

Being Prepared in Case of Emergencies and Disasters

A Handbook for Communities of Faith
for Emergency Preparedness



The United Church of Canada
L'Église Unie du Canada

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Introduction

We invite you to use this document to explore and prepare for any major emergencies or natural environmental events that may impact your community of faith, your community or your region. When we are prepared, we are better able to deal with a situation, so that it doesn't become a lasting disaster. Preparation allows us to be more resilient. We can bounce back from the situation and engage with life, in all its fullness, once again. We are also able to better care for each other through the process.

In the normal course of human and societal life, unplanned events will occur that exceed the capacity of individuals and organizations to respond effectively. When this occurs, it is important to provide timely and effective assistance that will minimize the damage, make recovery more effective, and above all, provide hope and direction towards recovery and even thriving. Our goal in providing this resource is to support you in preparing for a circumstance when you would need to offer this ministry.

We are aware that there are a number of factors changing in our world that affect both our real, and our perceived, awareness of risk:

accumulating risks associated with factors such as increased urbanization, critical infrastructure dependencies and interdependencies, terrorism, climate change, environmental change, animal and human diseases and the heightened movement of people and goods around the world have increased the potential for various types of catastrophes (Government of Canada and Ministers Responsible for Emergency Management 2011, 3).

READ THIS NOW –
and be prepared.

Don't wait until the emergency or disaster happens!

What is a Disaster?

The Emergency Management Framework for Canada defines a disaster as an event that results in one or more of the following criteria:

- 10 or more people killed
- 100 or more people affected/injured/infected/evacuated or homeless
- an appeal for national/international assistance
- historical significance
- significant damage/interruption of normal processes such that the community affected cannot recover on its own¹

According to Public Safety Canada (2017), a disaster is:

- a social phenomenon that results when a hazard intersects with a vulnerable community in a way that exceeds or overwhelms the community's ability to cope and may cause serious harm to the safety, health, welfare, property or environment of people; may be triggered by a naturally occurring phenomenon which has its origins within the geophysical or biological environment or by human action or error, whether malicious or unintentional, including technological failures, accidents and terrorist acts.²

References

[Canadian Disaster Data Base Reference Definitions](#)

[Canada Public Safety: Hazards and Emergencies](#)

[An Emergency Management Framework for Canada \(Third Edition\)](#)

Types of Disasters

- **natural environmental events** which have a disastrous or devastating impact on individuals or a community. (Note: environmental events are not disasters in and of themselves. For example, the flooding of the Nile renews the soil, and forest fires clear the undergrowth and renew the forest. The disaster happens when people and/or their settlements are adversely affected.)
- **physical health disasters**, such as pandemics, clusters of cancer or other illnesses or medical situations, possibly caused by a chemical spill, explosion at a local factory, mass casualty event, etc.
- **mental health disasters**, such as a cluster of deaths by suicide or multiple drug overdoses, etc.
- **human-caused disasters**, such as mass shootings, vandalism rooted in racism, mining disasters, terrorist threats, etc.
- **humanitarian disasters**, such as an ongoing lack of clean drinking water, starvation, displacement due to war, etc.
- **technological disasters**, such as long-term power outages, gas-leaks, ransomware or viruses in the computer system, etc.

¹ <https://www.publicsafety.gc.ca/cnt/rsrscs/cndn-dsstr-dtbs/index-en.aspx>

² <https://www.publicsafety.gc.ca/cnt/rsrscs/pblctns/2017-mrgnc-mngmnt-frmwrk/index-en.aspx>

- **localized emergencies:** i.e. the church or a house of someone in the congregation being destroyed by fire (that is, a single building rather than a community wide emergency)

With advancing changes in our climate, we are experiencing increased natural environmental events that impact our communities, including flooding, ice storms, and forest fires. The pandemic of 2020 has shown us how vulnerable we are world-wide to a variety of challenging situations that can affect daily life, job security, ways of communicating and worshipping, etc. Technological disasters and conflict situations are also at the top of our minds. Now, more than ever, we know that we need to be prepared. Depending upon the exact circumstance, the preparedness of the community and the individuals involved, these events may cause trauma and suffering. In addition, human-caused events can have overwhelming impacts. Communities of faith are at the centre of their communities, offering caring and support to those devastated, physically, spiritually or emotionally, in these situations. Ministry personnel, key leaders, and congregational members may feel challenged and overwhelmed while in the midst of their own recovery from the impact of these situations, as they seek to faithfully accompany others who are affected by the situation.

IMPORTANT – Regularly Review and Update Your Plan

The first week of May is national Emergency Preparedness Week in Canada.

Each May, reveal, review, and/or update the emergency plans and contact information for your community of faith.

In worship, at the beginning or end of Emergency Preparedness Week, include theological themes found in this handbook. Other messages might include:

- None of us like to be a burden to others. Being prepared helps us not be a burden. But sometimes we do need to rely on others. That's okay, too.
- The body of Christ rejoices and suffers together. We are prepared to help other communities of faith and other communities around us as well as to help each other.
- Share a Minute for Mission that relates to Disaster Preparedness or Response, and share how the national church responds with support in the event of a disaster.

Encourage members of your community of faith to create their own emergency plans and emergency preparedness kits. You can provide information from the [Government of Canada's emergency planning website](#).

Host an [Emergency Kit](#) creation day. Each person/family contributes the cost of a kit the size they would need. Supplies are purchased to have on hand. Have fun working together to create the kits (for 1, 2 or 4 or more people).

Disaster Recovery: A Process

Resilience is our ability to bounce back in the face of loss, change, trauma, challenge or disaster. It is the ability to bounce back, to engage life in its fulness, to live and love fully and to feel joy once again. Many factors impact our resilience including previous experiences, our community of support, and the specifics of the current context.

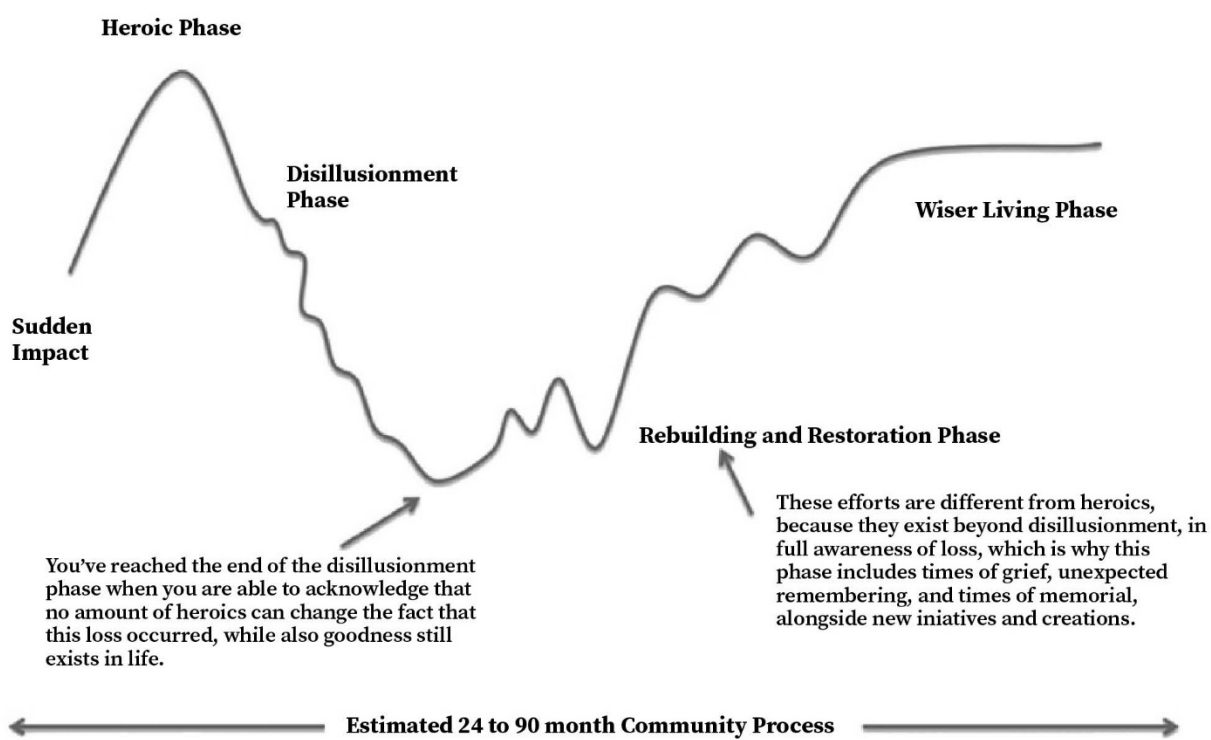
Resilience involves facing our frustrations and having our tears about what is not working and what we have lost. It is welcoming the sadness, rather than turning to blame, guilt, shame, or addictions.

We need to feel safe enough, in the context of a loving relationship (with God, with a partner or friend, or within a community) to express every emotion evoked by a situation. When we have grieved what can no longer be, we will then find the path back to love, laughter and the joy of living. When Jesus declared, “I came that they might have life, and have it abundantly” (John 10:10b), he was inviting us to experience resilience in a life of faith. Because of Jesus, we know there is hope and resurrection even as we journey through the wilderness. Yet, we can’t skip right to resurrection. We must journey through the wilderness and grief first.

