

The Context for Going to Help:

DISASTER RESPONSE CHAPLAINS

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Note: Disaster Chaplaincy is a specialized ministry.

Due to the reality of dealing with multiple victims, multiple injuries, and the reaction and grief of multiple families, disaster chaplaincy is not for everyone.

If you believe that you are called to this ministry, please contact Peter Gudaitis, Executive Director and CEO of NYDIS at 212.669.6100 or pgudaitis@nydis.org for information on disaster chaplaincy training programs for New York City.

Disaster Spiritual Care

Spiritual Care is the support offered to people in a time of crisis. It assists them in drawing upon their spiritual resources in the midst of their pain. Often, spiritual questions are neither formalized nor faith specific. Depending upon the context, it may include religious care which is the provision of specific ritual and prayer within the context of a unique faith tradition.

By extension, disaster spiritual care aids in the relief of human suffering by assuring skilled, appropriate, multifaith, and interdisciplinary spiritual care for all those affected by disaster. It respects the broad nature of spiritual response by responding to the human search for meaning in non-faith specific language.

Disaster spiritual care interventions are designed to mitigate the impact of spiritual, physical, emotional, and behavioral crisis experienced by survivors, family members, rescue/recovery personnel, and the community at large in the aftermath of a catastrophic event. The provision of disaster spiritual care is short term and functions as “spiritual first aid” for those impacted by the disruptive effects of a disaster.

This chapter focuses on the religious leader’s role in responding as a **Disaster Response Chaplain** as part of the overall recovery effort. A Chaplain is a religious leader who serves in an institution that is not usually regarded as a house of worship. Chaplains serve in the military, hospitals, schools, prisons, and generally have received





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specialized training in addition to their theological education. As we experienced in the aftermath of September 11, Chaplains served at the Family Assistance Centers, the Respite Centers, and the Morgues. They made their presence and spiritual and religious resources available to all who were there - with the commitment that each Chaplain was there to serve anyone who requested help.

The Need for Providing Disaster Spiritual Care

Many Americans profess a belief in God. Others define their relationship to the world in spiritual terms, while still others profess no belief. Yet, in the event of public trauma, all of these individuals will experience existential distress in one form or another. The foundations which gave meaning and purpose to their lives are torn asunder. These devastated individuals will need a place of safety where they know they will not be judged in the midst of their pain, and a calm, compassionate presence who will respect them regardless of what they believe.

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Disaster Response Chaplains

Various types of Chaplains provide spiritual care in the event of disaster:

- Local uniformed services such as fire and police have their own departmental chaplains. These chaplains minister to their colleagues almost exclusively.
- Professional chaplains in the area may respond. Their training enables them to function as multifaith spiritual caregivers in a trauma environment.

- Local religious leaders, endorsed by their faith community and credentialed by a community-selected agency, respond within areas designated by the authorities as disaster sites.
- Spontaneous volunteers will respond. Generally, they fit into two categories:

– **One:** those local religious leaders who have not been trained or credentialed in disaster response. They usually serve houses of worship and are respected leaders in the broader community. Their role in recovery and healing will be pivotal.

Should these religious leaders wish to work as chaplains during the initial phase of a disaster response they will need to be screened and oriented on the specifics of the disaster, the basics of interfaith care, and their role as part of the overall response.

– **Two:** the many non-local religious volunteers who will come to “lend a hand.” After they are screened and oriented, they may work for a limited period of time. Their access ends at the completion of their tour.

The American Red Cross’ National Spiritual Care Response Team may be deployed in the event of a large disaster involving transportation or technological accidents, mass casualty, or weapons of mass destruction. These volunteers have extensive training in the administration and management of disaster ministry. Their role is to support the religious leaders in the affected community by helping to create and maintain processes for the orienting, scheduling, credentialing and deployment of all religious leaders who are responding, other than those working with members of municipal services such as Fire, EMS, and Police.



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MITIGATION AND PREPAREDNESS PHASES:

Training

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Safety

Disaster sites are hazardous by nature. Safety procedures are implemented for the safety of all personnel who respond. Part of those safety procedures are intended to protect the victims and survivors against unwanted intrusive actions at a time when they are most vulnerable – directly after the disaster event.

Therefore, no unauthorized chaplain is permitted onto any disaster site or into and disaster response facility. **Do not self-deploy.** If something happens to you and you become a victim, who will know that you're there? Additionally, there may be specific needs or instructions for chaplains. **If you go on your own, you may very well jeopardize the presence of all chaplains at the site through your actions or you may find yourself arrested for trespass.**

Endorsement by Religious Denomination

- No person can become a credentialed chaplain unless their specific faith community has first endorsed them.

Screening

Once endorsed by one's religious denomination, each potential chaplain is screened to make certain that s/he will be able to function as a disaster chaplain and is likely to make a positive impact on the recovery effort.

