

Rapid Response Teams

by Phyliss Brien Hammerstrom

Like most churches, Hudson Community Chapel in suburban Cleveland, OH, had fielded a number of short-term medical and construction teams to various places. We believed that natural disasters and human conflicts opened doors for the gospel and provided a wonderful opportunity to demonstrate God's love. We had some basic skills in place, but we had never proactively prepared.

After-the-Fact Response Often Is Too Late

A flood ravaged our town in July of 2003 claiming two lives and leaving other victims homeless, but it didn't occur to us until much later that we could have provided assistance. Even though they were merely a mile down the road, we were of no help because we weren't aware of our community's need for a shelter, nor were we prepared. We realized we had missed a strategic opportunity.

After the 2004 tsunami wrecked parts of several countries in Southeast Asia, a helicopter pilot from our congregation volunteered for relief flights, but by the time he was ready to go, the relief agency had suspended flight operations. After Hurricane Katrina struck the Gulf, HCC sent two teams, six months apart, to rebuild homes. Still later, I was part of an HCC team to Pakistan that visited a hospital treating those injured in the 2005 earthquake. The death toll for that catastrophe was reported to be 73,276.

Touched by these tragedies and dissatisfied by our somewhat haphazard responses, HCC began to consider how we could be better prepared to help in the future. We came to realize that standing teams of trained, culturally aware, and spiritually prepared workers can gain entrance when disasters require their services. Those who begin to prepare after the disaster has struck often find that by the time they are ready to deploy, the opportunity for greatest impact has passed.

We also came to appreciate that beyond providing desperately needed services, rapid response teams in missions settings have the potential to increase the effectiveness of long-term work in the region. In addition, while exercising their practical, God-given gifts and

emergency related skill sets, team members gain firsthand knowledge of, and burden for, the people they serve.

Multiple Types of Rapid Response Readiness

Compelled by these facts, Hudson Community Chapel decided to start a church-based Rapid Response Team. A steering committee was formed composed of staff and volunteers. Paul Wides, HCC's director of global outreach, recognized that this new initiative would have relevance for both local outreach and for the building administrator, so he included several key staff members on the original steering committee. This made it possible for the Rapid Response Teams to work as one entity but under the leadership of several different departments of the church.

Eventually the effort took the form of five separate teams under one ministry umbrella: an on-site Emergency Response Team on duty during church services, a Shelter Team serving our local community, a Mighty Men Team focused on service via construction trades, and two Rapid Response Teams (RRTs)—one domestic and one international.



A survey was used to explore the level of interest and the skill sets of our church attendees. We were amazed when 140 people responded with both a level of interest and a breadth of skills we had not previously recognized.

Recruiting and Training Responders

The next steps were planning for training, identifying and recruiting leaders, and, subsequently, developing the teams. We began searching for materials and assistance

to help us build effective teams and prepare them to minister to people who are suffering.

Training ended up being easier than we expected. To begin with, many of our members were already trained as physicians, nurses, EMTs, or first responders, or they had other skills important in disaster management: counseling, food service, warehouse management, forklift driving, ham radio operation, etc.


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Our local Salvation Army Disaster Services arm was very welcoming and opened their training to our church people, many of whom signed up as Salvation Army volunteers, too. The Red Cross of Summit County was very accommodating, providing us with disaster training courses on site. Many of our RRT members in turn became active volunteers with the local DAT (Disaster Assistance Team). Some of our people took advantage of the city of Hudson's offer of free Emergency Medical Technician (EMT) training for those who will serve as an EMT following graduation for a specified period (about a year).

We were pleased to find that introductory level training and some specialized seminars were available through on-line classes at the FEMA website. And local radio clubs have offered ham radio operator classes.

A harder problem to solve was locating materials for the spiritual preparation we felt was necessary for people wanting to minister in difficult and challenging situations. Not finding what we needed, I wrote an eight-week Bible study curriculum accompanied by 45 days of devotional readings on the theme of "God the Rescuer." A CD with these materials along with our brochure, application form, pastoral recommendation form, songs for worship relating to the theme, a list of useful web links, and various other resources we uncovered are all available to other churches (see end of article).

Maintaining Readiness

Our Emergency Response Team now is on duty during most of our services. Our Shelter Team is trained but as yet has not been called on. We will soon be drilling with our local Red Cross and Hudson Emergency Services to sharpen and maintain our preparedness. Another Mighty Men team is off to tackle more Katrina rebuilding.