Recovery from disaster is a process not only of physical recovery but also of emotional and spiritual recovery. The following graph on the phases of collective trauma response gives a sense of the pattern that this recovery will take emotionally and spiritually, from the initial impact to the heroic response, through disillusionment and rebuilding. It is important to note that the length of time for recovery varies based on what happened, whether the event could have been anticipated, resources and response offered, and the individuals and community involved and the preparedness of those for possible emergency.

The emotional and spiritual impact of disaster is significant and usually requires a much longer journey to recovery than the physical impact. Depending on the specifics of the situation, emotional and spiritual recovery might take up to seven years or more for integration and healing of our bodies, minds, hearts, and spirits. Give yourself and others the space and time needed for the journey. Each person will experience it in a unique way.

Phases of Collective Trauma Response



How Disaster Affects Spirituality

Faced with any loss, but especially sudden and profound loss such as in disaster, one's sense of meaning and purpose—indeed everything one may have thought about how the world works—is turned upside down. This sense of disruption can pervade an entire community.

A disaster affects the entire fabric of community that existed prior to the event and can cause traumatic stress among the whole community. Disaster recovery is in large part the rebuilding of community, the retying of the thousands of strands of relationship in the fabric of our being together that have been severed by the disaster. (The Rev. John A. Robinson, Jr.)³

Facing the profound loss involved in any kind of disaster or tragedy involves much grief. There will be grief for the deaths of people lost in the situation, grief over loss of homes and treasured items, grief over loss of community, loss of jobs, loss of neighbours and friends who move away as a result of the situation, grief over loss of health, grief over the loss of feeling safety and security, and more. Each situation will bring its own losses that will need to be grieved. Each person affected will grieve in their own way. There are no stages to grief, just many, many emotions that may be experienced along the way. Each person will need their own time and way of grieving. Yet, communal sharing of the grief will be important.

We highly recommend the work of Dr. Alan D. Wolfelt, and his book *Healing Your Grief When Disaster Strikes: 100 Practical Ideas for Coping after a Tornado, Hurricane, Flood, Earthquake, Wildfire or Other Natural Disaster* (Companion Press, 2014).

In addition, you will find resources to support a community grieving after disaster on the United Church's [worship page for emergencies](#).

Looking to our Faith

As followers of the Way of Jesus, in the face of events that devastate our own lives or the lives of those around us, we are called to:

Be Prepared

In Matthew 25:1-13, Jesus tells the parable of the bridesmaids, which is a parable about being prepared and not waiting until the event is upon us. The telling of the parable in the gospel of Matthew ends with this statement, "Keep awake therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour." Being prepared for potential emergencies or natural events that may be devastating is a faithful response for those who follow the Way of Jesus.

³ "Light Our Way: A Guide for Spiritual Care in Times of Disaster" (NOVAD) available free of charge in print or downloadable pdf. Under Emotional and Spiritual Care Resources, <https://www.nvoad.org/?mdocs-file=6522>, p. 6

Offer Compassion

In 1 Corinthians 12:26, the apostle Paul reminds us that we are one body in Christ and that “if one member suffers, all suffer together with it.” Over and over again, in both testaments, we are invited to care for others, to share generously, and to extend a helping hand in response to challenging situations. In the face of major emergencies or the disastrous effects of a natural event, our response as Christians is to share in the suffering and address the needs.

Live with Hope

Our faith tradition is all about people who have journeyed through times of trauma and disaster and who have come out of it with renewed hope, new ways of being God’s people, and a re-oriented mission to serve as Christ in this world. When we are prepared, when we are rooted in our faith, when we have healthy spiritual practices into which we can lean, when we have a compassionate community to support us, we have a way through whatever comes our way.

- Think of the Israelites who were enslaved in Egypt, spent forty years in the wilderness, and lived in exile in Babylon and under repeated occupation of their land by various nations.
- Think of the disciples after the devastation of Jesus’ death and disorientation of his resurrection
- Think of generations of followers of Jesus before us who have faced events that were shocking, devastating and destructive, yet who worked with compassion and lived with hope into a new day.

In John 10:10, Jesus declares, “I have come that they may have life, and have it abundantly.” In these words we trust, even as we face devastating events.

We are a resurrection people; we believe that life can come out of death and destruction, and that, as the body of Christ, we can seek to generate what is good and compassionate out of dire circumstances. We are an incarnational people, who offer God’s loving presence to each other and to our communities.

As stated in A New Creed, we believe that God is with us; we are not alone. In the face of a devastating event, we proclaim our trust in God’s steadfast love and abiding presence. Each of us will be affected in unique ways, depending upon previous experiences and the specific impact of the current event. That is the gift of living and working within a community of Christ, where we can support one another and rest in each other’s faith, when our own may be challenged. Together we are the body of Christ!

Understanding Emergency Response

Understanding Why We Prepare

When we plan and prepare for possible emergencies, then we are more able to keep an emergency or disaster from becoming catastrophic for our families, congregation and community.

Stress is normal for humans. It is a situation that can typically be handled by the person(s) or congregation experiencing it, with little to no outside support (e.g., the photocopier stops working just when the Sunday bulletins are being printed).

An **emergency** is a more significant happening that requires a level of support beyond what an individual or congregation can handle alone. The amount of support needed depends upon the preparedness and skills of the individual or congregation (e.g., an individual breaks a leg at the church and requires medical support, or the congregation has minor flooding in the basement but has insurance coverage and knows who to call to address the situation).

A **disaster** is a situation in which the individual or congregation is not able to cope and requires major outside support to begin recovery (e.g., a tornado touches down and destroys the church building; the congregation loses all church records, insurance information, and computers, as well as their building; and ministry personnel as well as many congregational members have also had major damage to their homes).

Four Phases of Emergency Response to a Disaster

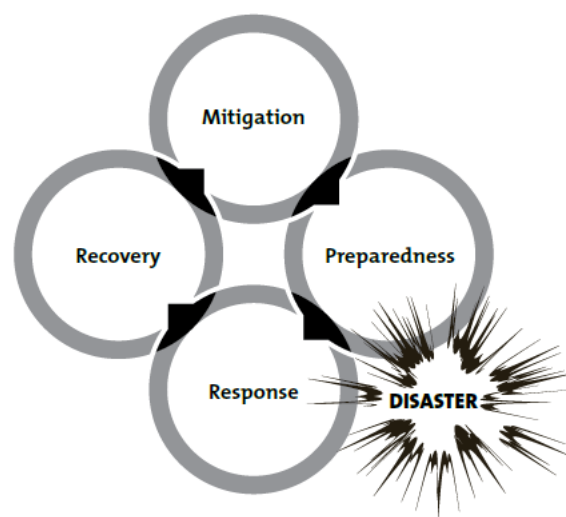
Mitigation – what we do to prevent disastrous events and major emergencies from happening, dealing with what we can control and anticipate.

Preparedness – what we do so that we are able to respond when a major emergency or an event that has devastating consequences occurs.

Response – what we do after a major emergency or an event that has disastrous impact has occurred. This involves the immediate saving of lives and the provision of survival needs (shelter, food, clothing, safety). It should follow a pre-determined plan to be most effective.

Recovery – may begin concurrently with the response phase. It involves the ongoing recovery for individuals and the community in all areas of physical, emotional, spiritual, financial and social needs.

THE FOUR PHASES OF EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT



An Invitation

There are many organizations, government agencies, NGOs and denominations who are prepared to respond when a major emergency or natural environmental event has impacted a community or region. We do not need to replicate the work of others but rather offer the specific gifts we have to offer within The United Church of Canada and in our unique congregations. As a denomination, we are best positioned to address emergency mitigation and preparedness as well as the ongoing response-recovery phase. It is important that we work with other organizations and agencies, who have skills and resources that allow them to provide an immediate response.

We invite you to consider what you might best offer as a United Church community of faith. Here are some possibilities to consider. You could:

- be a gathering place for people, a place of calm and compassionate presence place that allows people to get away from the stress, the rebuilding, and the other daily challenges, possibly providing food and warm drinks, blankets, clothing, etc.
- provide community connections between people and organizations that don't often work together, because you may have the collateral and trust within the community to offer this.
- support first responders in the community, offering encouragement, meals, a place to rest, etc.
- be a spiritual gathering place that is inclusive of all people and a breadth of faith expressions.

The goal of this resource is to help communities of faith ask the questions and explore your needs and resources so that in an emergency situation you are as prepared as possible and can potentially avert the situation from becoming a disaster for you. When we have prepared, we are more able to be resilient and bounce back, discovering new ways of being church and living Christ's mission in the world. We are also able to better care for each other through the process.

Emergency Preparedness for Communities of Faith

Key Questions

What are the typical emergencies that you might expect in your congregation and your location? Considering the demographic of people you serve and the natural environment and community around you, discuss the various types of emergencies you might expect and how vulnerable your building and the people in your congregation would be in each of these situations:

- natural environmental events which have a disastrous or devastating impact on individuals or a community. (Note: environmental events are not disasters in and of themselves. For example, the flooding of the Nile renews the soil, and forest fires clear the undergrowth and renew the forest. The disaster happens when people and/or their settlements are adversely affected.)
- physical health disasters, such as pandemics, clusters of cancer or other illnesses or medical situations, possibly caused by a chemical spill, explosion at a local factory, mass casualty event, etc.
- mental health disasters, such as a cluster of deaths by suicide or multiple drug overdoses, etc.
- human-caused disasters, such as mass shootings, vandalism rooted in racism, mining disasters, terrorist threats, etc.
- humanitarian disasters, such as an ongoing lack of clean drinking water, starvation, displacement due to war, etc.
- technological disasters, such as long-term power outages, gas-leaks, ransomware or viruses in the computer system, etc.
- localized emergencies: i.e. the church or a house of someone in the congregation is destroyed by fire (that is, a single building rather than a community wide emergency)

What is your municipality/city/town disaster plan? What is included in provincial disaster plans and preparedness? Is your church and/or minister/staff expected to participate in these community plans in anyway? For example, is your church included as a potential place for sheltering people in certain types of emergencies or disasters? Is your minister part of the hospital or regional Spiritual Care Team on call to respond in the event of a major emergency or disaster?

