



Photo by Glen Carrie (Unsplash)

Placing first-aid equipment in highly visible and accessible locations ensures ease of use when needed.

# Emergency Preparedness in the Liturgy and Parish

Jennifer Dyer

One Sunday, my husband and I dropped our three children off at the front entrance of church so they could prepare for their altar serving duties while we parked the car. After enjoying a brief moment of quiet and tranquility, we began to stroll across the parking lot toward church. As we did, we witnessed a fellow parishioner, Miss Lucy, trip and fall. She was not able to get her hands in place to break her fall, and her forehead was the first thing to come in contact with the ground, hitting the concrete walkway hard.

Because it was still early, the parking lot was empty. We rushed over to help her. There was a great deal of blood, and it

was clear she needed an ambulance. I ran into church, and when I was unable to find a first aid kit, I grabbed a handful of paper towels before calling 911. By now, more parishioners were arriving for Mass. We had an injured person on the ground, blood splattered on the sidewalk and, because Mass was about to begin, throngs of people walking by or around the area. My husband and I waited with Miss Lucy until the ambulance arrived, trying to keep her comfortable.

After the ambulance left, I sat in the pew thinking about what had just happened. My husband had tended to the woman's bloody forehead without rubber gloves, and we had no ice pack to offer her to keep the swelling down, no bandages, and no supplies to clean up the blood. I wondered if I just didn't know

where to find the first aid kit, or whether the church even had one. These thoughts spinning in my mind made me aware of the need for parishes to be better prepared for emergencies that may arise.

## THE IMPORTANCE OF PREPAREDNESS

Amidst the warm embrace of our parish communities, the phrase “All are welcome” resounds, echoing the inclusive spirit that defines our shared faith. But in addition to lovingly and compassionately welcoming all, how do we ensure that everyone is safe and protected while at Mass? How can we ensure the safety of those with limited mobility if there is a need to evacuate during Mass? How can we prevent injuries or respond when someone trips and falls? Is there an accessible first aid kit, and do people know where to find it? Are there proper signs to direct people to exits?

Sometimes, a parish may have plans in place, but not everyone is aware of the information. When my children were little, they often left my pew to attend children’s Liturgy of the Word. I never once thought about their safety or well-being until one day when the fire alarm went off during Mass. Although on that occasion there was no emergency, I realized that I had no idea where my children were or how to get to them if there were an emergency. Where was the reunification point? If there was a plan in place, I had no knowledge or information on the strategies that would be implemented to help me find my children. Would I go to them or would they come to me?

Plans for addressing emergencies that may arise in the liturgical setting is one aspect of preparedness. Parishes should create a broad emergency plan, providing information on what to do should an emergency arise anywhere on the parish campus or during any parish sponsored event. But creating plans is only one component of parish preparedness; communicating plans is just as important. It is critical that plans be widely shared to mitigate or reduce the impact of a disaster. So how can parishes and parish liturgy teams work together to develop and promulgate an effective parish preparedness plan? We do this by (1) building a parish planning team or committee; (2) conducting hazard, risk, and resource assessments; (3) identifying goals; and (4) creating a plan to guide preparedness and response activities.

## BUILDING A TEAM

The first step (with the support of the pastor) is to build a team to lead the parish preparedness planning efforts. The team should be small enough for collaboration and decision-making but large enough to include members representing the full diversity of the parish (including children, seniors, individuals with disabilities, and members from all language groups within the



Ushers can help identify persons who may need additional assistance in the event of an emergency.

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community). Assembling this team not only benefits emergency preparedness activities but can also engage a broader set of parishioners by creating pathways for people to share their gifts with the larger faith community.

If the pastor or parish leaders know individuals with certain competencies who would be a good fit to serve on a parish disaster-planning committee—for example, first responders or those with emergency experience—then a personal invitation by the pastor may help recruit them to the team.

Another way to identify parishioners who may be interested in helping put plans in place is to host a disaster-preparedness planning session for individuals and families. This will provide parishioners with the information they need to put together their own emergency preparation plan to keep themselves safe. In this session, they will think through things like how to get life-saving prescription medication during a disaster event or what items should be placed in a “go bag” in case you need to leave home quickly for an extended period of time. It will also help parishes identify those individuals who have an interest in, and might be inclined to help with, parish preparedness. Catholic Charities USA has created a five-video planning series called the Catholic Disaster Preparedness Program that can be used to guide this session, as well as guide the parish disaster planning process.

Once you have identified individuals to be part of a planning team, some initial questions to ask would be:

- What actions or decisions, or both, need to be approved by the pastor, and what can be decided by the team?
- How often will the team meet?
- What are the individual strengths of those present?



Photo © John Zich

Informing the assembly about the parish emergency plan is an essential way of ensuring their safety.

- Are there any skills gaps on the team that should be filled? (For example, no one on the team has knowledge or expertise in working with individuals with hearing impairments.)
- What resources does the team need to move forward?