Our US and International RRT members are taking further preparation via a mini-DART (Disaster and Relief Training) with Strategic World Impact (see information later in this *Postings*). After training, we anticipate HCC members will deploy under SWI's flag as a team or as individuals. These teams have also been linked with Samaritan's Purse and the Salvation Army.

Our RRTs will maintain readiness by keeping vaccinations current, making sure there always are extra pages in their passports, keeping on hand extra passport-sized photos for

visa applications, and packing a "Go Kit" stocked with basic emergency supplies. They have packing lists and will be encouraged to consistently review deployment procedures.

The Value of Agency Connections

Churches will want to consider carefully the issue of independence. If you operate on your own, you are responsible for assessing, assigning people to duty, transporting them, the logistics of moving material and people, and billeting your team in less than optimal situations. Few churches have a person who can perform these "advance team" operations, and many times only the well-known relief agencies are allowed on site.

At least to get started, we have chosen the other option: training and getting our people certified to be able to serve inside the "yellow tape zone" by joining one of the organizations called on to respond in national or international disasters via the incident command structure or emergency management system. Completing whatever registration is necessary with local or regional emergency planners means that the names of your rapid response team members are added to an inventory of assets to be called up as needed. However, it also may mean that persons are deployed individually or in small sub-units of the team. For this reason, we try to meet quarterly as a larger team to build team awareness and support.

We also value prayer and understand its importance because spiritual warfare often is a powerful ingredient in disaster conditions. Every team member is asked to recruit five people to pray for him/her and for the team.

Scripture is clear that there will be troubling times ahead. What better way to prepare than to seize those moments to both proclaim and incarnationally live out the love of Jesus.



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Advice from Others Who Have Organized Teams

While thousands of churches field medical and construction teams, a rapid response team differs in that it (1) is ready to deploy very quickly, often within 24-48 hours of a disaster, (2) is trained to work effectively in a situation in which the infrastructure and normal care systems are totally overwhelmed or even non-functional, and/or (3) is comprised of people spiritually, mentally, and physically equipped to go

into a very edgy setting—perhaps a disaster site with major devastation and casualties, a war zone, or a volatile refugee setting. These factors demand preparation beyond what is needed by the typical short-term ministry team.

Many church leaders we interviewed are currently in the process of adding training, improving their planning, and



expanding the number of people prepared to respond. Most readily acknowledged that they are still in a learning mode. But here is some advice they shared:

Elmbrook Church, Brookfield, WI

“Don’t head for a disaster location and expect to be allowed on site unless you are connected to an approved agency,” Mary Ann Lee warns from experience. When Katrina hit, Elmbrook was blessed with a close tie to an on-site missionary who provided an entrée to a local church. In other domestic situations, Samaritan’s Purse has been their point of entry; abroad, they worked under the auspices of a mission agency. In a more local disaster, they discovered that the Red Cross was inundated with more volunteers than they could use.

Team leaders learned the hard way to go in with a servant attitude and work under the local systems, even when they think they can do it more efficiently. In one case, a well-intended, “We will organize this to run better” approach destroyed a cooperative spirit that took a long time to rebuild.

Elmbrook has also learned to take advantage of local programs. For example, Wisconsin has a Citizen Corp that provides training. A firefighter in their congregation with established credibility is being trained to be their trainer for this program.

Calvary Church, Souderton, PA

Calvary has fielded a team approximately every other month to help with the Katrina rebuilding and also assisted in hurricane relief in Grenada. Missions Pastor Matt Reed has recognized that those who volunteer for disaster relief are highly motivated and want to hit the ground running, yet early responders are dealing with victims still in shock.

Calvary teams have discovered that sometimes just being there and expressing care is a large part of the ministry. Volunteers must be extremely flexible because the work often is different from what was anticipated. Calvary (and some but not all of the other congregations interviewed) will take carefully screened unbelievers on some trips, and they have seen team members accept Christ.

Menlo Park (CA) Presbyterian Church

The Menlo Healthcare GO Team has mobilized approximately 75 medical professionals from their congregation for regular ministry to underserved people in their local region and beyond, as well as response to disasters. Three teams were sent to Indonesia following the tsunami. Participants came back changed; they had a new conviction that God will always make a way to accomplish what He wants to do. And they were open to what He wanted to do next through them, and ministries have expanded as a result.

