

How Can We Help?



Church strategies for responding to global crises

By Ellen Livingood

Katrina. Tsunamis. Earthquakes. Now a heartrending refugee crisis is playing out across the media. Believers are urgently asking their church leaders, "Are we going to respond?" "How can we help?"

Many churches have been caught less than fully prepared to answer these questions. How can congregations respond well to a sudden, overwhelming world event? How can you facilitate your people's compassionate response as well as expand their understanding of God's global purposes?

I am not an expert on crisis response, but I offer these suggestions to help us think about some of the issues. These recommendations primarily relate to a crisis in another part of the world. A local crisis offers additional avenues for involvement.

1. Recognize the phases of the situation. Most crises have both a short-term, emergency phase and a longer-term, rebuilding phase. These are very different and generally call for different responses. We address them separately below.

2. Respond quickly to the short-term emergency with financial help through already trusted partners. Almost always, the best way for a church to help meet immediate needs of a global crisis is through financial gifts. Two types of organizations are prepared to act speedily:



- Mercy ministries with crisis-response departments (World Relief and Samaritan's Purse among others; many denominations also have an emergency relief department). These organizations specialize in knowing how to

respond in a variety of crisis situations. They are also poised to be able to get on location quickly, assess situations well, and deliver aid as effectively as possible.

- Agencies and partners with personnel already on the ground in the crisis zone. This may include missions agencies with missionaries who live in that location or national partners in the epicenter of the need.

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3. Carefully analyze requests for help.

Every organization knows that a crisis moves people to open their wallets. Sadly, a few agencies which raise money for emergency aid divert or waste funds. Others try to launch relief efforts for which they are not equipped. Don't be afraid to ask hard questions:



- Does this organization have the expertise and capacity (personnel and delivery systems) to provide goods or services where most needed?
- Are other organizations already addressing this need, perhaps better?
- How can we be sure that the aid we provide through this organization will benefit the neediest?

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4. Give your people a missions perspective of the crisis.

Does your congregation really understand the situation? Perhaps you need to present a coherent overview of what is happening.

Pictures of a dead child in the surf circulate quickly, but your people will likely need to hear from you that local churches are quietly serving displaced persons in that same location. Whenever possible, provide your congregation with a first-hand perspective on the crisis written by a believer or worker on the ground. Where can you find reliable reports? Check the websites and blogs of mission organizations you trust.

While it is natural to feel an urgent need to "do something" in a crisis, the most powerful contribution is prayer. Consider beginning a daily, short-term email blast circulating prayer requests that will guide your people in powerful intercession

5. Commit to meeting longer-term needs.

Quite often, the crisis will fade from the news before the greatest impacts of the disaster will even begin. Will your church be one that continues to walk alongside those who suffer, long after the media trucks leave? If so, you will need to develop a plan around the longer-term needs and goals of those on the ground. Here's where there are often opportunities to involve your people's skills in hands-on help. To keep your congregation engaged, you will need to

Partnerships Shine in a Crisis

For several years, **New Hope Church** in suburban Minneapolis has been developing a relationship with a pastor in the Middle East. This gifted national leader has planted a number of churches and opened a community center. As a flood of refugees began to pour into his city, the center shifted its focus to serve displaced people which consisted primarily of women and children.

At the same time as they were deepening this overseas relationship, New Hope was also linking with several other US congregations who shared their desire to support what this pastor was doing. One of the partners took the lead in children's ministry, and the other partners joined them. Because all of the partners already have a firm base of mutual trust and collaboration, they are poised to quickly expand their collaboration as the refugee crisis intensifies and takes on long-term proportions.



Missions Pastor Herb Janes shares his crisis-response principles:

1. Come around a national leader you know and trust, and whose ministry God is blessing.
2. Begin with a partnership orientation. Whenever possible, join with other churches that bring experience and expertise you may not have.
3. Combine your efforts in a way that addresses the humanitarian crisis holistically, but also lends itself to church planting and evangelism.

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continue to update them on the story of the ongoing need and how you are helping to address it.

6. ■ Don't rush after the crowd. When possible, churches should respond to crisis situations with thoughtful, prayerful generosity. But don't be tempted to divert funds from critically needed long-term ministry.

Are some of the skills most needed in crisis relief sitting undiscovered in your church?

Before getting heavily involved in crisis alleviation, some leaders make it a policy to step back and assess if other strategic funding priorities are getting pushed to the background. For example: In the emotional drama of the refugee crisis in Europe, we must not forget that there are major humanitarian needs in places like South Sudan, Iraq, and Somalia. And missionaries still need their monthly support, schools around the world need to continue to educate future leaders, and the gospel needs to continue to go out via media.

7. ■ Develop a response strategy before disasters arise.

Do you have a predetermined plan for addressing global crises? Such a plan should include:

- By what criteria will we quickly determine whether and how we should respond when a crisis occurs?
- Do we have clear guidelines for creating and publicizing a special giving fund for emergency relief?
- Should we establish a line item in our budget for crisis



Networks' Value in Refugee Crisis

Previous *Postings* have highlighted the value of networks ("[Better Together](#)"). But the recent refugee crisis has pointed out additional contributions that networks can offer.

In the midst of this emergency, there has been little if any time to research new partners and establish new trust relationships. Some Western churches considered sending survey teams to Europe to assess the needs and find partners. But it quickly became evident that those on the ground had no capacity to host such groups or the margin to step aside from ministry to interact with potential partners. It was all hands on deck to meet the urgent needs of the flood of displaced people.

Enter established networks! Local churches which had previously joined networks were already aware of who was serving in various ministries and how to plug into key projects. For churches not yet involved in a related network, there are upcoming meetings where churches can quickly get a bird's-eye view of ministry in the region and learn where and how they might best plug in. Interested in more information about such opportunities? Contact us at info@CatalystServices.org.

To those who invest time and energy to build and serve networks—thank you for your valuable contribution!

- Should we establish a line item in our budget for crisis needs?
- What organizations will we prioritize as conduits for emergency relief funds?
- What is our training and deployment plan for sending individuals or teams to serve special needs?
- Do our global partners have contingency plans to address a sudden crisis? This should include strategies for individual missionaries caught in an emergency situation. But it may also be wise

to plan how to come alongside partners' ministries at a time of crisis.

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8 ■ Identify emergency relief resources in your congregation.

Ask those who specialize in crisis response to provide a list of expertise most often needed in times of emergency and its aftermath. Do you have people in your congregation with those types of training and skills? Often needed: medical personnel of all kinds, social workers, trauma and grief counselors, all types of building tradespeople, drivers, cooks, project managers, translators, etc.



Consider regularly providing some emergency response training. Why not offer a class in collaboration with other churches in your area? You may want to develop and prepare a [rapid response team](#).

A Few Resources on Refugees

- [The Refugee Highway](#) is a global network of ministries, churches, and individuals who reach out to refugees at various points on their pilgrimage to a new homeland.

One of GMI's Missiographics, "[Stepping Beyond the Tent](#)," is an informative tool to stimulate deeper discussion.

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World Relief partners with churches in various ways to address the refugee crisis including

- [resources for churches](#).

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