Further Questions for Preparedness

For Medical Emergencies, Fire or Gas Leaks, and Other Localized Emergencies

Communications

- Is there quick access to a phone to call 911 (or your local emergency number)? Most people have cell phones, but some don't. Have a plan.
- If the situation requires calling 911, what is the best way for emergency responders to access the building? Who will meet them to guide them to the situation? Is there a clear path for them? How soon can you expect them to arrive? What will be done in the waiting period?
- Do you have a plan in place for alerting the congregation in the event of storm cancellation, or another event that would prevent use of the building?

- Who should the emergency be reported to after it has concluded, for follow-up, reviewing of procedures, restocking of medical supplies, etc.?
- Who will follow up with the person/people involved in the situation, both the person who has been at the centre of the emergency and those who responded and supported?

First Aid

- Where is the medical kit and the AED (automated electrical defibrillator), if you have one?
- Are they easily accessible and do people know where they are?
- Who is trained in First Aid and/or in use of the AED in the congregation? Is there usually someone with such training in the building when it is open? Consider offering a First Aid course.
- Would it be helpful in your context to have a Naloxone kit on hand?

Organizing a Response

- What specialized training is found among members of the congregation (such as through Red Cross, Salvation Army, St. John's Ambulance, and the Mennonite Central Committee) that would be helpful in responding to emergencies and disasters?
- Who will be in charge of managing the emergency situation? Will it depend upon the type of situation? Have they been briefed on expectations and procedures?

During Worship

- If a medical emergency happens in the middle of a worship service, what are your plans for the rest of the congregation? Who will take the lead in responding? How will privacy and respect for the person in distress be addressed?
- If the emergency happens in the middle of the service, consider these possibilities:
 - Remember the gift of prayer. Offer a prayer naming God's presence in the situation.
 - If it is possible to continue with the service, move to a part of the service that allows the focus to be taken away from the person/people involved so as to avoid embarrassment and to keep too many people from crowding around. For example, sing some hymns or read scripture.

Flexibility will always be required with adaptation to the particular situation.

- If the medical emergency happens in another area of the church during the time of worship, such as the Sunday School, what procedures will be followed? Who will take the lead? Do they have access to phone, first aid kit, etc.?

Evacuating Safely

- If the building needs to be evacuated, what procedure is in place? Who knows the procedure? Who is in charge of managing the evacuation? Where will people gather and take shelter?
- Have fire drills been conducted in the church, among staff and/or for the congregation?

- If the emergency originates in another area of the church, whether on a Sunday or on a weekday, what procedures will be followed to initiate and ensure evacuation?

Response to an Agitated, Violent, or Threatening Person

Be clear: an agitated person is not a threat unless they engage in threatening actions toward others.

1. The first priority is always SAFETY (that includes safety for the person acting violently).
2. Observe the behaviours, and if safe to do so, de-escalate the situation by encouraging the person to act in a less dangerous manner (e.g. putting down weapons, moving away from vulnerable people)
3. Immediately evacuate as many people as possible to reduce harm. If evacuation is not possible, ensure that people shelter in place until advised to move by an authorized person.
4. Contact 911 as quickly as possible to bring trained responders to ensure safety for everyone.

In advance of such a possible situation, consider:

- What racial or other biases might affect how you understand a person's agitation?
- Who will be the key (authorized) person to manage and deal with the situation?
- How will the staff (on a weekday) deal with a situation, exit the building and/or obtain immediate help?
- What will the procedure be if an agitated, violent or threatening person presents in the middle of worship or another gathering of people in the church facility?
- How soon might you expect emergency response, and how will you address the situation until then?

Preparedness Related to Property and Functioning as a Congregation

These questions are meant to encourage planning and do not cover every possible eventuality. Use them for preventing and/or mitigating the impact of the effects of major emergencies and disastrous events for your church building, knowing that there are things beyond anyone's control.

Insurance

- Has your insurance policy been reviewed and kept up to date? Does it cover loss of use of building?
- Are there insurance documents kept off site? Who knows where they are and how to access them?
- Do you have a documented list as well as a video of church contents? Where are these stored?
- What other major documents would be helpful to have access to and where will they be kept?

Computers

- Are your computers regularly backed up? Where are the back-ups kept? Would the back-ups survive flood or fire or another destruction of your building?
- Would the back-ups be accessible if a disaster hit and you could not access your building?
- Would you be able to function for three months without access to your building and computers?

Fireproofing

- Has your facility had a recent fire inspection and have issues noted been addressed?
- Where are the fire extinguishers, are they filled and recently inspected, and do people know where they are and how to use them?
- Have storage areas been sorted and cleaned? Is the furnace room/electrical room clear?
- Does the local fire department have a way of accessing your building, if necessary?

Flooding

- For minor water issues within the building, such as broken pipes or flooding toilets, what equipment do you have to deal with water (mops, pails, shop vacs, etc.)?
- For overland flooding, do you have access to sandbags, FloodSax (sandless sandbags), or other ways of preventing water entering the building? Do you have sewer back-up valves installed?
- Do you need retaining walls, repairs to basement windows, etc.?

Hurricanes, Tornadoes, and Major Windstorms

- Are there changes and/or repairs to your building that would mitigate damage to your building?

Blizzards, Ice Storms, Avalanches and Other Major Snow Events

- Are there changes and/or repairs to your building that would mitigate damage to your building?
- What will be done in case of power outages to prevent frozen pipes, etc.?
- Do you have snow shovels, ice melt, etc. readily available?

Flu/Virus Season and Pandemics

- Do you have hand sanitizer available at each door to the building?
- Is there regular cleaning and sanitizing of frequently touched surfaces?
- Do you have ways of giving that do not require the passing of the offering plate?
- What practices are in place for serving communion to minimize possible contact spreading of viruses?

- What is your plan for connecting with people and worshipping in a way that does not require physical gathering, if necessary?

Agitated, Threatening, or Violent Person(s)

- Without making your facility less welcoming, are there procedures or arrangements of furniture, etc. that could be put in place to create safety for staff and for those participating in programs?
- How would the staff exit the office area and the building and/or obtain immediate help on weekdays?

Emergency Requiring Evacuation of the Building

- Do you have a plan for evacuating the building on weekdays or Sunday, including small groups or full sanctuary? Review the occupants for each day of the week and consider evacuation plans.
- Who will take charge of the evacuation?
- How will you make sure that the entire building has been checked and cleared of people?
- Do you have a designated muster point at which people will gather?
- What arrangements would you make for sheltering people if it is snowing or raining?
- How easy is it for those with mobility issues to exit the building, especially if the power is out?

NOTES

What are the questions and situations you need to address?

Traumatized or Not?

People respond differently to situations, depending upon their prior experiences, life circumstances, context, preparation, and support systems. What might be traumatic for one person may be a manageable stress for another person. Do not assume that everyone is traumatized by a major event or that no one is traumatized by a seemingly minor event. Also remember that sometimes someone who seems to be handling the situation well at first may later (sometimes much, much later) show signs of being traumatized. And conversely, someone who was traumatized at first may find the support they need and discover that they are able to manage their emotional response to the situation. Pay attention to individual responses as well as to the community/congregational response as a whole.

First published in Gathering Pentecost 2 - 2023

Preparedness for Responding to Help Others

To use for planning for major emergencies or disasters where your congregation will be in the position of offering support to others.

The first rule of preparedness is to be personally prepared. Our own preparation helps a community to respond, by reducing the number of people affected in the short term and allowing for better allocation of stretched resources.

A simple example is ensuring the availability of a well-stocked and maintained first aid kit, so that minor injuries can be treated immediately without requiring the use of hospitals. At home, having sufficient personal medication in case of a disruption to supplies; having a well-stocked pantry and/or freezer; having a source of clean water stored. These can all aid in reducing the impact of a disaster for ourselves and others.

Helpful advice on preparing home and family for emergencies can be found on [Canada's Get Prepared website](#).

A local community of faith might help in personal preparedness by arranging for [emergency preparedness kits](#) to be sold at cost to members, or by hosting workshops to instruct in creating these kits.

Key Question

What is your congregation best positioned and best able to offer?

For example, would you do best at offering social support, practical support, spiritual support or a physical space from which other groups could offer support? Consider the skills and resources of your staff, your congregation, and what is viable in your context and location. Good intentions and wishful thinking will not help and may create a drain and hindrance to real help.

Other questions to consider so that you are prepared to respond:

If your building is a designated emergency response centre in your community, are you prepared for what is expected? Create a file folder for emergency response including:

- floor plan
- list of bathrooms, showers, and/or other facilities
- location of fire extinguishers, first aid kits, AEDs
- list of people who can be called upon to come to offer support and help manage the facility.

