

Faith groups provide the bulk of disaster recovery, coordinating with FEMA

Faith-based organizations are integral partners in state and federal disaster relief efforts.

by [Paul Singer](#) in the [October 10, 2017](#) issue

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(*USA Today*) If you donate bottles of water, diapers, or any other materials to storm survivors in Texas or Florida, your donation will likely pass through the hands of the Seventh-day Adventists first.

That's because the Adventists over several decades have established a unique expertise in disaster warehousing: collecting, logging, organizing, and distributing relief supplies in cooperation with government disaster response agencies.

Likewise, the United Methodist Committee on Relief is known for its expertise in case management. After the initial cleanup—the Methodists have work crews helping pull mud out of houses—the church sends trained volunteers into the wreckage to help families navigate the maze of federal and state aid programs and private insurance to help them rebuild their lives. UMCOR also trains other nonprofits to send their own case managers into the disaster zone.

In a disaster, churches don't just hold bake sales to raise money or collect clothes to send to victims; faith-based organizations are integral partners in state and federal disaster relief efforts. They have specific roles and a network for communication and coordination to make sure their efforts don't overlap.

The Convoy of Hope, a nondenominational Christian organization based in Springfield, Missouri, specializes in feeding. Before Hurricane Irma made landfall in Florida in early September, Convoy had three trailer trucks stocked with food, water, and sanitary supplies parked in the state, waiting to deploy to areas hardest hit, said spokesman Jeff Nene. In major disasters, the organization will set up feeding stations, sometimes at request of the Federal Emergency Management Agency and even using government-provided food and equipment.

The Adventists have agreements with states around the country to provide warehouse services in the event of a disaster.

“Right now, in the state of Texas, we are going around with FEMA trying to help them select a facility,” said Derrick Lea, director of disaster response for Adventist Community Services. “It’ll actually be the state’s facility but it’ll be us that helps them manage it.”

FEMA administrator Brock Long has asked concerned citizens to make donations through nvoad.org—the site for National Voluntary Organizations Active in Disaster, the alliance of volunteer organizations that are helping FEMA channel disaster assistance into the affected areas. About three-quarters of the organizations that are part of the alliance are faith-based.

Samaritan’s Purse, an evangelical aid group run by Franklin Graham, has trucks at the ready in Florida with debris removal experts. After initial cleanup, the group has contracting services available to help the needy rebuild their homes. The group has responded to 20 disasters already this year, said Luther Harrison, vice president of North American Ministries for Samaritan’s Purse.

“FEMA—they have been a big blessing to us, they’re an assistance to us,” Harrison said. “For Hurricane Irma, the majority of our equipment has already been dispatched to Texas . . . so our office in Canada is bringing their equipment across the border and FEMA was instrumental in helping us clear that with customs and getting all the paperwork done.”

One of the most critical resources the faith groups can provide is labor. The United Methodists have 20,000 trained volunteers around the country who can be called up as part of early response teams to help with debris removal and home cleanup, said Cathy Earl, UMCOR’s director of disaster programs. “They are trained, they are badged, they are background checked, and they are part of the team that can be called up on short notice to respond,” she said.

The crews come with more than just chainsaws, Earl said. “They have a person who is a designated listener, so that person can sit down and be an ear for somebody if the homeowner needs that.”

The efforts of volunteer groups come at essentially no cost to the government, yet they also have a significant cash value to the states they serve.

States are obligated in most cases to pay a matching amount for federal disaster aid, generally about 10 percent of the amount the federal government is paying in the immediate aftermath. But FEMA policy allows states to count volunteer hours as a payment toward that amount, at \$25 per hour. Harrison said that his group has already reported to Texas more than 27,000 volunteer hours worth more than \$675,000 toward the state's required matching amount.

"About 80 percent of all recovery happens because of nonprofits, and the majority of them are faith-based," said Greg Forrester, CEO of the National VOAD. The money is "all raised by the individuals who go and serve, raised through corporate connections, raised through church connections," and amounts to billions of dollars worth of disaster recovery assistance, he said.

And it is not just Christian congregations involved, Forrester said. There are also Muslim, Buddhist, and Jewish relief agencies at work in disaster zones.

FEMA does not assign work to the state agencies or the faith-based groups, said Jamie Johnson, director of the Department of Homeland Security's Center for Faith-Based and Neighborhood Partnerships. But "FEMA brings the groups into its national command center to work with us because they have their people on the ground."

"FEMA cannot do what it does so well without the cooperation of faith-based nonprofit organizations and churches," Johnson said. "It's a beautiful relationship between government and the private sector and it is something to behold."

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