

Disaster Relief and Emergency Response in the United Methodist Church

United Methodist Committee on Relief (UMCOR)

A Brief History

The love that is inspired by the Christian gospel is a love that reaches out to all—and this love is expressed with a special tenderness for those in great need, whom Jesus called “the least of these.” The United Methodists established the United Methodist Committee on Relief (UMCOR) as a channel for sharing the compassion of our Lord wherever God’s people are in need.

UMCOR traces its origins to the General Conference of 1940 when Bishop Herbert C. Welch (of Welch grape juice fame) asked for an offering to assist Chinese war refugees. The conference responded generously, and UMCOR was established to administer the funds.

UMCOR is part of the General Board of Global Ministries. UMCOR has the task of “assisting churches in direct ministry to persons in need” and requires that this ministry be administered in ways that “advance the dignity of persons without regard to religion, race, nationality or sex.”

UMCOR is known for being among the first to respond and the very last to leave any relief effort. UMCOR has a three-prong emphasis shaped by local and international human needs.

- Refugees

The plight of people driven from their homelands by war, violence, oppression, famine, and natural disaster is the type of human suffering that brought UMCOR into being back in 1940. Persistent political conflict can keep people in refugee status for generation.

When faced with a refugee emergency, UMCOR immediately provides food, shelter, medicine, and other essentials for survival. Additionally, UMCOR aids refugees in income generation, skills training, child care and other survival tactics. In recent years, UMCOR has been involved with refugees in countries such as El Salvador, Guatemala, Liberia, and Mozambique.

Local churches can participate directly in supporting UMCOR’s refugee ministry. Some churches or group of churches take on the support of a family as they resettle in the local church’s home town.

- World Hunger and Poverty

When United Methodists read of people starving, as in the Ethiopian famine in the 1980s and the North Korean famine in the 1990s, you can be assured that through UMCOR our denomination is moving to distribute food and other necessary supplies. When people are suffering from life-destroying poverty in countries ignored by the media, United Methodists can rest assured that UMCOR is there too, bringing hope to people in despair.

UMCOR not only supplies food for the hungry, but also helps poor countries move forward with development. It provides seed, tools, and training to enable people to grow their own food.

UMCOR works with some well known agencies, such as Heifer Project and Habitat for Humanity, as a way of multiplying the assistance rendered to those who are suffering.

World Hunger is Lane 2 in the Six Lanes of The Advance mission giving within our Conference. Your local church's contributions make a significant difference in the lives of those who are hungry.

- **Emergency Response**

In 1972, UMCOR was instructed to expand its work to include financial coordination and organizational support for those areas devastated by disaster. UMCOR has a very small group of trained disaster response specialists for quick reinforcement of local rescue and recovery efforts, and it keeps a supply of relief materials at the UMCOR Sager Brown Depot in Baldwin, Louisiana for dispatch when and where required.

UMCOR: "Them is Us!"

Before we go any further, it is important to dispel one notion. UMCOR has a world-wide impact. UMCOR has far-reaching, seemingly countless relief projects. It would be easy to conclude that UMCOR has a large "army" of staff, much like the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), ready for immediate and long-term deployment. If you are thinking UMCOR has a large paid staff, you are wrong. UMCOR has 2-3 full-time paid staff in the Washington, DC office; and perhaps, that many at Sager Brown Depot. UMCOR's real corps of workers are volunteers like us. UMCOR's ability to reach across the nation and across the world is due to the connectional nature of the United Methodist Church. UMCOR is able to be all over Florida responding to the hurricane devastation because we have United Methodist Churches and people all across Florida and the surrounding states. UMCOR was able

to be in South Georgia helping with flooding and tornado disasters because we have

churches and people all across the region. What's more, we are not left to ourselves to recover and rebuild; the United Methodists in other Annual Conferences respond to help us—and we them—whenever need arises. So, UMCOR is not “them” in some far off place who will come and do this ministry for us. UMCOR is “us”...all of us!

The Life-Blood of UMCOR: One Great Hour of Sharing

UMCOR receives no World Service Funds. UMCOR depends entirely on gifts from local churches and individuals for its operation. Most of UMCOR's funding comes from the Advance Special mission gifts. This is designated money, and every dollar goes to the designated cause.

The “One Great Hour of Sharing” offering taken on the fourth Sunday of Lent each year is the life-blood for the day-to-day operation of UMCOR and enables UMCOR to respond to emergencies immediately. Each local church is urged to observe this offering and generously support UMCOR. Please remit the offering through the Conference Treasurer, PO Box 52101, Macon, GA 31208. Please earmark these gifts for “One Great Hour of Sharing.”

Emergency Response

Four Levels of Disasters

Geography and amount of devastation determine the extent of response. Four levels of disasters have been designated.

Level I. A small local disaster, such as toxic spill, explosion, air crash, tornado, or limited flooding affecting between one and thirty households. Determining Factor: Is this within the ability of the local church(es) to respond to with little or no conference or national UMCOR assistance.

Level II. A medium-sized disaster (affecting 50-200 homes), which could be caused by localized flooding, a moderate earthquake, a small hurricane, or a tropical storm. Determining Factor: Is this beyond the ability of the local congregations and community to respond? Conference and national UMCOR resources are needed.

Level III. A large disaster (in terms of geography and/or severity) is usually eligible to receive a presidential declaration. Examples include widespread flooding, severe earthquake, or hurricane with significant damage. A disaster of this size requires the full mobilization of the conference disaster relief group and the support of other annual conferences to send volunteers.

Level IV. A Catastrophic Disaster as designed by Public Law 93-288. (An event

with a large number of deaths or injuries, extensive property damage, and/or severe impact on national security. In these cases, Martial Law will be declared and access to the area will be severely limited. A number of people in Conference leadership positions will probably be victims themselves.

Three Stages of Disasters

Disasters have a life cycle, which are arbitrarily divided into 3 phases. Each stage is usually, but not always, ten times longer than its predecessor.

Rescue Phase

This stage begins at impact, or with evacuation if there is a forewarning, and continues until all persons have been accounted for, the danger of continued destruction ends, and shelter is available for survivors.

State and local officials are responsible for rescue and the protection of life and property. They are the main actors in this stage. Local people will be caring for their neighbors. The American Red Cross and other agencies open shelters, feed and clothe victims, and provide emergency medical care. In this phase, United Methodists do neighbor-to-neighbor caring, often as American Red Cross or Salvation Army volunteers.

A cautionary note to churches: Local churches are often tempted to use their facilities as a shelter. Congregations should be careful about opening a shelter on their own. UMCOR advises against doing so unless the congregation has a written agreement that the American Red Cross, who will sponsor the shelter. The agreement should include specific statements about liability insurance and building damage repair from its usage as a shelter. Otherwise, the local church assumes all liability for everything that happens in the shelter.

Relief Phase

The American Red Cross and other agencies maintain assistance centers and distribute vouchers to help with urgent needs. Spontaneous volunteers and those from recognized disaster response organizations appear to help with cleanup. This is when our Early Response Teams would be activated and deployed.

Recovery Phase

This is where the long-term investment is made by the church. Rarely is recovery work completed within a year. In this phase we care for the primary victims, while looking for secondary victims whose homes may be safe but whose place of work may have been affected. Hidden victims like those service providers and relief workers

who are over-stressed from trying to restore their community after the disaster are offered care during this phase. It is during the Recovery Phase that the United Methodist Church joins with other faith-based groups to form a community recovery organization. Traditionally, this is the phase during which the United Methodist Church makes its greatest contribution by focusing on case work and long-term rebuilding efforts.