Would your parking lot be of service to any agencies or to your town/city/municipality? Consider:

- Are there electrical outlets or easy availability of electricity? What would the capacity be?
- Is water available? For drinking, for hook-ups to trailers, etc.?
- Are entrances and exits clearly marked, if necessary?

Schools and day cares may appreciate a church's offer to be a place they can evacuate to and reconnect children and parents in case of an emergency. What do you need to have available for them, if you have agreed to be their evacuation centre?

What are you prepared to offer, that you could do a good job of offering?

- Could you offer this if, for example, you had no power?
- How many people would need to be required? What equipment and supplies would be needed?

What would be the expense to your congregation, and can you manage this? Or would you need to apply to The United Church of Canada Foundation or other agencies for funding to support the initiative?

- Are there others (churches or agencies) you could partner with?

For example:

- Could you be a cooking centre? What do you have available to make this possible?
- Could you provide a cup of coffee/tea/hot chocolate and a place to visit and connect, a place of calm where people can get away from what they are dealing with during disaster recovery?
- Could you be a warming centre? Do you have blankets, back-up generators, etc. available at the church and/or easily accessible through people in the congregation?
- Could you have cellphone charging available?
- Could you provide a place for insurance companies to set up and be accessible to people?
- Could you be an information centre or a place where people could contact their extended families?
- Could you be a centre for psycho-social-spiritual support? Or a place for people to come for quiet or prayer? Or a place for a community worship service? Or a space in which another congregation, who has lost their building, could gather?
- If you are offering food, where will this food come from, who will prepare it, and do you have people with the proper training according to health regulations in your area for food preparation?

- How will you keep track of those who could be available to help in specific scenarios? What skills are you looking for?
- How will you communicate with the congregation when an emergency response is needed, especially those who have indicated they could help?
- What training do people in your congregation have that would aid in responding in a disaster? What training could you build within the congregation to be ready to respond? Who will manage this?
- What plans are in place in your community and/or province for disaster emergency response? How can your congregation fit into these plans? Remember, we need to do what we do best and let others do what they do best.

The [United Church](#) also offers resources to support you and help you prepare (also check with your own region).

Prepared for Recovery: When Your Congregation Is Affected

These questions do not cover every eventuality but can be used for planning for major disasters where your congregation is affected, whether human caused or caused by nature.

If your church is damaged or destroyed by fire or a natural environmental event:

- Has your insurance policy been reviewed and kept up to date?
- What disasters or aspects of these (i.e. loss of income) would be covered by your policy?
- Are the insurance documents (or copies of them) kept off site? Who knows where they are and how to access them?
- Do you have an itemized list as well as video of church contents? Note: several copies (either in print or digital) should be kept by various people. Do you know who has the copies of these lists?
- Who will manage decisions that need to be quickly made?

If your community is hit by an environmental event and you have had to evacuate the community:

- How will you communicate with the people of the congregation to check on safety and to communicate information about the congregation?
- Will a church in a neighbouring community be the go-to point for information? Pre-arrange this.
- Where or how will you gather for worship or will you? What might be most important to your congregation?
- Where will church office/minister's office be located? Would computer & phones be available?
- Will your ministry personnel require support (volunteer or employed) to carry out the ministry required by the congregation as a result of the disaster?
- Does your insurance policy cover costs for renting alternative space or for staff salaries?

In the immediate aftermath of the emergency/disaster:

- What immediate support is needed? This will depend on the type of disaster. Remember that the presence and connection you offer is what is most important.
 - natural environmental events causing disaster – cleaning out and cleaning up of building and site
 - physical health disasters – medical response, following public health guidance
 - mental health disasters – on-site counselling and spiritual resources
 - human-caused disasters – counselling resources, community gathering space
 - technological disasters – replacement or regaining use of computers, generators, other equipment
 - humanitarian disasters – supplies and personnel from beyond the congregation
- What spiritual needs must be immediately addressed?
- Who can you turn to for support? (Other churches, region, national church, etc.)
- What agencies are available to support? (Red Cross, Samaritan's Purse, local agencies, etc.)

Engaging Volunteers Within and Beyond the Congregation

While many people might be willing to volunteer, in recovering from a disaster it is important to have the right people with the right training and right equipment in the right place at the right time, so that recovery can move forward safely and in a way that is truly helpful.

- How will the request for volunteer help go out? Who will manage this and communicate requirements?
- Who will manage the volunteers once they arrive and ensure that they have the right equipment and training for the situation? (i.e. people cannot help after a flood or fire disaster in shorts and flip-flops)

In the ongoing recovery from the disaster:

- What ongoing support is needed in your community for
 - physical needs
 - emotional needs
 - spiritual needs
 - humanitarian needs
- What are you able to support as a congregation, especially if you have been directly affected?
- What other NGOs/groups might be better able to support specific needs?
- What support do you require from the region or national church?
- What resources does the national church have to support you and help you in the recovery phase?

Protocols for Collecting Funds Following a Major Emergency/Disaster

Invite – Inspire – Thank

People often want to give financial resources, and these need to be managed carefully. These gifts bridge what is not covered by insurance and may allow for facility improvements during the recovery. They need to be encouraged, accountable and acknowledged, realistic, without constraints, and allow for dealing with future situations. The goal is to Invite – Inspire – Thank.

Invited and Encouraged

People who give should be encouraged to give cheerfully and without thought of reward. However, many want to feel that their offerings have been effective. This is in the interests of both accountability, and reward. This is one of the places where volunteers can provide assistance.

Make It Easy to Give

The majority of funds raised will come from individuals wanting to help their friends, neighbours and fellow citizens by making a direct gift of money. Accordingly, mechanisms must be set up to enable this generosity an outlet. Kindly decline gifts of uninvited goods, unless specifically needed. Consider carefully offers of service, whether they are specifically needed and who will manage them?

In the case of a region wide emergency situation, such as a flood or wildfire when multiple communities have been affected, it may be better for an entity such as the Regional Council to collect, manage and make decisions regarding distribution, rather than having multiple United Church congregations collecting for the same emergency situation.

The more ways available for people to give, the more they will give. Consider:

- A donation link on the congregation's website.
- A congregation outside the disaster area where cash and cheque donations could be collected. Note: Donors need to be well documented for receipts and thank you notes.
- E-transfers – possibly to a special email, rather than the regular e-transfer e-mail for the church, in order to track the donations for this cause.
- CanadaHelps.org works well in that it also issues receipts.

Financial donations are a great help after a major emergency or disaster. However, this aspect of the recovery may become a challenge to manage in the midst of everything else. You may need to invite help to track and manage donations that need to be receipted. Reach out to your region for help in determining the best way to manage the receipt and tracking of donations.

Please note: Communities of faith must have a clear process in place to account for the use of funds and for the tax-receipting of funds.

Realistic and Accountable

Good communication enables good stewardship. If funds are being solicited, there should be a clear and well-communicated purpose. In an emergency, some people may hesitate to give because they are uncertain about how their gifts will be handled. Others will give without consideration but deserve the responsible stewardship that the church can provide. This includes both a system for acknowledgement (informing donors that their funds have been received, and how they are being used) and accountability, which includes a method for issuing tax receipts.

Record-keeping and communication are key.

Accountability is increasingly important when emergent fund-raising (i.e. GoFundMe) may be used more frequently than giving to established organizations. People are increasingly on guard against fraud in charitable fund-raising and failing to address this may have a seriously chilling effect and result in reduced donations in the future.

Remember: These funds will need to be reported on your yearly statistical form. Please consult with your region's Executive Minister to determine how to report these so that they do not skew your yearly assessments.

Many disasters, particularly those for which provincial and national emergency plans are initiated, often have government funding set to match charitable donations. Direct funding to well-established agencies, such as the Red Cross, might be encouraged to limit the need for a local congregation to manage donations, and to provide access to matching grants. A larger agency also provides support to a broader scope of people. However, donations to a local congregation or organization may better target a congregation's or community's specific needs.

Good Communication Encourages Giving Without Constraints

Gifts that have strings attached should be resisted. They rarely match the changing requirements on the ground and limit the possibilities for those who are most affected. Gifts that are overly restricted should be respectfully redirected to what is needed through communication with giver or accepted only with those constraints removed. Communication should include the indication that the gifts may be used for future or emerging needs as the recovery continues.

Misunderstandings can be mitigated by providing regular, sincere, and inspiring communication that lets people know what gifts are needed, what gifts will accomplish, and expresses appreciation.

Giving Thanks

People give to people, not to events. When people open their hearts and send support, communication is only one-way until those who have received the support let the givers know that their gifts have been received, used, and appreciated. This can be done through a system of gift receipts, a thank you email, newsletters, website updates, social media postings and personal connections throughout the church. It does not need to be a burden that falls entirely on the local church that is dealing with its own immediate responses to crisis. This is one of the ways in which volunteers from outside the affected area might offer valuable assistance and support, by relieving some of the administrative burden and providing virtual administrative assistance.

Regional and National Church Support

Any congregation dealing with a disaster should coordinate with their region. The region may help with receiving/managing donations, as well as staff support and pulpit supply. They will know of national funds that may be available and help access them, such as The United Church Foundation's *Ann Baker Estate Trust Fund for Emergencies*, set up to be a nimble fund to support Communities of Faith in the event of a disaster. A request for these funds would come through your region.

The C.A.R.E. principles in disaster response are important.

