

From the Living Lutheran: 'After the media leaves, Lutherans stay'

Last year Lutheran Disaster Response (LDR) worked on 47 relief and recovery projects in 29 countries and distributed nearly \$6.6 million. The ministry has a reputation for staying in and serving communities long after other agencies and media have left. “Because Lutherans are at work in communities and in the congregations, we walk with people every day through their lives,” said Michael Stadie, LDR-U.S. program director. “LDR is just another way for us to walk with people. Our disaster response is a natural outreach of being the church. We were there before the disaster, and we’ll be there after

Among the first to respond to a disaster and the last to leave the site, [Lutheran Disaster Response](#) (LDR) has a reputation for serving communities even when other agencies have packed up. Working mostly behind the scenes, it’s able to respond so readily through an extensive network of partnerships around the world.

“We often joke that long after the media’s gone, Lutherans are the ones leaving the building and turning off the lights,” said Michael Stadie, LDR-U.S. program director.

Last year LDR worked on 47 relief and recovery projects in 29 countries, distributing almost \$6.6 million. Without its worldwide partners, LDR wouldn’t exist since there are only five full-time staff working out of the ELCA churchwide office.

In this way, LDR is often misunderstood. “The LDR office is not operational—meaning that our affiliates do the work,” said Stadie, who provides training, assistance and guidance to partners in the United States. He and Joe Chu, associate program director, are known for saying: “The heroes are the ones on the ground.”

Those affiliates include partners, social ministry organizations and synods, for which the organization provides training, consultation, assistance and funding. For example, Stadie and Chu traveled to Lutheran Services Carolinas last spring to train around 30 case managers in aiding flood victims of 2016’s Hurricane Matthew.

LDR also works globally with such organizations as the [Lutheran World Federation](#) (LWF), [Lutheran World Relief](#) (LWR), [Church World Service](#) (CWS) and companion churches.

“Meeting the needs of people according to what *they* need, and utilizing *their* resources and gifts is a hallmark of how the ELCA engages with people around the world,” said Y. Franklin Ishida, director for Asia Pacific with ELCA Global Mission who oversees recovery work in Nepal after the country’s 2015 earthquake, one of LDR’s biggest projects.

Resiliency and sustainability

LDR’s sustainability is intrinsic to the way in which it responds to disasters. After the 9/11 attacks in New York, it continued to help those affected for seven years, phasing out its New York affiliate in 2008. Area pastors also report that counseling is continuing for first responders in their ongoing healing from the trauma at ground zero.

“This shows that we don’t forget people and communities impacted by disaster,” Stadie said. “That’s why we’re in it for the long haul—we don’t forget them.

“LDR can stay in assisting those impacted by disaster because of our understanding of the incarnation of Christ. We see Christ in those who are impacted by the disaster, following Matthew 25.”

Sustaining help for those in need is a building block of the Lutheran faith, said Mark A. Anderson, assistant to the bishop in the Northeastern Iowa Synod. Anderson, also a victim of flooding in 2008, organized a synodwide collection this year of supplies for future flood cleanup needs. “This is a Lutheran thing and goes back to the Reformation, when Martin Luther said it was the church’s responsibility to care for people,” he said.

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Each of the synod’s 150 congregations was asked to fill one bucket with cleaning supplies, but Anderson predicted that the response might be as many as 10 per church. The flood buckets, he said, will be stored at churches throughout the synod and distributed for the next flood.

“Before any of us, it is the people saving people,” said Prabin Manandhar, LWF country director for Nepal. “That happens not when you have [a] resilient building—that happens when you have resilient people.”

Stadie attributes this resiliency and sustainability to the ELCA’s strong partnerships around the world. In the United States, he said, the social ministry organizations affiliated with LDR know who the local coordinators are, making it easier to facilitate help on the ground.

This was especially true in the wake of [Hurricane Katrina](#) in 2005, when Lutherans were able to add value to the disaster relief and response efforts because of their network of people and agencies in the region. “After Katrina, there was a diaspora of sorts, but we had the resources because Lutherans knew where the other Lutherans were working in the region and around the country,” Stadie said.

While LDR’s work on Katrina is complete, in 2017 the organization is assisting in old and new disasters alike, both abroad and at home. LDR is at work in many regions, but there are six areas currently receiving its most significant responses.

Hurricane Matthew

Florida, North Carolina and Georgia were hit hard by flooding when [Hurricane Matthew](#) dumped rain in September and October 2016. Nearly a year later, LDR is still working with Lutheran Services Carolinas after the agency was awarded the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) disaster case management contract.

Sharei Green, LDR program communicator, said the work mostly includes guiding people through the assistance process to get their homes rebuilt. “It’s assessing whether people have insurance, asking if they had flood insurance, and helping them sort through the paperwork associated with getting FEMA assistance,” she said.

The disaster work actually started early—as the hurricane was forming in the Atlantic Ocean. “Social ministry organizations and synods started working together via phone calls before the hurricane even hit,” she said.

In Haiti and Cuba, where Matthew’s damage was more severe, LDR-International has allotted \$150,000 in funding so far. Through the Cuban Council of Churches, \$50,000 was awarded, and another \$100,000 to Haiti through ACT Alliance, which was split equally from LWF and CWS to provide food and shelter.

Hurricane Sandy

Five years after [Hurricane Sandy](#) hit the Northeast, volunteers are still working through Lutheran Social Ministries of New Jersey to help rebuild homes. New Jersey was especially hard-hit, Stadie said, and many people lost their homes on or near the shore. “Our affiliate is doing volunteer management in rebuilding,” he added. “Believe it or not, there are people who are just now getting their homes rebuilt.”

