

# The Role of Faith in Disasters

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When people feel powerless in times of extreme stress, they may turn to a higher power to help them get through the situation. This can be true for those who have been directly impacted by the disaster and those who are called to help others. Many faith-based organizations (FBOs) have disaster response and recovery components as major elements of their own missions – and not just for the benefit of their own followers. By helping others through disasters, FBOs create a valuable force-multiplier role in disaster response and recovery as well as in the other key national preparedness mission areas of prevention, protection, and mitigation.

According to [The 2020 Census of American Religion \(https://www.prii.org/research/2020-census-of-american-religion/\)](https://www.prii.org/research/2020-census-of-american-religion/) released in July 2021, roughly 77% of American adults affiliate with some organized religious group. Americans utilize faith to help get through disasters that impacted them and faith in others to help respond to and recover from them as well.

Many FBOs view outward charity as a combination of faith and hope. Academic and theologian Martyn Percy described this relationship between FBOs and society as an [ecclesial canopy](https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315615868).

(<https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315615868>). That outward charity can exist to help any survivors of disasters, regardless of their own faith or lack thereof.

Poet and satirist [Alexander Pope \(https://oll.libertyfund.org/title/boynton-the-complete-poetical-works-of-alexander-pope?html=true\)](https://oll.libertyfund.org/title/boynton-the-complete-poetical-works-of-alexander-pope?html=true) said, “In Faith and Hope the world will disagree, but all mankind’s concern is Charity.” FBOs active in disaster charitable work are not just those associated with Christianity. In Judaism, the word for charity is [tzedakah \(https://www.chabad.org/library/article\\_cdo/aid/3056/jewish/Charity-an-Anthology.htm\)](https://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/3056/jewish/Charity-an-Anthology.htm), and it is a *mitzvah* (good deed) equal to the sum of all other good deeds:

With their own response and recovery components, many faith-based groups can support disaster response efforts, plus provide mental health and spiritual care.

Charity is an act of love, kindness and compassion. It is also a duty, a privilege, a right, an act of justice, a humbling experience (even more for the giver than for the recipient) and a badge of identity.

The [concept of charity in Islam \(https://marytn.medium.com/the-concept-of-charity-in-islam-720543015e76\)](https://marytn.medium.com/the-concept-of-charity-in-islam-720543015e76) – *zakat* (mandatory requirement for almsgiving – one of the faith’s five pillars) and *sadaqat* (voluntary giving) – is very strong: “*zakat* and *sadaqat* are performed by believers not just as moral obligations to society, but as sincere endeavors to gain God’s pleasure.” Buddhism has a required action called [dana \(https://www.purdueglobal.edu/blog/human-services/helping-those-in-need/#:~:text=Buddhism%3A,or%20on%20a%20construction%20project.\)](https://www.purdueglobal.edu/blog/human-services/helping-those-in-need/#:~:text=Buddhism%3A,or%20on%20a%20construction%20project.), which “includes giving [including one’s time and talents, or sweat *dana*], sharing, and selfless giving without anticipation of return or benefit to the giver.”

## FBOs as Part of a VOAD/COAD Relationship With Governmental Organizations

Many FBOs are components of Voluntary Organizations Active in Disaster (VOAD (<https://www.nvoad.org/>)) and Community Organizations Active in Disaster (COAD), which can help with governmental operations of Category A (debris removal) and the “[locally executed, state managed, and federally supported \(https://www.dhs.gov/news/2020/04/06/weekly-update-dhs-response-covid-19\)](https://www.dhs.gov/news/2020/04/06/weekly-update-dhs-response-covid-19)” Category B (emergency protective

measures) work of Public Assistance in Response ([https://www.fema.gov/sites/default/files/2020-07/fema\\_public-assistance-fact-sheet\\_10-2019.pdf](https://www.fema.gov/sites/default/files/2020-07/fema_public-assistance-fact-sheet_10-2019.pdf)), and most (if not all) of the Recovery Support Functions (<https://www.fema.gov/emergency-managers/national-preparedness/frameworks/recovery>):

- Economic,
- Community planning and capacity building,
- Housing recovery,
- Health and social services,
- Infrastructure systems, and
- Natural and cultural resources.