- **Cash:** financial gifts to get help to people fast
- **Ask** before donating any supplies
- **Respond** by volunteering with local relief agencies
- **Everyone** can help

People and communities who have been affected by disasters have many stories of receiving goods that they can not use and that become a burden for them to manage, sort and distribute. While people are well-meaning and generous in their offers of specific goods, financial gifts get the right kind of help to people in the most efficient and timely manner. Those affected by disasters do not need the added task of trying to figure out what to do with piles of donated goods that may or may not be in good condition and may or may not serve anyone's needs. In addition, those affected by disasters do not need the added burden of managing volunteers who are not prepared and do not have specific skills that are useful in the exact situation.

It is recommended that communities of faith:

- Kindly decline uninvited gifts of goods, unless you know that they are specifically needed.
- Consider carefully offers of service and whether they are specifically needed, and whether those offering are reliable, certified and/or can proceed without need for you to manage them.
- Be specific and thoughtful in your requests for donations of specific goods, with clear messaging about what will be done with any excess.

Prepared for Recovery – For Reflection by the Ministry and Personnel Team

For the team to reflect on their role and their own preparedness to support the ministry personnel and other staff in the event of major emergency or disastrous impact of a natural environmental occurrence.

The Ministry and Personnel Team has the responsibility of ensuring that the ministry personnel and other staff are supported in whatever ways are needed so that they can continue their work for and on behalf of the congregation. In addition, the M & P team needs to work with the Council/Board to make sure that the ministry personnel and staff have office space, access to computers, etc. if regular office space has been impacted by the emergency/disaster.

These questions can be discussed within the M & P team and should also be engaged with the ministry personnel. Some of these questions will not have a clear answer prior to a specific emergency/disaster event but are good to keep in mind. *Please also read the section below: "Reflection for Clergy."*

Questions to consider:

- Considering the various types of major emergencies/disaster events possible in your community, who might be looking to your ministry staff for support? (i.e. congregational members only, the broader community, neighbouring communities, schools in the area, etc. What might the increased workload look like? How would you support your minister(s) in managing the increased workload?

Consider options, in discussion with your ministry staff, such as:

- inviting retired ministers or supply ministers to lead worship once or twice a month
 - using extra financial donations that often come for specific disasters to hire another qualified person to offer pastoral care and counselling
 - ensuring that minister(s) are taking their days off.
 - if holiday time or sabbatical time is missed due to the emergency/disaster, making sure that equivalent time is made available at a near future, agreed-upon date
 - how vulnerable (medically, emotionally, physically, financially) ministry personnel may be if personally impacted by an emergency/disaster
 - what you can offer to help them function well in the situation
- Does your ministry personnel have expertise that would be helpful to your congregation as well as the broader community in recovering from a disaster? How might community needs be balanced with the congregational needs? Is it feasible for the ministry personnel to take specific training that would be useful in your context?

- What extra demands might be placed upon office and other church staff during the recovery phase? What might shift in their roles and expectations? Are there new skills/technology that staff are needing to learn and how will this be supported? Will volunteers (from within the congregation or from another congregation) needed to help with some work?
- Who will check in regularly with the minister(s) and other staff to make sure that they are feeling supported and have what they need to function in their jobs?
- Do you know who to contact in your Region to obtain additional support for your ministry personnel, staff and/or the congregation?

Prepared for Recovery – For Reflection by Ministry Personnel

For clergy to reflect on their role, their own preparedness, and the support they may need personally

Key Pieces of Wisdom from those who have made this journey before you....

- This is a marathon, not a sprint! There are times to work hard and times to take a break.
- You are not in control of the timeline of recovery (your own, others, your community).
- Your presence matters more than the product (worship, study groups, etc.)
- There is a path through this – that is the witness of scripture!

Your Skills and Training

- Are you registered as a chaplain with your regional or local hospital, Legion, RCMP, or another organization? Are you linked with mental health providers, Victims Services, first responders or other emergency response programs or personnel who will call upon you in an emergency?
- Do you have emergency training, first aid training, etc. that would be valuable in emergency response?

Your Previous Experiences

- How resilient do you believe you are? How might you bounce back, spiritually, emotionally, physically, and/or financially?
- What previous traumatic situations have you been personally involved in? How might those experiences positively or negatively impact your response to a new disaster or emergency?
- What might be your trigger points or challenges to offering care to others in the midst of a disaster?

Remember not everyone is traumatized by a major emergency or disaster. There are many factors that go into a person's response to a situation in which they are involved. Trauma also affects everyone differently. If you feel traumatized, you may wish to seek outside support. For some, the difficult point may be a year or two down the road. Do ask for help if you need it. Don't be stoic.

Your Needs

- What resources do you need to have access to in order to carry out your ministry?
- What personal physical, family, financial and/or practical needs and limits may affect how you carry out your ministry in the initial or long-term response to a disaster/major emergency?
- What skills might you want to learn in order to be prepared? (i.e. take a first aid course)
- What spiritual practices might you want to develop to aid your resilience?
- Personally, if you lose contact with or are separated from your partner and/or family, who/where will be the one place/person/social media location where you will all connect (in person or by communication)?

Your Situation

- How have you been personally impacted in this current disaster (emotionally, spiritually, physically)?
- Has your own home been affected?
- Have people in your own family been impacted?
- Will you need to live elsewhere and/or work from another location for a period of time?

Your Support

- Who do you usually turn to for support? Have they also been impacted by this disaster?
- Who or where is your village of support?
- Who can help monitor how you are doing as you continue to minister through this disaster and in the following months?

Your Self

- What are your personal physical, family and/or practical needs and limits at this time that may affect how you carry out your ministry?
- Who is providing emotional and spiritual support to you?
- Who will you turn to when you are feeling absolutely overwhelmed?
- What spiritual practices and personal care practices will help you through? (These need to be a priority, in spite of all that needs to be done.)
- Remember: your presence matters more than offering the perfect prayer or best worship service or the right words. Just be. Don't push yourself. Be kind to yourself and receive the kindness of others.

How are your 5? A Daily Self Check-in

How is life for you in each of these areas?⁴ Who or what can help you address changes needed?

Work Love Play Sleep Eat

There is Support! You Are Not Alone!

Are you in the midst of a sudden disaster, tragedy or other devastating experience, whether personal, congregational or community-wide?

Are you needing to process an experience of disaster, tragedy, or devastation that you experienced years ago?

Reach out to regional staff, colleagues, trusted friends and family!

Remember: United Church of Canada ministry personnel and staff have access to support and counselling through the EAP (Employee Assistance Program).

You are not alone!

⁴ How's Your 5? was used successfully in Joplin, Missouri, during its recovery from a tornado that devastated the city on May 22, 2011. Three months after the tornado directly hit their workplace, Mercy Hospital co-workers held a series of community focus groups to identify ways they could support social or emotional recovery and resiliency in children and adults recovering from the tornado. The community identified the How's Your 5? domains of work, love, play, sleep, and diet as areas of concern that had been negatively impacted by the natural disaster. This concept has been used in many post-disaster communities since. It was a key piece used by those supporting mental health in High River, Alberta following the June 2013 flooding.

Further Resources

For more detailed information and resources regarding emergency preparedness and disaster recovery, including worship materials, please go to [The United Church of Canada's website](#).

In addition, we recommend:

“Light Our Way: A Guide for Spiritual Care in Times of Disaster” ([NOVAD](#)) available free of charge in print or downloadable pdf. Scroll down and choose Emotional and Spiritual Care Committee Resources. On the page that opens, scroll down and find the link to this document.

Recovering from Un-Natural Disasters: A Guide for Pastors and Congregations after Violence or Trauma by Laurie Kraus, David Holyan and Bruce Wismer (Westminster John Know, 2017), available in paperback or Kindle edition.

Healing Your Grief When Disaster Strikes: 100 Practical Ideas for Coping after a Tornado, Hurricane, Flood, Earthquake, Wildfire or Other Natural Disaster by Alan D. Wolfelt (Companion Press, 2014). Designed for use by individuals who have been affected.

[Presbyterian Disaster Assistance](#)

[United Church of Christ – USA – Disaster Ministries](#)

The PDA – USA and UCC – USA both work in conjunction with National Voluntary Organizations Active in Disasters (NVOAD) to provide compassionate and practical support in communities following disasters.