Alex Elefante, disaster recovery coordinator for Lutheran Social Ministries of New Jersey, said that over the past five years, more than 4,400 volunteers have worked tirelessly to renovate and rebuild homes. While Elefante estimated that the volunteers have worked on 354 houses, another 27,000 still await repair.

“We’re making progress, but it’s slowly happening,” and wouldn’t be possible without the volunteers, he said.

Louisiana flooding

The ELCA happened to be meeting for the 2016 Churchwide Assembly in New Orleans when [devastating rainfall](#) flooded Louisiana. “We were actually there when it happened in the Baton Rouge/Lafayette area, and a member of the assembly stood up and asked if we could pray for those who lost their homes,” Stadie said.

LDR did more than pray, helping to assess the situation and working with Upbring (formerly Lutheran Social Services of the South) to provide aid. More than 150,000 applications have been filed with FEMA for assistance.

South Dakota tornadoes and flooding

Two years later, LDR is still working with Lutheran Social Services of South Dakota to help Native Americans recover from tornadoes that caused flooding on reservations in 2015. This was the first time that tribal lands got a federal declaration apart from that of the state, Stadie said, adding, “LDR is in conversation with our local partners on long-term recovery.”

Nepal earthquake

Nearly \$2.1 million has been given to LDR companions and partners in Nepal, which was hit by a [7.8-magnitude earthquake](#) in April and again by a similar one in May 2015. Green said work includes rebuilding more than 270 homes and nine schools, restoring water and sanitation systems, improving livelihood, and providing job-training and income-generating projects like bee-keeping and farming.

LDR is working with LWF-Nepal, LWR, United Mission to Nepal and Shanti Nepal, a primary health care and resource center.

At Shanti Nepal, Green said recovery work includes upgrading facilities for disaster preparedness, expanding the maternity ward, constructing new emergency and outpatient departments, and adding new emergency equipment and an ambulance.

Global migration crisis

LDR’s work with partners around the world in the migration crisis focuses mostly in the Middle East, Central America and South Sudan, Africa.

Drought, famine and civil war in South Sudan are affecting more than 7 million people. More than 100,000 people have fled their homes this year alone. LDR helps distribute food and provide water, sanitation and psychosocial support.

The ELCA is currently constructing the Lutheran Community Center in the country’s capital of Juba to provide education and health services. With support from ELCA [World Hunger](#), the LWF is increasing food production through development of new agricultural practices and training women and youth on the skills to earn a living.

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for us to walk with people. Our disaster response is a natural outreach of being the church.”

LDR is also serving victims of chronic violence, poverty, environmental displacement and lack of opportunities in El Salvador, Honduras and Guatemala through the ELCA’s [AMMPARO](#) strategy (Accompanying Migrant Minors with Protection, Advocacy, Representation and Opportunities).

“This strategy is unique among U.S. churches and provides a holistic whole-church response,” said Mary Campbell, program director. The initiative encompasses accompaniment, awareness-building and advocacy at every moment of the migrant journey. This includes serving arriving migrants as they transition to a new phase of life, and accompaniment of companions who work with migrants deported back to their countries of origin.

All LDR staff agree that helping those in need is what Lutherans are called to do. “Because Lutherans are at work in communities and in the congregations, we walk with people every day through their lives,” Stodie said. “LDR is just another way for us to walk with people. Our disaster response is a natural outreach of being the church. We were there before the disaster and we’ll be there after.”

Lutherans happy to help

“I try not to make disasters, but they keep happening,” said Jerry Lynn, a volunteer disaster coordinator for the Southwestern Pennsylvania Synod.

The member of Berkeley Hills Lutheran Church in Pittsburgh coordinated volunteers last spring from six area congregations: Berkeley Hills; Christ, Beaver Falls; Emmanuel, Etna; First English, Pittsburgh; Hebron, Blairsville; and Faith, New Florence. The 15 volunteers partnered with members of the Catholic dioceses of Pittsburgh and Greensburg, as well as the Byzantine Catholic Archeparchy of Pittsburgh, to help renovate houses damaged by August 2016 flooding.

The Lutherans planned the service project as part of the 500th anniversary of the Reformation this year, said Kim Rapczak, pastor of Christ Lutheran.

“I think it’s great to have people participating like this,” she said. The area is often flooded, she added, because the Monongahela and Allegheny rivers meet to form the Ohio River.

Rapczak said 160 businesses and homes were affected and Lutherans were happy to do something practical to help.

Need was up in 2016

Lutheran Disaster Response’s (LDR) work is only possible through generous gifts. Much of the financial response comes after disasters are reported in the news, said Daniel Rift, ELCA director for world hunger and Lutheran disaster appeal. Giving can vary from year to year depending on the severity of the disaster and the extent of the news reporting.

Last year was a tough year, he said, because the presidential election dominated the news. Need was up, especially after flooding in the South, where Federal Emergency Management Agency applications were four times the norm, he added.

Michael Stadie, LDR-U.S. program director, called 2016 the “year of the forgotten disaster.” With the media focused on the election, it was easy to forget disaster giving, he said, adding, “A lot of the money that comes in does so because of what’s on CNN.”

Sharei Green, LDR program communicator, agreed: “The biggest thing I’ve seen is the smaller things, especially in the disasters that don’t make the news or that people don’t see.”

LDR is at work, however, even when donations are low, she said. Still, it managed to raise enough last year to respond to nine major disasters.