FBOs are a key element in a whole-community approach to emergency management. Emergency managers must cultivate these relationships during the preparedness phase of the disaster cycle to be able to activate them during the response and recovery phases.

Many FBOs support government missions – across the entire disaster phase cycle – without bias or proselytizing (i.e., promoting their faith or beliefs as part of their collaborative disaster missions). Incorporating FBOs into the community's emergency planning supports not only the emergency management's Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) initiatives for public service, but the whole community for the emergency response and recovery work itself.

In New Jersey, for example, FBOs collaborate and coordinate on disaster readiness within the state in at least three forums:

- New Jersey has an Interfaith Advisory Council (<https://www.njohsp.gov/interfaith>), sponsored by the State's Office of Homeland Security and Preparedness (OHS&P), which provides a two-way communication connection between government and FBOs for site protection/prevention and disaster preparedness. This council also provides information and expertise on obtaining state and federal support such as non-profit security grants.
- For small (undeclared) and large-scale disasters, FBOs can play a critical role in the rollout of multi-agency recovery/resource centers (MARC)s). For example, FBOs who provide financial assistance, donations of goods and cleanup supplies, or services to disaster survivors can be organized in a "one-stop shop" for survivors to avoid having to travel to multiple aid organizations for assistance. These resources from nongovernmental organizations to disaster survivors are generally available regardless of citizenship status or income level. In 2021, multiple MARCs (<https://www.redcross.org/local/new-jersey/about-us/news-and-events/news/ida-response-nj---1-year-update.html>) were established in New Jersey after Hurricane Ida struck most of the state (and were located independent of the FEMA Disaster Recovery Centers for maximum exposure). In October 2022, a MARC was established for a multi-family fire in Passaic County, which displaced nearly 60 residents permanently from their homes. For nongovernmental organizations supporting disaster-impacted families of any size – especially FBOs – a MARC can effectively centralize recovery resources available to families in need.
- During full activations of the state's emergency operations center, OHS&P staffs a private-sector desk, which includes the New Jersey VOAD (<https://www.njvoad.org/members-partners/>) that represents the state-level VOADs/COADs, including FBOs. The New Jersey VOAD also helps the state's voluntary agency liaison coordinate with the FEMA voluntary liaison. During Superstorm Sandy in 2012 (<http://www.njvoad.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/NJ-Non-Profit-Long-Term-Recovery-Assessment-print-version.pdf>) in New Jersey, VOADs/COADs provided more than \$116 million in direct non-governmental financial assistance, assisted nearly 30,000 households with disaster case management, helped more than 3,000 families rebuild and restore their own homes, and contributed more than 350,000 hours of voluntary service.



The Salvation Army feeds disaster workers and volunteers at their command center in Windsor, Colorado (Source: Michael Rieger/FEMA, May 24, 2008, Public domain, via [Wikimedia Commons](https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/a/a1/FEMA_-_35456_-_Salvation_Army_feeding_rescue_workers_in_Colorado.jpg) ([https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/a/a1/FEMA\\_-\\_35456\\_-\\_Salvation\\_Army\\_feeding\\_rescue\\_workers\\_in\\_Colorado.jpg](https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/a/a1/FEMA_-_35456_-_Salvation_Army_feeding_rescue_workers_in_Colorado.jpg))).