[The Canadian Red Cross Psychological First Aid Guide](#)

[TearFund Canada Disaster and Resilience Resources](#)

[Public Safety Canada: An Emergency Management Framework for Canada](#)

[Humanitarian Disaster Institute](#)

“Compassion in Times of Disaster,” Boschman, K. R. (2011). NAGEP Spiritual Care Document. (*Internet search document by title and author*)

[Canadian Council of Churches Emergency Planning Resources](#)

For Mental Health response and recovery, review the Mental Health Continuum provided by the [British Columbia Emergency Health Services](#)

Federal Emergency Management Services

For information about emergency management services in your province, consult the respective provincial Emergency Management Office as well as:

The Government of Canada [“Get Prepared” website](#) has tools and information for

- assessing risk for particular types of situations
- planning and preparing for flooding, power outages, etc.
- response and recovery resources
- information for those with disabilities and special needs to aid them in Disaster Preparedness

- safety tips, planning resources and information on preparing a Disaster Readiness Kit
- a Canadian Disaster data base
- personal stories from those who have faced disasters in various provinces
- links to Provincial and Territorial resources and contacts

Example of Emergency Response Plan

High River United Emergency Action Plan (updated 2025) **SECURITY PHONE: 403-652-9663**

Potential Emergency	First Steps	Be Aware	Who is in charge?	Equipment needed & where kept	Follow-up
1. Evacuation of Building <i>Procedure for any emergency in which it is unsafe to remain in the building.</i>	Assess situation 1. Clear building. Evacuate to Muster Point. 2. Call 911 or other emergency services. 3. Move people to alternate indoor space if needed, such as Post Office lobby.	Avoid area of building in which hazard has occurred, if possible.	Ministers, Office Personnel, or those in charge of event	Take cell phone with you, if possible. Engage another person to help you.	Building cleared? Each area of building checked? Emergency dealt with? Safe for people to enter building or do we send them home? REPORT incident to office immediately.
2. Water Emergency <i>Water line break, flooding, etc.</i>	Assess situation 1. As needed, turn off closest water turn-off valve or Main Water Line (in storage closet across from Women's Washroom. 2. If needed, turn off electricity in electrical room. 3. In flood situation, monitor local media for updates and listen for High River Emergency Alerts	Water & electricity don't mix.	Ministers, Office Personnel, or those in charge of event	Flood saw are located in shed. These can be used for soaking up water in event of a water line break. Shop Vac is in the electrical room. Water can be dumped in drain in Janitor's room.	Phone posted Security phone number to contact appropriate staff and/or Property Team. REPORT full incident to office as soon as possible. Begin clean-up if safe to do so. Call Caretaker by contacting Security phone number .
3. Medical Emergency <i>Any serious medical emergency such as heart attack, stroke, choking, etc.</i>	Assess situation 1. Call 911, if needed 2. Ask for someone trained in CPR & use of AED 3. Employ AED as directed by 911	Create privacy for person while attending to medical needs.	Ministers, Office Personnel, or those in charge of event	AED located above drinking fountains. First Aid Kits located above drinking fountains, in kitchen, in office and in children's room.	Contact family member or friend. Monitor the person until Ambulance arrives or they are in care of family/friend. REPORT incident to church staff/office as soon as possible.
4. Severe Weather <i>Blizzard, tornado, high winds, hail and electrical storm.</i>	Assess situation 1. Keep people calm, away from windows and give instructions as to next steps, as available. 2. Monitor weather stations and/or cell phone apps.	Do not let anyone leave building until safe to do so.	Ministers, Office Personnel, or those in charge of event	Emergency lighting will come on if power goes out. Candles & flashlights are in office. Prayer shawls and blankets in healing rooms & youth room & other parts of building.	Make people comfortable with food, light and blankets. Entertain! Games & puzzles in children & youth rooms. REPORT incident to office as soon as possible.
5. Power Outage <i>If another emergency has caused the power outage, address that emergency first.</i>	Assess situation 1. Use cell phone to report power outage. 2. Unplug computers in office and sound booth, as needed.	Unplug computers in office and at sound booth. Note: surge protector in sound booth.	Ministers, Office Personnel, or those in charge of event	Emergency lighting will come on automatically and stay on for several hours. Candles & flashlights available in office. Main power switches are in Electrical Room.	If people will be in building longer than emergency lighting will last, prepare next steps. As possible, end activities and send people home safely. REPORT incident to office.
6. Fire	Assess situation 1. Evacuate Building to Muster Point (Inspiration Garden at back of building) 2. Call 911 3. Use fire extinguishers if safe to do so. Found at front, back and south doors, kitchen & sanctuary. Grease Fire Extinguisher in Kitchen. Extinguisher for Electrical Fires in Electrical Room.	Safety of people before safety of property	Ministers, Office Personnel, or those in charge of event	Fire Alarms located above each fire extinguisher. Fire extinguishers located at each of the three outdoor exit doors & inside the sanctuary door & in kitchen. Emergency Lighting will come on automatically.	Account for all areas of building being cleared. Assist fire department with information. Do not return to building until cleared by Fire Dept. to do so. REPORT incident to office as soon as possible.
7. Threatening Person in Building <i>If you feel in danger due to the actions or approach of another person in the building.</i>	Assess situation 1. Leave Building, if possible 2. Call 911 via cell phone or from a neighbouring business, as needed.	Safety of people before safety of property	Ministers, Office Personnel, or those in charge of event	If no cell phone, use Wolf Pack Alarm system to trigger call to emergency services, by putting in code and pressing Alarm, then leaving the building.	Do not re-enter building until you know that it is clear. Contact office staff to report the incident. REPORT incident to office as soon as possible.
8. Gas Leak	Assess situation 1. Evacuate Building immediately. 2. Call 911	Evacuate quickly to Muster point (Inspiration Garden at back of building)	Ministers, Office Personnel, or those in charge of event	Follow instructions of Fire Department & Gas Company.	Do not re-enter building until given permission by Fire Dept. REPORT incident to office as soon as possible.

Worship Resources

[Hymns in Times of Crisis](#) curated by The Hymn Society. John Ambrose, project coordinator. Free download.

[Gathering Worship Resource](#) (The United Church of Canada)

- Exploring Preaching in Challenging Situations – Pentecost 1, 2018
- Exploring What I Learned about Worship During the Pandemic Pentecost 2, 2022
- Exploring Ways to Address Traumatic Situations” Pentecost 2, 2023

In the Time of Wildfires: The Burnt Prayer, a Prayer of Lament, a Prayer in Burning Need

Holy One, we anticipate Pentecost and the arrival of the Holy Spirit. Haloes of flame rest upon the apostles, and we prepare for exuberance: red preaching stoles, flame-coloured clothing, Pentecost shoes, birthday cake with icing images of the Spirit's fire.

And yet again this year, we put aside these images of fire. We reluctantly open our liturgical resource folder and file the sermon relating to holy cleansing, or rising like a phoenix, or the rekindled glory of a pink carpet of fireweed across a scorched forest floor. We set aside prayers about the fiery, out-of-control exuberance of spiritual awakening. We purge from our metaphors any reference to burning. We return our red shoes to the closet and hang on the rack the necktie with delicate silk images of flames. We phone the organist to change the hymns for the end of the month: no winds of change, no setting the church on fire or striking as the lightning hits a posing spire. Will we ever sing Ron's hymn⁵ again?

We notice helicopters against the cloudy sky. We receive news reports of Drayton Valley fire smoke in Halifax. Wildfire alerts come on our phones. We feel the smoke and ash closing in.

Yet again, we remember Fort McMurray and Slave Lake. Burned in our memories—oh, there is a metaphor unbidden!—deeply embedded in our memory are the images of homes and forests aflame, and videos recorded from inside cars as families fled along a roadway with fire on each side and overhead.

We remember Kelowna, Sparks Lake, Lytton, Williams Lake, Coldwater, Barrier, Naramata.

Yet again, we are pained by the disasters we remember: flooding in High River, mudslides on the Coquihalla, murder in the Yellowknife mine, hurricane devastation across the Maritimes and Newfoundland, tornado in Dunrobin-Gatineau.

We bring our lament. We pray our sadness. We carry our shock. We resist our numbness in yet another season of wildfire.

Yet again this year, we bring prayers for the persons whose lives are threatened. We bring prayers for the firefighters, armed forces, and other professionals whose work it is to provide, to bring safety. We bring prayers for the communities, the families, friends, community groups, gathering places, farms, businesses, ranches—and politics and politicians.

⁵ Refers to “Winds of Change” by Fred Kaan and Ron Klusmeier, *More Voices* 23

We bring prayers from deep in our souls for creation and for the crisis in which we have found awkward ways of living. We are aware of the annual accounting in acres of devastation: forest, wilderness, and homeland. We recognize the environmental collapse in which we live and move and have our being. We confess our attachment to selfish ways.

And as we light the Christ candle, as we bring match to wick, as we ignite a small and tended flame, we become the connection of the small to the large, the here to the there, the local to the province⁶, the prayer to the prophetic. We pray for grace, we pray for help, we pray for rain: we pray in the moment and we pray in community because only in beloved community can we possibly know hope. O God who is with us, bring us the wherewithal to be the people of hope. Amen.

—Rev. Dr. Catherine Faith MacLean, St. Paul's U.C., Edmonton, Alta. May 15, 2023. First published on *GatheringWorship.ca*, May 2023

A Prayer for Those Who Have Been Traumatized

Oh, God we pray for those who are crushed, and poured out, and emptied. Those experiences are real, and the pain is real.

We pray for those who sit in panic with their backs to the wall, who wake fear-drenched in the middle of the night, who are nervous when a stranger smiles at them. We pray for those who flashback to moments when they were deeply afraid or deeply wounded. May we recognize the moments when we need to weep when they are weeping.

Forgive our casual prayers for peace, our passing mentions of happy families and our liturgical delight in the beauty of creation, feelings that people dealing with depression and trauma may not share. We recognize that too often we are the least helpful of caregivers.

We give thanks for the marvelous resilience of the human spirit. We celebrate when someone comes to the point in their journey when they can declare, "I will push back the night." We sing and dance with those who discover they can assert, "This is not, and never will be, the end of me."

May we be the companions people need on their journey through trauma, willing to listen, to learn and to live the liberating hope we know through Jesus the Christ. Amen.