Collegiality

Unfortunately, religious leaders tend to be "lone rangers," working independently within their own faith community. The events of 9/11 demonstrated the need for disciplined networking. Community religious leaders need to have a better sense of who their colleagues are and need to build trusting relationships with them. (*See Chapter 5 on Developing Cultural Competence*).

- Learn who your colleagues are in all faith traditions and establish relationships with them.
- Create a support system for yourself.
- Create a comprehensive referral network.
- Create relationships with the fire and police departments, and other emergency responders that serve your local community.
- With your colleagues, plan for immediate, short-term, mid-term, and long-term responses.
- Be aware of the demographics of the broader community.
- Pool resources.



By definition, a disaster response is disciplined chaos.

GUIDELINES AND INTERVENTIONS FOR RELIGIOUS LEADERS

RESPONSE PHASE

Disaster Specific Orientation

- If a catastrophe occurs that requires deployment, job-specific orientations will take place as many times as necessary to accommodate locally credentialed and spontaneous volunteers.
- Every disaster is local, and every disaster has its own personality and culture, therefore no one orientation fits all situations.
- The orientation process may result in a job-specific credential which becomes invalid after the individual's termination of service.

Sites

Designated disaster sites will vary from event to event. However, there will always be a **Family Assistance Center (FAC)**, which is where the majority of chaplains are likely to be deployed. Additional sites may include respite centers for the response/recovery workers, morgues, and other sites as needed.

Self Care in a Disaster¹

- Every chaplain is required to assure their personal well-being by taking breaks, maintaining a healthy diet, getting enough sleep and exercise, speaking with colleagues and supervisors to debrief, and taking opportunities to do what is re-creative for them, such as meditation and prayer.
- In order to avoid secondary trauma, every chaplain must be defused and/or debriefed on a regular basis. Debriefing helps insure the emotional, spiritual, and physical health of a disaster responder by providing a safe and non-judgmental place for them to talk about their experiences. Debriefing is not, nor should it, take the place of therapy; however, it can identify individuals who might need more help.

What the Chaplains can expect:

By definition, a disaster response is disciplined chaos. The magnitude and amount of grief can be overwhelming. The unexpected is the norm and the chaplain must be able to tolerate working in such an environment. Further, it is crucial that a deployed spiritual care provider be willing to serve as a team member in a paramilitary environment where they have no input in decision making. Flexibility is a virtue in a disaster and it is a defense against frustration and burnout.

Additionally, the chaplain can expect to encounter some or all of the following as part of the response phase:

A rigid bureaucracy: this is in place for your protection. Even though it may feel less concerned with the actual events, it is simplest to just follow the rules. The result is a smoother exit from their offices, and more time spent on doing what you signed up for: to help those affected by the disaster.

Poor information flow: Remember that it's a disaster. No one person knows what is happening in each part of the site. Rumors abound, and everyone, with the best intentions, will try to pass along information that may or may not turn out to be true. The best rule of thumb is that all you can really know is what you can see in front of you. And even then, you don't know how it fits into the rest of what's happening. Simply do what you came for.

Procedures that can change hourly: The reason for this is that the incident command may be changing, new information may have been discovered, the previous way turned out not to have been safe. Just go with the changes and provide support to those around you – they may be less secure with change than you are.



Ideally, religious leaders should be integrated into local, state, and federal disaster response protocols.

RECOVERY PHASE

A Disaster Response Chaplain is by definition involved in the Response phase of a disaster. There may be some involvement in short term recovery, but generally, their work is done once the response phase moves into recovery, and they continue their work in the context of their local house of worship. *(See the chapters on Radical Hospitality, Self-Care, and Mental Health for more information on this aspect of care.)*

CONCLUSION

Disaster Response Chaplains must be endorsed by their religious denomination, screened for suitability for disaster response work, and trained to refine their chaplaincy skills for disaster response.

If denominational-specific questions are raised, then the Chaplain is expected to seek out or make a referral to a religious leader of that denomination to obtain the answers to the questions that were raised.

Cross-cultural knowledge is also important. To be most effective, a Chaplain should have a working knowledge of the cultural, ethnic, and religious diversity of the impacted community.

An ability to be supervised and to function appropriately in a multifaith environment are essential requirements for anyone wishing to function as a Disaster Chaplain.

Disaster response calls for an ability to interact collegially with Mental Health, Fire, Police, EMS, and other government agencies. It is essential to understand that chaplaincy, while an essential role, is not the most important function and that the Chaplain is operating under someone else's authority and as a part of the overall response effort.

Ideally, religious leaders should be integrated into local, state, and federal disaster response protocols. A clear working relationship between the religious leaders and members of these organizations must be developed so that the first time they meet is not in the middle of a major disaster. Such proactive organizing is valuable for the community on many levels, not the least of which is the confidence born out of a shared sense of preparedness.

¹ See Chapter 3, 'Self-Care' for more information on this subject. Ed.