Tapping into supplies of medicines and equipment already on hand for the local outreaches and a list of experienced volunteers, a Menlo team was able to deploy within hours of the latest Southern California wildfires disasters. They work in partnership with Christ in Action (see below). Coordinator Melinda Porter reports that their greatest frustration is the limitation on providing medical services if serving in a state where the medical professionals are not credentialed. However, regulations may change.

Rolling Hills Covenant Church, Rolling Hills Estates, CA

Besides significant involvement in Katrina relief, RHCC has sent teams to minister in Thailand and India after the tsunami. In both tsunami relief situations, they came alongside long-time partners to provide assistance. They discovered the huge advantage of being able to build on the presence, networks, and contacts on-site workers had already established in the community. Their experiences solidified the church’s commitment to work with people who know what they are doing and have connections to local communities.

Mariners Church, Irvine, CA

Mariners has responded to five disasters over the past five years—from the southern California wildfires to the Southeast Asia tsunami. As is true of all Mariners’ ministry, the response was driven not by staff initiative but by the desire of people in the congregation to help, and involvement was focused around their explicit commitment to work through and beside an on-site local church.

Senior Director of Global Outreach Matt Olthoff explains, “We always are looking for how best to leverage our involvement. In a disaster, the opportunities are immense, and it is easy to be spread too thin. Since our greatest passion is to work through the local church wherever we go, in responding to a disaster we look to partner with a body of believers there and see how we can help make them the heroes in their community. This focus helps us to choose the type of involvement that we believe best uses our resources.”

Living out this philosophy means that Mariners often will engage in several phases of response to a disaster. Immediate relief is the first step, and they have signed an agreement of understanding to work with Hope Force International (see below) to have their people trained as Hope Force reservists. But Mariners also wants to help the church in the recovery and rebuilding stage. For example, they continue their involvement in New Orleans, now focusing on helping their church partner in planting new congregations in communities where former churches have closed. At this stage, Mariners’ part is training and helping mobilize this congregation.

When the earthquake hit in Peru, Mariners was already poised for involvement because of their partnership with a key church in Lima. By the time the first Mariners’ team arrived, this congregation had already done a damage assessment, and thanks to connections to Peru’s first lady, had access to deploy people into the epicenter of the disaster.

Mariners sees response to disasters such as Katrina as a great entry-level outreach, “the top end of the funnel” as they describe it. The global outreach office now has a list of people with various types of expertise and growing passion for ministry. Their next step is putting together an incident command team to oversee different aspects of future disaster response.

Omaha (NB) Rapid Response

Begun from the vision of individuals in one church, Omaha Rapid Response (ORR) now is an independent, not-for-profit involving volunteers from a number of congregations. Fielding small teams to disaster sites around the world, ORR does not

work under the major international organizations but rather chooses to concentrate on helping those who have been missed by the large relief agencies, often the victims who are the neediest and in the most remote locations.

“There are opportunities beyond what you can imagine,” Director Ken Smith says, “but you have to be willing to go to hard places.” He goes in first to work out the logistics of translators, transportation, and housing. Then the rest of the team arrives and just begins to look for ways to serve. Their emphasis is less on specialized skills and more on faith to believe that God will work beyond the limited resources of the team. ORR looks for team members who are spiritually solid because it is easy to get frustrated with the multitude of problems and the always unique challenges.

“What disaster victims need more than anything is someone to love them and to ask, ‘How can we help you?’ We just need to show the love of Jesus on a personal level,” Smith declares.

On the other hand, ORR does utilize professionals, generally going in with a medical team, and does train people so that they are prepared. One of the greatest challenges, Smith finds, is identifying those who can go on very short notice. This includes having the funds and a mindset to put aside other commitments to be willing to take off when called. Often that demands a breakthrough in perspective. Smith notes that it takes the kind of person who will stop on the way to work to help a stranded motorist, even though he knows he will have to do some explaining later to his boss. On a more mundane level, maintaining readiness means keeping shots and passports up to date.

Smith suggests beginning by responding to a need in a relatively easier setting—like Central or South America—where it is not difficult to find translators and the atmosphere is not hostile to Christians. On-the-ground experience will help to prepare a team for the much more complex demands of a disaster like the Pakistan earthquake or the tsunami.