—Neil Parker, *The Vienna, Community Church, Vienna, Austria*. First Published in *Gathering: Pentecost 2*, 2023

When Disaster Strikes: A Prayer

Accompanying God, when disaster strikes, our first reaction is to make sure that our loved ones are safe and have escaped harm. When the urgency of the situation has passed, we ask that you help us find your grace to guide us through the next steps. May your grace be found in the care we receive and the care we provide, in the giving of blood, the filling of sandbags, or the offering of food. Attune us to your grace so that we may become the instruments that deliver grace to others, bringing comfort, care, and relief, even in small ways. May we sing your song of love no matter the occasion,

⁶ or another province where wildfires are burning

inspired by your constant presence with us through trial and trouble. May we discover divine love working through us, advocating for compassionate help and challenging injustice and inattention.

Forgive us the moments when we feel selfish. Forgive us when we give ourselves over to the despair of believing that all hope was lost in the disaster. Forgive us when we lose patience with others, even if it is justified. Align us with your kingdom so that we might live it out in our words and actions, even when disaster strikes. Amen.

Words of Assurance

We're only human, and humans are vulnerable beings. Yet we carry the spark of God's intimate love and care within us. That love is able to expand beyond our human frailties. It accepts us for who we are, while calling us always to be better. This is the kind of love that nourishes us into loving and accepting others, even in the midst of disaster. Praise be to God that we are God's beloved children!

—Éric Hébert-Daly, *Responsable des ministères en français, L'Église Unie du Canada. First Published in Gathering: Pentecost 2, 2023*

When Worship Itself is Traumatizing

Words can hurt. Worship words can hurt even more. In worship, people may expect to be in a safe place, a place where they can feel their vulnerability. Then a certain phrase or story can poke into the rawness of their vulnerability and add to the woundedness they experience. For example, on Mother's Day, a well-intentioned but ill-advised prayer may celebrate all mothers, not remembering that there are people who have been abused by their mothers, or women for whom it has not been possible to welcome the children they so wanted. In the same way, worship words that assume that everyone in the congregation has enough food and appropriate shelter, that everyone is feeling joyful and grateful, or that everyone is cisgender heterosexual or of a White cultural background can leave worshippers who are hungry, seeking better housing, grieving, not heterosexual, or not White feeling wounded and wondering if this is a safe place for them to worship. When we weave together worship words, we need to check our assumptions and consider how the words will be received, and whether they will add to someone's pain.

—Susan Lukey, *Editor. Gathering Worship Resource. First Published in Gathering: Pentecost 2, 2023*

Planting Gardens in Babylon

Disaster, tragedy, and devastation come upon us. We have no choice. Suddenly, we find ourselves in the midst of a situation that has turned our whole world upside down. As clergy and congregational leaders, we may be personally affected even as we are responding to the spiritual, emotional, and physical needs of people in the congregation and community. What we hope will be a sprint back to some sort of normalcy becomes a marathon, and we discover that we have to slow down and pace ourselves. We need to seek the support of others and recognize our limits.

In 586 BCE, about 10,000 Jerusalemites were taken captive by King Nebuchadnezzar and forced to relocate to the city of Babylon. The prophet Jeremiah had surprising advice for these devastated and traumatized people who'd had life as they knew it ripped from them: "Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, to all the exiles...: Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat what they produce...[And] seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare" (Jeremiah 29:4–7).

Our first reaction, as the reality of the disaster situation settles in, may be that we want to get away physically from the place where it happened. That is natural and, for some, this is the necessary option. Yet, sometimes we cannot escape, especially from the emotional and spiritual aftermath. That is when Jeremiah's advice rings true. We need to plant gardens, build houses, and take up residence in our grief and recovery. We need to accept that this is now our experience. We need to seek the welfare of this "city" in which we now live, for in seeking its welfare, we find our welfare.

—Susan Lukey, co-minister at High River U.C., High River, Alta., through the flood and recovery of 2013. First Published in *Gathering: Pentecost 2, 2023*

Mending Our Relationship with Creation: A Sermon Series Idea

When a disaster or tragedy occurs, the question arises: how do we restore our relationship with our context and our sense of safety in the context in which the disaster or tragedy happened? A year after the 2013 flooding in High River, Alberta, many of us began to think about our relationship with the river that runs right through the middle of our town, the river that caused the massive flooding.

Just a note: High River is not named because of the river that can flood. It is named for the tall cottonwood trees that grow along the riverbanks. The Indigenous name for the area is 'Ispitsi' which means "tall trees or high woods". From this, the river was named the Highwood River, and the townsite that was established at the stagecoach crossing of the river became a shortened form, High River.

We were going to continue to live with the river in our midst. The town council was making wise decisions about how to mitigate future high water. Yet, we felt betrayed by the river, even though it just did what rivers do when they are filled by too much snow melt and rain. So, how would we restore our relationship with a river that we had cherished and enjoyed for canoeing, fishing, swimming and hiking?

At High River United, we decided on a theme of "Mending Our Relationship with Creation." For each Sunday, we invited someone who had a particular relationship with that aspect of Creation to share their experiences and their spirituality of Creation. Then, either my husband or I (the clergy team at the time) would preach on mending and honouring our relationship with Creation. We did not use all of the scriptures listed, but they were the ones that inspired us. Here is the outline:

Our Relationship with the Cycle of Seasons

Scripture: Genesis 1:1-2, 14-19 (God creates seasons), Ecclesiastes 3:1-8 (For everything a season)

Theme: Setting up the theme, naming why we are exploring our relationship with Creation, naming ourselves as connected to a landscape.

Speaker: *Our Landscape Shapes Us:* Instead of a speaker, we invited individuals to discuss in small groups and then some to share with the congregation what landscape has shaped their lives and spirituality, perhaps where they grew up or one with which they connected along the way.

Our Relationship with Summer

Scripture: Ephesians 3:14-21 (abundant possibilities in God), Proverbs 6:6-11 (be productive like an ant), John 14:25-27 and 15:9-12 (I have come with peace and joy)

Themes: How do we even know what season we are in when we've been sideswiped by disaster? What season I am in personally? In the Bible, summer is not often a good image. It is a time of hard work and productivity to prepare for coming winter/dry season, to prepare to survive. Our summers are a change of pace and relaxation. But peace and joy are nestled into (sometimes hiding) every season as a gift promised by Jesus.

Speaker: *The Wisdom of Summer:* a person who loves summer activities shared their perspective
Our Relationship with Autumn

Scripture: 2 Corinthians 9:6-12 (reap what you sow; generosity), Leviticus 23:9-22 (at the end of harvest leave some in field and rest)

Themes: releasing, preparation, quiet, introspection, a time of harvesting what has been planted, gathering in the fruits of your labours, thanksgiving, generosity and compassion, splashes of colour, drawing our resources in to prepare for winter. What do we need to let go of in order to move forward?

Speaker: *The Wisdom of Autumn:* a person who loves the harvesting of grain and garden
Our Relationship with Winter

Scripture: Exodus 34:21(six days work, the seventh for rest), Mark 4:33-41 (Jesus takes a nap), Acts 27:1-2,9-26 (finding a winter port for the ship on which Paul was prisoner – hope is abandoned)

Themes: Traditionally a time of trusting, resting, growth and preparation for new life happening unseen but today our winters are times of greater activity and productivity. Do we ever rest during the year? The resources (for our physical and spiritual needs) that we have nurtured and helped grow during summer and gathered in during autumn now sustain us through the time when those resources are not so readily available to us. What are the resources that we need to sustain us through the winters of grief, disaster, challenge, devastation? Family, friends, community, faith practices—we nourish those in good times and they are there for us in difficult times—just as we are there for others in the winters of their lives. We will have winters in our lives. This is unavoidable. What port do we put into to winter over there, to minimize the damage and loss?

Speaker: *The Wisdom of Winter:* someone who embraces winter as a time for nurturing, gathering with others.

Our Relationship with Spring

Scripture: Psalm 74:12-17 (fixed bounds of summer and winter), Song of Solomon 2:8-17 (Arise my love for winter is past), Colossians 3:9-17(Clothe yourself with the new self), Revelation 21:1-5a (new earth)

Themes: With spring, we begin the cycle again and experience the first glimmers of hope—but we still have to work hard. The resources (for our physical and spiritual needs) that we have nurtured, that grow during summer, are gathered in during autumn and used during winter must still sustain us until new resources reach full growth and we can begin to use them. But the signs are all around us that abundance is on its way. Hope will spring forth. Winter will not last a lifetime; the intensity of grief lasts about 2 hours before we get an easing/a break. What are we hoping for this spring as we continue the recovery?

Speaker: *The Wisdom of Spring:* an avid gardener who plans for spring planting throughout the winter

Our Relationship with Mountains

Scripture: Psalm 121(I lift my eyes), Mark 9:2-8 (transfiguration), Isaiah 25:6-10a (on the mountain of God)

Themes: In scripture, good things happen on mountains, powerful things. We meet God on mountains. The mountains anchor biblical story and in our context they anchor us. For those of us raised near mountains, it is hard to get our bearings elsewhere—here we always know west because that is where the mountains are, from where the first snows come. But mountains are not to be trifled with. They are much bigger and more powerful than we imagine—we must sojourn into them with respect.

