

TENNESSEE-WESTERN KENTUCKY CONFERENCE DISASTER RESPONSE

Rev. Stacey Harwell-Dye, Chairperson, Disaster Response Leadership Team

The mission of the United Methodist Committee on Relief (UMCOR) disaster response is to offer a caring Christian presence to communities that have experienced disaster. The primary focus of disaster response ministry in the TWKUMC is to prepare churches and individuals with training and resources to respond when their neighborhoods are impacted by disasters. Large-scale disasters occasionally make it necessary to partner with conferences outside of the Tennessee-Western Kentucky Conference.

Early response and long-term recovery efforts are made equitable and efficient by quality preparedness training. COVID remained a barrier to large scale gathering and training efforts, though we are seeing pockets of hope in the ability to gather on Zoom. Clifton Tackett has engaged and trained new Early Response Teams (ERT) and has scheduled at least one training per quarter for the coming year. You don't need to wield a chainsaw or hammer to serve in disaster response. UMCOR has introduced an improved Connecting Neighbors training program. TWKUMC offered the introductory training this spring to begin identifying possible volunteer trainers (ambassadors). This team of trainers will help ensure that every congregation has the opportunity to be prepared when a disaster impacts their community. The Connecting Neighbors training focuses on family, church, and community preparation and response.

The conference remains involved in the vital work of disaster case management with survivors of the multiple disasters in Tennessee and Western Kentucky, and we will remain involved in this work until the recovery is complete. As of March 2022, there were 1,909 cases between the four disasters from 2020 and 2021 that were case worked by dedicated professionals who walk alongside survivors. Hundreds of other survivor cases will be opened in the coming months for both the flood in and around Waverly and the December tornado recovery. This work does not happen in a vacuum — TWKUMC disaster case managers are part of a network of long-term recovery partners who each take a piece of their own community's recovery, from volunteer coordination to spiritual care to supplies and donations. Our hope is that Methodists will be part of preparation, relief, and response efforts in their own community before a disaster strikes so that when disasters occur, relationships are already built, and a plan is in place to bring survivors to a place of new wholeness and healing.

One of the great successes of the past year was getting a family impacted by the tornado of March 2020 back into their home. Through the case management of Rev. Marie King, the family in Nashville has their home rebuilt, thanks to Project Christmas House, a group of amazing volunteers from the Purchase District. The volunteers spent a week building this home on the lot where the survivor's home once stood before the tornado of 2020. Local churches stepped up and sponsored meals for the team as well as landscaping for the front yard.

The conference's ability to respond to our neighbors impacted by disaster is made possible by donations and grants. Churches and individuals responded in amazing ways to the disasters of 2020 and 2021. The need for financial and volunteer donations remains a priority for the conference to be able to continue to walk with these neighbors. Additionally, grants from UMCOR and other organizations have helped make the relief and recovery work of the conference possible for these disasters. UMCOR awarded the conference another Solidarity Grant for immediate relief needs for the tornado survivors and for the flooding in Waverly. More funding will be required for this recovery to be successful. The support of our connection makes the ministry of restoring hope possible.