

Hurricane-struck churches apply for FEMA aid

The possibility of federal funds paying to restore sanctuaries is a change from previous FEMA policy.

by [Yonat Shimron](#) in the [November 7, 2018](#) issue



A church sits flooded as U.S. Army Spc. Daniel Ochoa rides in the back of a high-water vehicle while searching for residents to evacuate in the aftermath of Hurricane Florence in Spring Lake, North Carolina, on September 17, 2018. AP Photo/David Goldman.

In the aftermath of Hurricanes Florence and Michael on the Eastern Seaboard—which caused dozens of deaths in Georgia, Florida, North and South Carolina, and Virginia—congregations have the potential of receiving government

aid to help them recover.

Baptist and Methodist disaster relief workers, representing the region's largest denominations, have begun taking an inventory of the number of sanctuaries damaged. Thanks to a lawsuit filed on behalf of churches damaged by Hurricane Harvey in Texas, the workers are also directing congregations to sources of government assistance.

One requirement for congregations who are applying is to prove they serve a community role.

"Part of that process is for them to identify and support that they are a critical response in that community and play a critical role in helping the community recover," said Kevin Smith, director for the Center for Faith and Opportunity Initiatives in the Department of Homeland Security, which the Federal Emergency Management Agency falls under.

The possibility of federal funds paying to restore sanctuaries represents a departure from previous FEMA policy, which disqualified religious groups from receiving aid available to other nonprofits.

The changes come in the wake of a 2016 ruling by the Supreme Court in *Trinity Lutheran v. Comer*, in which the justices found in favor of a Missouri church that claimed religious discrimination after it was refused state funds to improve its playground. Last year, three Texas churches severely damaged by Hurricane Harvey, including one that had sheltered about 80 evacuees in its Sunday school classrooms, filed suit to get access to FEMA funding.

FEMA announced the change earlier this year, drawing criticism from several church-state groups, which argued that paying congregations to rebuild violates the First Amendment.

"We know it's a hard time for a lot of people, and our hearts are with those who are suffering," said Maggie Garrett, legislative director at Americans United for Separation of Church and State. "But even in difficult times we have to follow the Constitution and the values that protect all of us. You can't get much more at the heart of establishing a religion than building a church or a house of worship. That's our concern."

FEMA officials, in partnership with the states' emergency management divisions, plan to hold a series of town hall meetings with religious leaders to explain how they may apply for aid.

Houses of worship must first recover what they can from their insurance policies. If insurance doesn't cover the cost of repairs, they must then apply for a low-interest loan from the federal Small Business Administration. If no loan is granted, or not enough of a loan is granted, congregations may then apply for reimbursement from FEMA through the state's emergency management division.

Hampstead United Methodist Church, about 20 miles north of Wilmington, North Carolina, suffered some of the worst damage from the storm. Its roof was torn off, its ceiling caved in, and the interior of the church was flooded.

But Skip Williams, the church's pastor, said he wasn't sure the church would qualify for FEMA reimbursement because the congregation just took out a loan to build a fellowship hall.

"As I understand it," he said, "FEMA will cover what the small business loan doesn't cover. Unfortunately, we already have a construction loan out for the new building, so I can't take on another loan."

Regardless, Williams said he was confident the church would eventually rebuild. It has already started three separate fundraising drives: one for the church, one for members who lost their homes, and one for the community.

"We've got mobile classrooms and an admin office on the way," he said. "We're going to come back stronger than we were." —Religion News Service

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