“To begin, go with an agency such as SWI [see below] or World Relief,” Smith recommends. But his emphasis always comes back to the basics: “Go places where there is no love of God, where people have never heard the name of Jesus. You can make an instant impact by comforting people; it doesn’t take words. Deploy where Jesus won’t be physically present until you go.”

The Rock of KC Church, Kansas City, MO

Several years ago, God laid it on Missions Pastor Ben Baird’s heart to develop a disaster relief team. Rock of KC worked with the Salvation Army after 9/11, with SWI in Indonesia after the tsunami, and with a local contact following Katrina.

Today, approximately 25-30 people at The Rock have taken SWI’s DART training (see later) which they require for participation, but not everyone has yet been deployed. The team meets every other month for fellowship, worship, prayer, and ongoing training.

Early on, Baird realized that especially for involvement in domestic disaster relief, it was important to be credentialed by a major organization such as the Salvation Army, the Red Cross, or Heart to Heart. For them, this involves taking Community Emergency Response Teams (CERT) training and courses offered by the International Crisis Intervention Stress Foundation (ICISF).

Resources for Developing Rapid Response Team Ministries

As Catalyst interviewed local church missions leaders, it quickly became evident that improving preparedness for rapid response is becoming a priority for a growing number of congregations. Like Hudson Community Chapel, many churches have become sensitized to the needs via involvement in Katrina relief efforts, local disasters, and/or concerns about preparedness for terrorist attack.

We discovered several organizations with experience in both disaster response and training. Each one was recommended by one or more local churches which had either used their training or deployed people on teams with them. Each of the following organizations is helping local congregations prepare and deploy in effective ministry.

Christ in Action

www.christinaction.com

Contact: info@christinaction.com / 703.368.6286

Christ in Action offers two-day Faith Based First Responders Conferences which teach volunteers how to minister to individuals in crisis and also provide an orientation to what to expect when responding to a crisis, how to coordinate with the Incident Command Structure, etc. One track of their program offers the 13-hour “Assisting Individuals in Crisis” course of the International Critical Incident Stress Foundation. The certificate earned at completion is recognized by the United Nations handling crisis situations around the world.

Christ in Action’s courses are offered regionally on invitation for a multi-church event. They also consult with churches on issues like what type(s) of disaster assistance they want to provide, how to connect with local disaster response coordinators, how to get a church readiness plan on paper, and how to develop a customized list of leadership roles, etc.

Christ in Action also deploys volunteers to a variety of disasters as part of a mobile feeding unit that can provide

15,000 meals/day. A connection to the White House gives them early access to various types of disaster situations.

Hope Force International

www.hopeforce.org

Contact: info@hopeforce.org, 615.371.1271

Official partners of the Salvation Army, Hope Force trains and helps deploy disaster responders through a program they call Hope Force Reservists. The four-day training, offered several times per year in various parts of the US (and this year also in Mexico), includes two days of HFI preparation of the responder himself/herself, and two days of Salvation Army training on the specifics of preparedness and response. Those who complete the program and application process are registered reservists ready for deployment by their local church or HFI. HFI is also developing a chaplain training program.

HFI surveys relief needs and deploys a limited number of teams. In deployment, they often choose to lead with medical teams and prefer to work in partnership with others. Currently they have a formalized a statement of understanding with one church and look forward to developing others.

International Fellowship of Chaplains

www.ifoc.org

The IFOC offers week-long chaplaincy training in various locations across the US that is recognized in multiple ministry venues.

Samaritan's Purse

www.samaritanspurse.org/Volunteer_Index.asp

Billy Graham Evangelistic Association

www.billygraham.org/RapidResponse_Index.asp

Samaritan's Purse and the Billy Graham Association work in cooperation to provide disaster relief. SP handles the physical relief aspects, and BGEA personnel provide chaplain services. SP is eager to have churches deploy individuals or whole teams with them. BGEA offers three levels of training for volunteer chaplains in cities across the US.

Strategic World Impact (SWI)

www.swi.org

Contact: 877-832-6794

SWI's passion and focus is international work in disaster areas, war zones, and places where the body of Christ is persecuted and the gospel restricted. Their Disaster Assistance Response Training (DART) is offered in a five-day conference in Bartlesville, OK, that includes not only such topics as disaster assessment and trauma counseling, but also anti-terrorism, hostage survival, and land mine awareness training among others. The strength of the program is hands-on experience in a simulated refugee camp. Training is provided by the SWI staff, some of whom have 18 years of experience, and other topics are taught by military personnel from Fort Leavenworth. A notebook of extensive materials is included. Those who complete the program earn a certificate.