As the team begins to think through these questions, seek out potential partners who can provide direction and resources such as diocesan facilities managers, Catholic Charities, Knights of Columbus, Society of St. Vincent de Paul, local emergency managers, and other voluntary organizations active in disasters (VOAD). Each state has a VOAD website listing members and resources. Parish leaders may also find information on the state VOAD page about active local VOADs in your community. These entities can help provide resources, guidance, and information and will be important partners during potential disaster events. Note that it is helpful to build these relationships *before* emergencies happen so that you know who to turn to for needed resources when disaster strikes.

## A TRIPARTITE APPROACH

Before embarking on the journey of preparedness, it is important to consider three foundational pillars of parish preparedness. Each one plays a pivotal role in safeguarding the parish community, sacred spaces, and the invaluable treasures that bind the community together in faith.

**1. Parish Operations:** At the heart of preparedness efforts lies the preservation of parish operations, ensuring the continuity of essential functions. From safeguarding parish staff to protecting facilities and vital resources, this facet of preparedness focuses on minimizing disruption and facilitating a swift return to normalcy following a disaster. By meticulously charting the course for response and recovery, the structures and processes that form the backbone of the parish community are fortified, ensuring that the guiding light of faith continues to shine brightly amidst the darkness of uncertainty.

**2. Protecting the Community:** Central to the mission of the parish is the unwavering commitment to protecting all members and guests, especially the most vulnerable, in times of crisis. Whether gathered for Mass, religious education, parish celebrations, or ministry functions, every individual deserves to feel safe and secure within the sacred walls of parish structures and gatherings. Plans must be carefully crafted to mitigate the impact of disaster events, from natural disasters to unforeseen emergencies, ensuring that the sanctity of parish gatherings remains untarnished amidst any chaos that may occur before, during, or after a disaster. Through proactive measures and swift response protocols, the parish affirms their unwavering commitment to the well-being of all who gather.

**3. Protecting Sacred and Important Items:** Within the confines of the parish lie treasures of immeasurable value, from the Blessed Sacrament to sacred vessels used in liturgy, as well as sacramental records and essential parish documents. As custodians of these sacred articles, we have a duty to safeguard them against the effects of a disaster, whenever possible. Plans should be created to shield these precious items, ensuring that they remain safe. Through diligent preparation and strategic placement, we honor the legacy of our faith and preserve the tangible manifestations of our shared spiritual journey. Parish liturgy teams and sacristans should be consulted to help formulate—and receive training to implement—recommendations for securing these sacred items.

The goal of the team is to identify the actions the parish should take to prepare for and reduce the impact on the people, property, and community should a crisis or disaster occur.

## CONDUCTING ASSESSMENTS

As the team begins to work together to think through parish preparedness, it is helpful to review any existing policies or procedures that may be in place. Once those materials have been collected and reviewed, it is a good idea to conduct an assessment to determine hazards, risks, and resources available to the parish, both internally and externally. There are resources online that can guide your assessment process, including Catholic Charities USA's Catholic Disaster Preparedness Participant

guide. You can also begin by simply listing all the hazards that have affected the community in the past or that could potentially affect the community in the future. These events might include hurricanes, tornadoes, fire, flood, drought, earthquakes, oil spills, active shooters, explosions, groundwater contamination, or chemical spills. Once you have a complete list of potential hazards, you can prioritize these events based on likelihood of occurrence and potential impact on people and property.

It is important to take into consideration the most vital functions of your Church, such as Mass, support groups, and food pantries, and how they will be affected by the disruption when prioritizing hazards and risks. For example, a severe weather event may force you to suspend all parish activities. If this were to happen, who might be most affected by this disruption? A grief support group may be at the top of your list, since these individuals are already dealing with loss, change, and potential trauma. It is a good idea to review this prioritized list with the pastor and other key individuals to seek input before putting goals and actions in place.

Once you have completed a hazard and risk assessment, it is important to develop a list of parish resources for responding to potential events. This should include people, buildings, and materials. For example, the parish extraordinary ministers of holy Communion know homebound parishioners and could be engaged to do a wellness check following a disaster event. Ushers know those with limited mobility who attend Mass and may need extra care should an evacuation occur. It is also important to consider buildings and spaces on the church grounds that could be used as a point of reunification should one location need to be evacuated. Other parish resources may include relationships with local emergency managers, a generator, group messaging capabilities, and mutual aid agreements.

## GOAL SETTING

Using the prioritized list of hazards and risks, the team can now begin to develop a set of parish preparedness goals. Goals should be broad and identify what will be achieved and the actions needed for a successful outcome. For example, if multiple risks reveal a potential need to empty the church during Mass, the goal may be to create and promulgate an evacuation plan for Mass. The team (in coordination with the pastor) should determine a reasonable number of goals to focus on. Additional goals can be added as preparedness work continues. Once the goals are established, objectives should be created for each goal. Objectives should be specific and include timelines to help you implement the goal. For example:



Photo by Chandler Cruttenden (Unsplash)

In the event of structural damage to the church, a continuation of operations plan helps parishes decide where Mass will be held.

