

Charlestown Ecumenical Network
Charlestown Congregational Church
November 16, 2011

**Disaster Ministry: How Your Church Can Prepare
to Help When Help is Needed Most**

On November 16, 2011 at 7 p.m., the Charlestown Ecumenical Network (CEN) met to discuss emergency disaster management in Charlestown and what our religious communities could do to help. We need to start a conversation on this subject before an event happens. The Rev. Susan Grant Rosen chaired the meeting. After an opening prayer by the Rev. Marthe Dyer, participants introduced themselves and engaged in one-on-one warm-up discussions about our observations of recent storm damage and how well our churches were prepared to respond.

Charlestown Emergency Planning

Our first speaker was Charles Baraly (cebaraly@comcast.net), Director of Charlestown Emergency Management (www.CharlestownEM.com). Charles has been director of emergency management for 8 years and has his headquarters in the Emergency Operations Center at the Fire Station (1 Main St., Charlestown, NH 03603). His basic function is to coordinate the use of town resources -- fire, police, public works, emergency services, communications, and volunteers -- during an emergency or disaster. He also is responsible for developing emergency response plans for local emergency operations, hazards mitigation, and health hazards. Charles has 8 people on his staff, several of whom are qualified to work in the emergency operations center at the fire station and in the emergency shelter located at the school on Main Street.

Charlestown is very fortunate not to have had a major disaster since 1942. However, the town is vulnerable to a number of possible events -- ice jams and floods on the Connecticut River, forest fires, ice storms, earthquakes, tornadoes, hazardous material spills associated with derailments, water supply shortages or well contamination, power and communication outages, and pandemics. If Hurricane Irene had tracked up the Connecticut River Valley 50 miles to the east of its path in Vermont, Charlestown would have had the kind of flooding that occurred in Vermont.

Charles said that the churches in the area could do a number of things during disasters. He strongly recommended that people take care of themselves first -- make sure that you are safe - before trying to help others.

- (1) During an emergency, churches should contact their members, especially those who live alone, to make sure they are all right and do not have medical or other emergency needs. Some may need shelter as a result of damage to their homes. This information should be passed on the Emergency Operations Center.
- (2) During an emergency, churches can work with Emergency Management Services to help those in the shelters, people will need to be fed and housed. Perhaps a schedule could be

worked out in advance as to which church could prepare meals and for how many people before an event occurs.

- (3) Churches can help with transportation provided the roads are safe to travel and proper vehicles are used.

A major problem during an emergency is the areal extent of the problem. If a flood is localized, the town will be able to receive assistance from surrounding towns through mutual aid and help will be available in a matter of hours. If a major area of the state is affected, assistance may not be available for 72 hours. In a major ice storm where trees are downed and power lines cut, we may be on our own for an extended period of time. Homeowners with generators can help their neighbors. The Emergency Operations Center during such events will serve as a clearinghouse for assistance and distributed information on shelters.

Charles had a table of brochures on a number of topics -- making a family emergency kit, preparing for floods, preparing for fires, and other topics. Copies are available from his office. The Charlestown Emergency Plan can be reviewed at the Fire Station, the Library, and the Selectman's office.

Alstead 2005 Flood

The Rev. Jan Howe of the Third Congregational Church in Alstead played pivotal role in coordinating the community response to the 2005 flood, especially during the first few weeks. The flood badly damaged the Cold River bridge separating the Fire Station and people who lived along Warren Brook on one side of the river from the Third Church and the people who lived along the Cold River on River Street. To get from one side of the river to the other, one had to drive to Charlestown and Walpole. When the flood hit in October 2005, the church was totally unprepared. They started by praying and opening their doors (and a coffee pot and cookies) to people in need. Many needed to tell what had happened to them so listening was a very important task throughout the ordeal.

Initially, the church established a white board to list what other people said they needed and what people offered in the way of assistance. Needs and offers were matched up. Young people at the church took charge of this task, and a second board was set up at the fire station. Thus, from the beginning there were two service sites for flood assistance. The primary shelter at the town hall behind the fire station was used the night of the flood. By the next day virtually all people had found temporary shelter with family members, friends, or neighbors.

Pastor Jan mention the importance of VOAD (Voluntary Organizations Active in Disasters). The national organization website (www.nvoad.org) has a description of the national network, downloadable brochures, and a store where emergency kits and supplies may be purchased. The NHVOAD (www.volunteernh.org) is a statewide partnership of nonprofits, the faith-based community, private industry, and state government agencies to restore homes for people affected by a natural disaster who are uninsured or are under-insured, so they are safe, sanitary and functional. Locally, COAD (Community Organizations Active in Disasters) provide local assistance. There is a local group for the Monadnock Region. Pastor Jan noted that it was very important to understand what other organizations do and do not do. The Red Cross has trained disaster volunteers to work with the communities. It is important for the local community groups

to welcome these groups in and host them where ever possible and to facilitate their operations. They are well-trained to do their jobs. She explained that recovery from events is a multiyear process. Local organizations will have much do to over that period.

Her church in Alstead set up separate accounts for donations. People are very generous and it is important to account for their gifts. One thing they found helpful was to have \$20 gift cards to give out for groceries, hardware stores, and so on. Such assistance is emotionally supportive at a time when people wonder if people care about their situation. As Christmas approached in 2005, efforts were made to provide children with Christmas presents. Later, the church realized that adults needed Christmas presents too.

Churches in Charlestown could help making clean-up buckets, provide cash donations, encourage those who can to feed their neighbors, provide revolving loads, and encourage people to accept help from “outsiders.” You need to define your church mission in terms of disaster assistance and decide what you can do well in an emergency. You should consider developing a telephone tree to notify people of a disaster, Use bold to highlight the numbers of people who live alone that need to be checked on and have the contact information of family in case they disappear. Often people go to the homes of relatives and the authorities cannot determine where they are. We might consider dividing up the work ahead of time, providing protective gear -- boots, gloves, and helmets for volunteers. We should consider becoming a part of the NH VOAD network.

Question and Answers

Many questions were asked by participants. A concern was expressed about communications between Charlestown and others. The communication’s system in Southwestern New Hampshire is very good. In addition to public service agencies, Charlestown has access to ham radio operators and Citizens Band Radios. Charlestown is in the process of applying for a grant to acquire a generator for the shelter. Cell phones are very useful in areas with reception. However, without power, cell phones can’t be recharged. If voice communications are out because of system overload, you may still be able to send text messages.

In discussing food, we learned that the Salvation Army has portable kitchens and refrigerator trucks capable of serving 1000 meals a day in a clean environment. Local meals-on-wheels cannot and should not try to complete. We need to learn to accept help.

One participant urged authorities to use Facebook and Twitter to disseminate information during emergencies - road closings, location of shelters, and so on. In New Hampshire and Vermont, one can dial 211 and get in touch with a person who can answer questions about the on going emergency.

Some denominations have emergency plans and urge their churches to develop them. The Episcopal Diocese of New Hampshire has such a plan and St. Luke’s Church as adopted it. St. John’s Episcopal Church in Walpole has their plan on their website(http://stjohnswalpole.org/emergency_plans.aspx).

Finally, there was a discussion of the need to have a emergency back pack containing water, food, medications, identification, rain gear, and clothing that could support an individual for 3 days should you have to evacuate your home in an emergency. Each family member should such a pack or bag.

Next Meeting

Participants agreed that we needed to have another meeting on this subject. We agreed to meet on January 18, 2012 at 7 p.m., at the Congregational Church.

Submitted by the Rev. Mr. David Moody, Anglican Church of the Good Shepherd.