

A mother and her young daughters were building health kits for Haiti. One child asked to add a note saying she was thinking of the people of Haiti and sending God's love. The mom explained these kits can only include items on the UMCOR list. The daughter said, "I know what I can do." She opened the kit and blew a kiss into the bag. "I can send God's love through a kiss." —from Christ UMC, Kettering, Ohio

# Disaster Response Ministry

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Hurricanes Katrina and Rita in 2005 radically changed the face of responding to needs of disaster victims in the United States. And in the aftermath of the recent earthquake in Haiti, we witness another struggle to effectively assist in settings of large-scale tragedy. Over the years we have also been changed by disastrous events much closer to our homes—the May 3, 1999, tornado in Moore, the bombing in downtown Oklahoma City, and natural disasters in communities across our state such as the recent ice storms in southern and southwest Oklahoma.

As a result of the realities of these types of disasters, the Oklahoma Conference of The United Methodist Church decided in 2006 to begin a full-time Disaster Response Ministry as an integral part of Oklahoma's Volunteers In Mission (VIM).

■ The OKVIM Disaster Response Ministry works in coordinated partnership with two agencies of the denomination: UMCOR (United Methodist Committee on Relief) and UMVIM (United Methodist Volunteers In Mission).

■ It also collaborates in another key partnership that unites a number of faith-based organizations, governmental organizations, and non-governmental organizations to respond to disasters. This partnership is called Voluntary Organizations Active in Disaster (VOAD).

VOAD promotes "cooperation, communication, coordination, and collaboration" in an effort to bring a responsible response out of the chaos that a disaster spawns.

United Methodists understand that any response must be based on the needs of the victims. The reality of a disaster's impact can be seen in their faces; we remember that our responses are always focused on the needs of those people and not ours.

We should not focus on who gets there first, what we think the victims need, or what makes us feel good, nor help only



Ron King and Richard Norman, inside trailer, direct tours of a shower trailer, on display Feb. 28 at the Lawton District Local Church Leaders Workshop, held at Centenary UMC in Lawton. Three districts—Clinton, Lawton, and Woodward—jointly maintain two disaster response trailers: a tool supply trailer and this one, which has three bathrooms. Rev. King is pastor at Carnegie and Mountain View churches. Rev. Norman is coordinator of Disaster Response with Oklahoma Volunteers In Mission.

Photo by Holly McCray

when it is convenient for us.

In Micah 6:8b, we hear God's agenda for people of faith: "And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God." Humility is a great resource in a disaster area. The most effective disaster response volunteers are those willing to learn. They understand that, while a response has many common and necessary elements, the *type* of response needed and the *trajectory* that the response takes is based on the constant and changing needs of the victims.

The *bigger picture and the unseen story* of successful response include **education, preparation, leadership, training, and communication** when put into place prior to a disaster.

There is a tremendous amount of preparation, funding, training, and commitment that emergency and early responders must have *before* disaster strikes.

After the TV cameras are turned off and the food lines and shelters close, the victims are still living lives in chaos and are still in need. They need help beyond the immediate steps of emergency and relief

responses. Many times it takes months to get their lives to a *new* normal, and they need help in that process.

They need us to be in ministry with compassion and hope when other aid groups have moved on.

In order for us to be most effective in our response, we know our focus. To be a ministry of compassion and hope in times of disaster, we consider these things:

- What is best for the victims at that particular time;
- The ultimate goal of the response, not the current popular news; and
- Becoming effective responders by being aware of and committing to the preparation, funding, training, and commitment necessary before a disaster strikes.

With your focus clear, you say: "My church wants to help. What should we do?"

## I. Education

Experience has taught us that everyone who wants to be involved in the ministry of disaster response first should be given enough information to make an educated decision on how they can best serve.

Thus, the OKVIM Disaster Response Ministry will soon be offering "The Basic Disaster Ministry Course."

This will be a prerequisite to all other OKVIM disaster response training and will help you/your church decide your best avenue of involvement in helping those in need.

During the first four years of our OKVIM Disaster Response Ministry, we focused on Early Response Teams (ERTs). From that we have learned those teams are extremely valuable if, and only if, they respond *early*. These are highly specialized teams and prepare much like volunteer firefighting squads in communities. ERTs will always be vital in our Disaster Response Ministry, but they will not be the only response and sometimes not our primary response.

## 2. Proper preparation

This preparation includes helping yourself and your family by learning and developing a "Family Disaster Response Plan." Next: helping our churches each develop a "Local Church Disaster Response Plan." Another step of preparation is assisting

Youth members at Anadarko-First UMC pack health kits for Haiti. From left are: Sunshine Carrion, Martha Carrion, Dalton Thomas, Heather Gaddis, Austin Post, Daniel Ahshapanek, and Andrew Ahshapanek. Carrie and David Witte are youth sponsors.



In January, more than 15 volunteers from the Perry and Orlando churches assembled 122 UMCOR health kits for Haitians, after the two churches pooled cash donations to purchase the supplies. Pat Hoerth, Ann McFerron, and Larry and Myrna Moore shopped for the items.