**Goal:** Create and promulgate an evacuation plan to safely remove everyone from the church during Mass

- **Objective 1:** Identify where people will go if evacuated from church. (It would be good to designate more than one option in case multiple areas are impacted.) This will be accomplished by \_\_\_\_\_.
- **Objective 2:** Determine how evacuation information will be communicated during an emergency (who will make the decision, who will make the announcement, how will the announcement be made). This will be accomplished by \_\_\_\_\_.
- **Objective 3:** Determine how those with limited mobility and others needing extra care will be identified and assisted. This will be accomplished by \_\_\_\_\_.

Once the parish planning team has agreed upon the set goals and objectives, this is a good time to check in with the pastor, Catholic Charities, the local emergency manager, and other

partners to get feedback and identify potential resources and training to help carry out the goals.

## CREATING PLANS

In the intricate tapestry of parish preparedness, two essential threads weave together to form the fabric of resilience: the continuity of operations plan (COOP) and the emergency operations plan (EOP), also called a disaster plan. Together, these plans serve as the cornerstone of a parish's commitment to safeguarding people, property, and sacred items in the event of a disaster.

The COOP lies at the heart of the parish operations as a comprehensive road map designed to ensure the uninterrupted functioning of parish operations in the aftermath of a disaster. If there is structural damage to the church following a severe weather event, where and how will parishioners attend Mass? How will this information be communicated to parishioners? How will the insurance claim be processed? Drawing upon a wealth of resources and expertise, the COOP delineates essential functions, delegates authority, manages vital records, and mobilizes human resources with precision and clarity.

Complementing the COOP is the parish emergency operations plan, a proactive framework geared toward fortifying the Church's ability to shield individuals from harm and expedite recovery efforts. As a parish confronts the unpredictable nature of emergencies, from natural disasters to unforeseen crises, the parish emergency operations plan is critical to providing confidence in the minds and hearts of all those visiting the parish grounds. By fostering a culture of preparedness and responsiveness, this plan equips the parish with the tools and strategies needed to mitigate the impact of a disaster and advance the restoration of normalcy.

While each plan serves a distinct purpose, all share a common goal: to protect and empower the parish community in times of need. These plans can be developed in tandem by the same parish preparedness team or done separately by two different groups. The Catholic Disaster Preparedness Program has examples of both a COOP and an EOP. Additionally, the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) developed a document called the "Guide for Developing High Quality Emergency Operations Plans for Houses of Worship." This is an excellent tool to assist a parish in developing an emergency operations plan. This document was created by experts from across the inter-faith community, including Catholic Charities.

It is vital that the continuity of operations plan and the emergency operations plan be regularly reviewed and updated, and that the appropriate individuals receive the necessary training and resources to carry out the objectives and tasks for which they are responsible. It is good practice to select a date to review these documents annually.

A few weeks after her nasty fall, Miss Lucy returned to Mass. We gave her some get-well brownies and shared a moment of prayer and gratitude. While she had sustained a concussion and still had a discolored bump on her forehead, she would make a full recovery. In the broader context of disasters and emergencies, this was a minor one, but it revealed an important truth: our parish was not sufficiently prepared for even a minor

event. This event raised awareness about our vulnerability if a more significant tragedy or larger disaster event unfolded on parish grounds, and our need for a more comprehensive emergency plan. When we are prepared as a parish, and have widely communicated our preparedness plans, we are better able to answer our Gospel call to help our neighbors in need. ♦

## RESOURCES

The following resources can help parishes prepare an emergency preparedness plan:

- **Catholic Charities USA's Catholic Disaster Preparedness Program (CDPP)** is a five-video series focusing on individual preparedness, parish preparedness, and sharing your gifts with others. These videos, along with other training tools, can be found in the CCUSA Disaster Training Toolkit: [catholiccharitiesusa.org/disaster-training-toolkit/](http://catholiccharitiesusa.org/disaster-training-toolkit/).

- **National Voluntary Organizations Active in Disaster (NVOAD)** has a list of all State VOADs. Catholic Charities and the Society of St. Vincent DePaul are part of NVOAD, and many local branches are engaged at the state or community level: [nvoad.org/state-territory-voad/](http://nvoad.org/state-territory-voad/).

- **The Federal Emergency Management Agency's (FEMA) Guide for Developing High Quality Emergency Operations Plans for Houses of Worship** can assist a parish in developing an emergency operations plan (EOP) also called a parish disaster plan. This document was created by experts from across the inter-faith community, including Catholic Charities: [fema.gov/node/guide-developing-high-quality-emergency-operations-plans-houses-worship](http://fema.gov/node/guide-developing-high-quality-emergency-operations-plans-houses-worship).

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JENNIFER DYER serves as the director for capacity building for the disaster operations office of Catholic Charities USA.

### *At [www.PastoralLiturgy.org](http://www.PastoralLiturgy.org)*

Find and share this article with parish staff and the liturgy committee at the following URL: <http://www.pastoralliturgy.org/EmergencyPreparedness.pdf>.