Is your church prepared?

The first article in this series dealt with the presbytery's implementation of a disaster plan outlining how it would respond should a disaster strike one or more churches within it's boundaries and how individual churches can initiate the process of becoming more prepared for disasters. This article is intended to encourage you and your church to begin taking action.

By now I hope your church has at least started the conversation about how prepared or perhaps unprepared you are for a disaster or other type of emergency. Anticipating a disaster and how to respond is an easy topic to put off with the anticipation that it won't happen here. Frankly, I hope that you are right. I hope it doesn't occur in your church. But just in case……what if it does happen? As I mentioned in the first article there are a number of steps that your church can likely take that will involve minimal time or expense.

One of the first steps, if not the first step, your church will want to take is to identify 2 or 3 people who are genuinely interested in being prepared and committed to leading your church's effort to be ready. This group does not need to be large just committed to the job and supported by the session. In most cases the session will need to identify and endorse the preparedness team. The team will then need to consult with other church members as they develop the action steps and strategies the church will use in case of an emergency.

One of the most important steps for a church in any emergency is looking out for each other. Is your church directory up to date? Does it include cellphone numbers and email addresses? How will your church contact the congregation in case of severe weather? Is everyone OK? Does anyone need help? Is anyone injured? Maybe you just need to let people know that church is canceled due to icy roads. Phone trees where one person calls perhaps 3-4 predetermined people who then in turn each call 3-4 additional predetermined people and so on is one good method to quickly determine who is OK and who may need assistance. However, there are other methods which may also be useful. Today many, if not most, people have a cellphone and cellphones have the capability to send and receive text messages. On most cellphones texts can be sent or received at very little or no cost. One person, the pastor, the secretary, the clerk of session or some other designated person can send a group text in a matter of a couple of minutes to everyone on the list. It is beyond the scope of this article to discuss how to set this up in your church but your cellphone providers can give you guidance on how to get started or there are numerous companies that provide the service.

The key is to have as many cellphone numbers for your congregation as possible and have them set up in advance in groups to receive text messages. Of course, this won't work for everyone so a text blast accompanied by a phone tree for those without a cellphone is generally a very good option for getting information out in a hurry.

More information on setting up a phone tree begins on the next page.

Another option to consider is contacting your local TV stations about their emergency weather alert systems that scroll at the bottom of the screen. Generally the station will provide a user ID and password that can be used on the station's website to initiate the alert that the church is closed or delayed. The designated person from your church logs into the station's website, puts in the information regarding the closure or other issue with any necessary information and that is it. In most cases there is no cost for this service. This is definitely a resource your church should investigate.

Keeping your congregation informed and providing assistance when needed is an important function in case of emergency. If your church has an innovative communication idea that is working I invite you to share it by emailing it to me so that it can be included in upcoming articles.

CJ Merriman
Director of Disaster Preparedness
cjmerriman16@gmail.com

How to Build a Phone Tree

A phone tree is a prearranged, pyramid-shaped system for activating a group of people by telephone. Using the phone tree system can spread a brief message quickly and efficiently to a large number of people.

USES

- Quickly notify members and/or supporters about fruit deliveries.
- Spreads the work load out between members.
- Save printing and postage costs involved with communicating brief notices by mail.

RESOURCES NEEDED

- **People**- A coordinator and a network of reliable people form the skeleton of the phone tree. See enclosure titled, "Example Phone Tree Layout"
- **Time**- The coordinator will spend time organizing the tree. (This process should be done prior to serious activation of the tree.) Once it's set up, the tree can do dozens or even hundreds of hours of work with only five to 50 minutes of involvement by each member, depending on the frequency and number of calls each member is assigned.
- **Money**- No money is needed aside from long-distance charges, where applicable. Use home telephones and cell phones at no additional cost.

ACTION CHECKLIST

1) Make a list with current phone numbers of all the persons you want the tree to reach.

2) From that list, recruit a smaller group of people who will be responsible for calling and activating other members. This small group is referred to as the Key Group .

a. Keep the Key Group as small as possible, since each group may be responsible for reaching people who in turn are responsible for reaching out, and so on. It is critically important that the members of the Key Group are reliable!
b. Impress upon ALL participants the importance of completing all their assigned calls.

3) Divide the people on your list among the members of the Key Group.

a. Consider assigning responsibilities geographically to reduce any phone charges.
b. Try to limit calls to three to eight per participant so the phone tree won't become too burdensome.

4) Make a chart of Key Group members and their assignments and distribute it to the Key Group. Be sure to include work, cell, office, and other numbers to locate members.

5) Ask key people to notify you when they are going out of town or will otherwise be unavailable. Have alternate Key Group folks that can fill in if someone is unavailable.

6) Hold message drills occasionally to test your phone tree for effectiveness and identify areas for improvement.

OPERATING THE TREE

1) As coordinator, you will start the tree. Write out a brief script complete with the specific details of fruit and delivery.

2) Call the members of the Key Group using the script. Make sure that Key Group members understand what they need to do and the time frame in which they should do it.

3) Spot-check the tree's effectiveness by calling a few people down on the list to be sure they have received an accurate and complete message. Also, you can prearrange with folks down the list to contact you once they have received the message.

4) Train the folks in your phone tree to keep trying each person on their list until they make contact. If a member of the phone tree cannot be reached, have the caller notify you as the coordinator so you can fill in or delegate the responsibility to another member.

KEY POINTS

- Have an organization chart for your phone tree.
- Be sure that your Key Group members are reliable.
- Have multiple ways of reaching members (home, work, and cell numbers are key).

EXAMPLE PHONE TREE LAYOUT

COORDINATOR

KEY GROUP

Key Member #1	Key Member #2	Key Member #3	Key Member #4

1 2 3 4

5 6 7 8

9 10 11 12

13 14 15 16

Key Member #1
Contacts
1. Jo — 555-3434
2. Beth — 555-0786
3. Jill — 555-5623
4. Linda — 555-0401

Key Member #2
Contacts
5. Jane — 555-0716
6. Betty — 555-9812
7. June — 555-1718
8. Alex — 555-8833

Key Member #3
Contacts
9. Ruby — 555-7786
10. Amy — 555-9856
11. Robin — 555-1887
12. Patty — 555-9734

Key Member #4
Contacts
13. Lynn — 555-6741
14. Molly — 555-9802
15. Tara — 555-1532
16. Denise — 555-2834