Givers

- Active Listener -with some interviewing skills
- Companion
- Group Facilitator
- Debriefers
- Advocate

Active Listener

- Give the person full attention
- Ask appropriate questions – especially if of a faith not known to you
- Try not to direct conversation
- Use caution/discretion in self-disclosure
- Avoid clichés
- Don't preach or proselytize
- Be cautious about giving advice
- Permit persons to share their memories and stories
- Share your emotions sincerely
- Encourage connections to loved ones
- Support people in finding their own solutions to problems
- Offer prayer if requested

Companion

- Accompany survivors to stressful spaces or meetings IF appropriate: i.e. morgue to identify body or first contact with officials
- Accompany at a distance when helpful: i.e. available if needed in a general area or by phone
- Accompany survivors to places where they can acquire essentials, assistance, and information.

Group Facilitator

Groups of survivors may wish to discuss, without a formal debriefing, their experiences and options. One might act as a moderator of such a group.

Debriefer

Lead, with appropriately trained others, a modified Critical Incident Stress Management debriefing.

Advocate

Advocate for support for the vulnerable in disaster, especially those with disabilities, the elderly and the poor

Ensure that marginalized persons have access to services and resources for recovery

Helpful Responses after a Disaster

- Support
- Presence
- Resources
- Training
- Respite
- Access help early

Support

- Show Up
- Immediate response
- Leadership support
- Personnel
- Financial support
- Celebration of response
- Special events

An adjunct to support is simply to “show up”. Simple acts such as sitting with a person quietly, a hand on a shoulder, or attending a meeting with the congregation are extremely meaningful. Lives are busy, agencies are stretched thin and time is precious; congregations, pastors and staff are truly touched and supported by the ministry of presence. This “walking alongside” provides a sense of comfort and a sense of normalcy in an otherwise chaotic and overwhelming circumstance. It is best to have this presence available at the earliest possible time, preferably within 24 hours of a disaster.

Congregations and staff are in dire need of support at each stage. Support for the leadership is important as they work through issues and planning, support for the congregation as they work through the numerous church and personal losses and changes, and support for the recovery effort as the church looks to the future. Ultimately, in the church setting, support can bolster a sense of hopefulness and to promote continued reliance and faith in God, a belief that He walks with us through life’s trials. Support is the visible and tangible presence of our faith in action. Reassuring support behind the scenes is more important than many public pronouncements for support.

It is particularly important to support the pastor and church leadership. They may have suffered personal losses and stresses from the disaster. In addition, the congregation and, perhaps, the community may be looking to them for guidance, emotional and tangible physical

support. Much of the information needed to plan a response and to look forward to recovery will be new and, often, it is unclear how to gather and assess the information obtained. Knowledgeable support during this time will not only assist the leadership in making informed, appropriate decisions, but will assist the leaders personally in dealing with the emotional and physical toll of the disaster.

Personnel may be particularly affected by the disaster as the church is their “work home”. They may or may not be members, but they are certainly emotionally invested in the church and its mission in the community. In addition, personnel may have lost possessions and other things of meaning in the facility. Personnel may be emotionally or physically unable to work or may need to take time off to deal with personal and family issues such as their own home damage. In such cases, temporary, part-time, and/or volunteer personnel can be helpful to fill in until personnel can return or a more permanent situation can be arranged.

While recovery is expensive, the lack of recovery or failure to recover in a healthy way is more expensive. Financial resources within the church and congregation, within the community, within the larger church organization and within the state/federal agencies should be systematically explored. Assistance in record keeping and proper disbursements of funds is often very helpful to churches at this time. While new and unexpected expenses will occur, the church must continue to meet its financial obligations to employees, vendors and others. Disruption in weekly contribution envelopes may impact the church’s immediate financial health. Short-term financial solutions should be explored to bridge the gap between expenses and current income.