Some, but not all, SWI ministry trips are limited to DART-certified participants. This spring SWI is also beginning to offer "mini-DARTs," 2 ½ day, in-church, training conferences in various geographic locations.

Opportunities for Churches

Developing a multi-level rapid response preparedness in your church is an exciting opportunity but it also may seem like an overwhelming task. Here are some ways to get started, even with limited volunteers and funds:

- 1. Evaluate how rapid response ministry fits into your church's priorities and how it matches your congregation's DNA.** Where do you already have expertise, passion, and connections? Your geographic location (for instance, are you in a region often impacted by tornadoes?), ministry history (did your church respond to Katrina so that there are people God touched by involvement on a team that served in hurricane relief?), and/or your missions connections (do you support missionaries in an area of the world prone to natural disasters or political upheaval?) may be indicators of how God would want your church involved in the future.
- 2. Choose one area at a time to develop:** local, domestic (anywhere in your country other than your immediate area) or international. While there are many similarities, ministry in each of these areas is developed in very
- 3. Send one or two people to training** offered by one of the organizations listed above. This will give you a great introduction to ministry needs and the resources provided by the agency.
- 4. Identify those members of your congregation who are already trained in some aspect(s) of disaster response.** This could be people working in the medical field, or firefighters, police, or those in social-services fields. Talk to these people about their areas of expertise and their ministry passion. You will likely find a desire to help expand your church's rapid response readiness.
- 5. Interview those in your church or community who have suffered from some type of disaster.** Discover what needs were most pressing and if/how they were met.

different ways. Usually the easiest place to begin is with domestic disaster response because it can be engaged by individuals serving on teams organized by a ministry with great experience working in settings that are relatively accessible.

You may find in this group some committed volunteers for your rapid response ministry.

build a joint team that would be stronger than any individual church could field.

6. **Investigate whether there are other churches in your denomination or community interested in developing ministry capability in this area.** Discuss how you could work together, perhaps to bring training to your area or to
7. **Interview your missionaries who have disaster relief experience.** Ask whether they could see how a well prepared team from your church could be of assistance in such situations. Discover if there are ways that they could help your team be trained or better prepared.

Opportunities for Mission Agencies

The trend in local churches to establish various types of rapid response teams and to develop emergency readiness may benefit agencies in a variety of ways. Consider some of these ideas:

1. **With a Kingdom mentality, encourage churches to develop rapid response preparedness** for local, domestic, and international crises. Building and deploying such teams increases a missional mindset of church and people, regardless of its direct impact on your agency's ministry. Refer churches to the training organizations listed in this *Postings* to help them be well prepared.
2. **Build a list of churches with rapid response teams or individuals ready for quick deployment.** Even if your ministry does not normally do disaster relief, a major crisis in an area where you work could precipitate a need for such help. And a number of organizations have also had a catastrophic incident destroy or significantly damage their headquarters. A well trained disaster response team could be a huge help at a time when staff members may be largely immobilized by personal trauma.
3. **Encourage missionaries to take training in rapid response.** Being able to respond themselves in a crisis could save lives and open doors for the gospel. In addition, after some introductory classes your workers could train national churches in basic disaster response, providing yet another way to serve their community and build bridges for the gospel.
4. **Challenge missionaries to invite those in supporting churches who are equipped for rapid response to come and train national believers and perhaps also offer a training event as a community outreach.** Training in first aid, CPR, or more advanced skills creates

an avenue for a short-term individual/team to minister, and provides a service bridge to the community.

5. **When visiting local churches, follow up with those who have been deployed on a rapid response or other disaster relief team.** Such experiences are life changing and value altering for those who participate, yet seldom are team members sufficiently debriefed when they return to their church nor challenged to think about what next step in service God might be calling them to consider.
6. **Volunteer additional training for rapid response teams.** What expertise could your agency personnel offer such teams? International workers could teach very practical sessions on cross-cultural communication. Or perhaps you have workers with experience with refugee work, poverty, illiteracy, lack of sanitation, government corruption, etc. All of these issues impact how disaster relief functions in a setting where they are present. Since one of the challenges of maintaining a rapid response team is keeping interest strong, your willingness to provide some ongoing training can help to keep the team ready and committed.

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