## Coordinate Locally & Support the Restoration of FBO Sites

*Disasters start and end locally* – and their partnerships with FBOs should be the same. With houses of worship in almost every community, these FBOs know how their own organizations operate disaster support missions and can provide in-roads to residents (<https://www.domesticpreparedness.com/updates/nyc-emergency-management-empowering-faith-leaders-to-assist-communities-with-emergency-preparedness/>) that government may not be easily able to penetrate with preparedness messaging. Emergency managers should be part of their county/parish/tribal entity COAD group, support ecumenical councils in and around their communities, and be supportive (<https://www.domesticpreparedness.com/preparedness/start-or-restart-voads-coads-during-the-preparedness-phase/>) at the state level for their VOAD (<https://www.domesticpreparedness.com/updates/volunteers-play-integral-role-in-disaster-relief-and-recovery-efforts/>). Some FBO groups operate at a multi-community level, meaning that they support smaller disasters locally and larger disasters regionally and that their physical presence may not be in every community – for example, the Salvation Army and Catholic Charities support the entire nation, but do not have physical offices or sites in each municipality. Although the American Red Cross is not an FBO (nor is it a governmental organization), it is sometimes mistaken as one because of its globally recognized emblem. The Red Cross is a founding member (<https://www.nvoad.org/about-us/>) of the VOAD movement and supports/partners with various FBOs (<https://www.nvoad.org/current-members/>) on their own disaster response and recovery missions.

Although the concept of “separation of church and state” is generally about not endorsing one faith group over another, it also translates into the private-public distinction for financial and other governmental assistance for recovery. However, when an FBO’s site is used as a critical infrastructure’s key resource as a pre-established part of a community’s emergency plans –

and is available without bias or discrimination to all the public – that FBO’s site should be supported through governmental and non-governmental assistance. For example, if a house of worship’s fellowship hall is used as a shelter or point-of-distribution, it should count as a Public Assistance Category B resource – and fall under FEMA’s Private Non-Profit (PNP ([https://www.fema.gov/sites/default/files/2020-07/fema\\_public-assistance-fact-sheet\\_10-2019.pdf](https://www.fema.gov/sites/default/files/2020-07/fema_public-assistance-fact-sheet_10-2019.pdf))) criteria, which states that it:

*[M]ust demonstrate the facility provides a critical service or provides a non-critical, but essential government service and is open to the general public. A facility that provides a critical service is defined as one used for an educational, utility, emergency, or medical purpose.*

This does not mean that tax dollars go toward restoring houses of worship. However, in many communities as with their public schools, FBOs have a much larger non-disaster role in community housing, community planning and capacity building, and community health and social services. Those elements are key recovery support functions for any community.

## **Mental Health/Disaster Spiritual Care**

Finally, disaster trauma is a serious health concern for families impacted by disasters and the responders who help them. The federal government recognizes this and supports disaster grants on presidentially declared disasters through the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) of the U.S. Department of Health & Human Services. SAMHSA also has [resources \(https://www.samhsa.gov/dtac/disaster-responders\)](https://www.samhsa.gov/dtac/disaster-responders) dedicated to emergencies and first responders. FBOs can help communities before, during, and after disasters with [mental health \(https://www.domesticpreparedness.com/preparedness/disaster-preparedness-a-societal-view/\)](https://www.domesticpreparedness.com/preparedness/disaster-preparedness-a-societal-view/) and disaster spiritual care.

FBOs also help [balance \(https://www.domesticpreparedness.com/commentary/the-first-open-source-equitable-decision-intelligence-model-1/\)](https://www.domesticpreparedness.com/commentary/the-first-open-source-equitable-decision-intelligence-model-1/) equity needs for any community, especially when cultural and religious rituals need to be maintained and conducted, for example, grief and bereavement activities associated with disaster-caused fatalities. The American Red Cross recognized this as a national gap in the recovery process for individuals and families early in 2020 during the COVID-19 pandemic. To respond, they created a virtual [family assistance center \(https://www.redcross.org/virtual-family-assistance-center.html\)](https://www.redcross.org/virtual-family-assistance-center.html) to help guide people through to behavioral health, spiritual care, and disaster health services support from partners – including from FBOs.

FBOs who are VOAD/COAD members should be considered whole-community partners by emergency managers. They bring tremendous breadth and depth to the table through coordination, cooperation, collaboration, and communication. Along the same lines of working with non-FBO VOAD and COAD groups, emergency managers need to [empower, endow, educate, and entrust \(https://www.domesticpreparedness.com/preparedness/start-or-restart-voads-coads-during-the-preparedness-phase/\)](https://www.domesticpreparedness.com/preparedness/start-or-restart-voads-coads-during-the-preparedness-phase/) the FBOs they work with to the benefit of the public.

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