In the midst of sadness and unsettled circumstances, the church can still feel joy. The message of special celebrations are twofold—to acknowledge the good things, the hope, the relationships built, the lessons learned, the fact that we can walk together and not alone as well as to take a breath during the long recovery phase and focus upon the faith, the ties that bind us together, so that we can continue. Special celebrations can serve as benchmarks on a path that may seem endless and with many snares. They remind congregations of the progress made with a focus on joy and hope. These are essential “lights” on what could often be a dark and uncertain path.

Churches are often focal points for special events. Historic anniversaries, all-church and community events such as picnics or VBS, annual bazaars and traditional potluck dinners all are a part of this history and the fabric of what makes a church congregation. Interruptions in typical events further traumatize the members and the staff. As much as possible, thought should be given as to how to continue traditional events in some way, even if they must be modified or delayed. A sense of normalcy, structure and routine is beneficial to the entire church community and these can be bolstered by continued participation in church special events.

Additional Resources

- Financial resources/Grants
- Technical resources from Presbyterian Disaster Assistance or Church World Service
- Presbyterian Publishing Company
- Church Redevelopment Network

Church damage carries with it complicated relationships with the insurance company, local officials, and companies that the insurance company may hire to assist in the recovery. All of these relationships can be new for the leadership of the church, even if professionals in these areas are present in the congregation. Recovery from church damage is a learning process for all concerned.

Financial as well as technical assistance from the outside can be very helpful. The tendency is to trust whatever someone in authority says without really understanding the choices. This can be expensive.

The leadership of the congregation is better supported when they have the willingness to accept assistance from outside the community and consider informed advice from several sources and options.

The Presbytery may need to take on the role of help to find new resources and advocate on behalf of recovery. Presbyterian Disaster Assistance, Church World Service and the Church Redevelopment Network are just three networks of assistance that can be helpful.

Training

- Disaster Training
- Spiritual Care Training

Training for congregational leaders in traditional disaster response may or may not be appropriate; however, training for those dealing with the aftermath of the church damage can be very helpful. One area to focus upon is spiritual and emotional care. While this care can positively impact the congregation and staff, it is even more essential for those in leadership, long-term recovery positions and the pastor. Training in Compassion Fatigue can reduce stress, help bring leaders together, and reduce the long-term impact of the tragedy both for the leaders and the congregation. These trainings are usually one or two day events and are available through PDA.

Respite

- Care for Caregivers includes time away
- Retreats for leadership
- Paid leave for pastors and educators

A leadership role in working through recovery from church damage can be exhausting. The timetable is not in the hands of the leadership, but the myriad of people involved in the decision-making about recovery. Of course, many of these people as well as the decisions are made outside of and with little input from the congregation even though the impact upon the congregation may be substantial.

In a major rebuilding or relocation, leadership will need to pace themselves for the long haul. A successful recovery isn't very successful if leaders are lost at the end. The pastor may need to take a break from time to time. A weekend away with family can disconnect them from the day-to-day stress of rebuilding. A week long discernment process after several months may be needed. The leadership of the church may benefit from a weekend retreat to build teamwork, discuss the impact of the church damage on the whole program of the church, and learn new, more healthful, patterns of working together.

Access Help Early

- Ask Presbytery
- Ask PDA
- Ask PDA to broker with other parts of the PCUSA and VOAD

Support in the form of tangible and/or financial resources as well as training and personnel are available to congregations recovering from a disaster. Presbyteries vary in their ability to provide specific supports at any given time, but are always willing and available to provide emotional and spiritual support and guidance to pastors and congregations. No matter the circumstances prior to the disaster, churches are encouraged to contact and work with the presbytery in the aftermath of a disaster.

Additionally, PCUSA provides the ministry of Presbyterian Disaster Assistance as a resource to congregations. PDA can be accessed through the presbytery as PDA must be invited by the presbytery. Again, this is another good reason to be in contact with the presbytery following a disaster. PDA has numerous resources to share with affected communities and churches once they become involved.

Thank You.

May God Bless and Keep You