Speaker: *The Wisdom of the Mountains:* a family who regularly hikes in the mountains and camps in backcountry

Our Relationship with the River

Scripture: Exodus 2:1-10 (Moses in river), Mark 1:4-11 (Baptism of Jesus), Revelation 22:1-5 (river of life)

Themes: In scripture, powerful things happen in rivers. In Celtic tradition, rivers as the thin place—earth, sky and water meeting and here the veil between earth and heaven, humanity and divine is thin. Life happens by rivers; life is sustained by rivers. A river is a natural place to gather and to build a settlement. Our community, most communities across Canada, live in relationship with a river. The river was here first. Rivers flood. How do we make room for their flooding? How do we reconnect with our river?

Speaker: *The Wisdom of the River:* a journalist who writes about the outdoors and has often fished the river.

Our Relationship with the Prairies

Scripture: Genesis 2:4b-9 (humans created from soil), Joel 2:21-28 (Do not fear, o soil), Mark 4:1-9 (sower and seeds), Ephesians 3:14-21 (rooted and grounded in God)

Themes: We are rooted and grounded in the earth. Humans are made of the earth and of star dust and to the earth we shall return. Plants and humans alike can not grow well without soil. We are also rooted and grounded in God. We are called to be caretakers of the earth. This is a high calling, a responsibility and a privilege.

Speaker: *The Wisdom of the Land:* a farming couple, living on a farm that had been in their family for over 100 years, shared their understanding of caring for the soil and the prairie land.

Our Relationship with Animals and Plants

Scripture: Job 12:7-10 (ask the animals and plants), Psalm 19 (the heavens tell the glory of God)

Theme: There is wisdom in Creation. Plants and animals (and our pets) have much to teach us. We need to live in relationship with plants and animals. We need to be attentive to what Creation is telling us, teaching us.

Speaker: *The Wisdom of the Bees:* a beekeeper shared what he had learned about life and God as he worked with his bees.

Living with Respect and in Relationship with Creation

Scripture: Psalm 148 (all creation praises God), Jeremiah 4:23-27ff (the earth is laid waste), Romans 8:18-39 (creation groaning with us, nothing in creation can separate us from God), Isaiah 55:12 (go out in joy, led forth in peace, trees clap their hands), Genesis 8:20-22 (summer and winter, day and night shall not cease)

Themes: A weaving together of our relationship with Creation, a summing up. The Jewish concept of *tikkun olam*, the repair or mending of the earth is a joint responsibility with God. The First Nations understanding of “All my relations.” Knowing what we know now about living near a river, how do we live both with respect and joy in creation? Can we trust the river? Can we trust Creation? When we rest and limit ourselves, it is good for Creation because it saves resources and respects the earth.

Speaker: *The Wisdom of Creation:* a person involved in the local riparian society, who is involved in restoring the river area to its natural forms and plant life.

—Susan Lukey and David Robertson, while at High River U.C., High River, AB

A Call to Worship

Bears, beavers and badgers, **Don't be afraid!**

Eagles and elks, honey bees and hawks, **Don't be afraid!**

Prairie soil and rolling hills, **Don't be afraid!**

Fruit trees and vegetable gardens, **Don't be afraid!**

Sky and earth and oceans, **Don't be afraid!**

Elders, adults, youth and children, **Don't be afraid!**

People of every country and culture, **Don't be afraid!**

For God is with us; God's compassion and tenderness enfold us.

God works with us for the mending of the world,

helping us find ways to create peace, justice and healing.

Therefore, with glad and joyful hearts, we can declare to all creation:

Don't be afraid! For God is with us! We are not alone.

Let us now worship for the sake of mending our relationship with creation.

—Susan Lukey, while at High River U.C., High River, AB

A Litany: Mending Our Relationship with Creation and with Our Geography

All sing: MV 90 “Don’t be afraid” (*once*)

Mountains: Isaiah 25:6-8 On the mountain of God

All sing: MV 90 “Don’t be afraid” (*once*)

Prairies: Joel 2:21-22 Do not fear, o soil!

All sing: MV 90 “Don’t be afraid” (*once*)

Animals & Birds: Job 12:7-8 Ask the animals & plants

All sing: MV 90 “Don’t be afraid” (*once*)

River: Revelation 22:1-2 The River of Life

All sing: MV 90 “Don’t be afraid” (*once*)

A Litany: Mending Our Relationship with Creation: The Wisdom of the Seasons

Summer: Proverbs 6:6-8 Consider the ways of the ant

All sing: VU 308 “Many and great, o God” (*verse 1*)

Autumn: 2 Corinthians 9:6-7 Sow & reap generously

All sing: VU 308 “Many and great, o God” (*verse 1*)

Winter: Exodus 34:21 Work six days, rest on seventh

All sing: VU 308 “Many and great, o God” (*verse 1*)

Spring: Colossians 3:9-10 Clothed in the new self

All sing: VU 308 “Many and great, o God” (*verse 2*)

—Susan Lukey and David Robertson, while at High River U.C., High River, AB

For Those Who Have Lived through Tragedy or Disaster, When One Unfolds Elsewhere

If you, like me, have lived through a tragedy or disaster, then watching or hearing one unfold for others is evocative. My personal experience was the 2013 flooding of High River that put 85% of our town under water, flooding our church and my home.

Since then, as another tragedy or disaster unfolds in the news, I resonate with so much of what is happening for people in that situation, whether it is wildfires or flooding, hurricane or tornado, a shooting or vehicle collision. While each situation creates different issues and circumstances, there is so much the same. I find myself watching the news and hearing comments of people who are affected and remember making some of those comments myself or hearing others in High River make those comments. I look at the people’s faces and I know the feelings: the fear, the disbelief, the pain, the deep sadness, the confusion, the frustration and the utter exhaustion.

We have a sense of what the people are going through. For example, when we hear of others being evacuated, we remember what it is like to not know where loved ones are, what it is like to not have our medications with us or our pets or a change of clothes, what it is like to know you have to leave but not know where you are going or when you will return, what it is like to wonder whether your

home and/or business will be there when you return or to know that it is already destroyed. We have been there; we remember.

As we listen to the news and watch the images, there are a few things are important to keep in mind as people who have been through our own disaster or tragedy:

- We need to protect our children (especially those under 12) as much as possible from the images and news stories. The media often offers almost continual coverage, which may be necessary in some circumstances for the sharing of needed information for those affected by the situation, but our children don't need to experience this much coverage. It is hard for them, especially the youngest, to understand that this is happening far away. It is hard for them to know that *we are safe*. Remember, little ears and eyes are right there paying attention to what when you are listening to and watching even if the children appear to be playing. Children will also pick up on the emotions of their adults.
- For those children and youth who have experienced tragedy or disaster firsthand, the images and stories of this current situation may bring up feelings of trauma, grief and fear, as if they are going through it all again. That is quite natural. Be ready to give your children more hugs, more story-time, more conversation—anything that helps them feel connected, loved and safe. Don't downplay the feelings. Accept their tears and their fears. They are real.
- Be aware of your own response to the images and media reports. We may want to care for the people experiencing the current situation because we know how much outside support means. There will be many ways we can offer support, as we choose. But we must also remember that we are people who have been traumatized by our own disaster. It is amazing to me, even years later, how raw my feelings may be as I watch the images, how quickly tears may come to my eyes, how severely my gut may wrench as I hear the reports, how hard it may be to focus on my work as I wonder what is happening in that context. We need to be aware of those responses, be gentle with ourselves and honour the emotions we are feeling. Go slow, rest, play and find activities and situations that remind you of the goodness of life!
- Do you find yourself fixated on the images and media reports? As a situation unfolds for others, we may find ourselves fixated on following media or checking websites to find out what is happening. We may start feeling some of what we felt in the first days after our own disaster, when we were desperately trying to find information. It is okay to turn off the radio and television and to close social media. If need be, give yourself a set amount of time in which you will check the reports and then move on to something that takes your focus to a different place—family, work, exercise, a hobby, friends, community. Following endless hours of reporting is not healthy for us; it can re-traumatize us. This is not our disaster.

There are tears in our eyes and prayers in our hearts as we watch the tragedy or disaster unfold for others. We understand the devastation and recognize the emotion on the faces of the people involved. We know that the road ahead of them is a long one. We know that strength comes in having the support of others. We know that it is possible to choose to create something good, something better out of the disaster or tragedy. We also know that the sense of pain and loss continues and the memories of “the day” it happened are still vivid, long after the event.

As followers of the Way of Jesus, we weave back together the torn fabric of our lives and our community, slowly recovering our well-being emotionally, physically, mentally and spiritually. We know that it is love and supportive relationships that will piece things back together. We remember the words of Paul in 2 Corinthians 4:8-10 (*adapted*):

- We've been traumatized in every way but not crushed.
- We don't know what to do but we don't despair.
- We are persecuted but know that we haven't been left alone.
- We been struck down but not destroyed.
- For we feel in our bodies the suffering and death of Jesus,
- so that the life of Jesus may also be made visible in our bodies.

Right now, we may once again be feeling in our bodies and spirits what we felt when the tragedy or disaster happened to us. We have been shaped by that disaster or tragedy but, when the time is right in our healing journey, we can also be symbols of possibility, of hope, and of healing that can follow a disaster or tragedy.

May we remember to take care of ourselves and to honour the depth of what we are feeling as we watch this new disaster or tragedy unfold. We may not be over our own trauma, but we are healing, rebuilding and restoring our selves and our community. That, in and of itself, is the hope we offer.

—*Susan Lukey, while at High River United Church, High River, AB, May 4, 2016. Written originally in response to the Fort McMurray wildfires in May 2016. Edited.*