

TENNESSEE-WESTERN KENTUCKY CONFERENCE DISASTER RESPONSE

Rev. Robert Craig, Disaster Response Coordinator

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 the disaster response ministry in the Tennessee-Western Kentucky Annual Conference 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 TWK Conference.

In 2022-2023, recovery efforts continued for three disasters from previous conference years. Those ongoing recoveries throughout the conference are for the tornadoes of March 2020, the flood from August 2021, and the tornado outbreak from December 2021 that impacted 16 counties in both states of the TWK Conference. Currently, the TWK Disaster Response Ministry is working with communities in 10 counties impacted by the most recent tornadoes that happened on March 31, 2023. United Methodists have been assisting in all these areas since the disasters occurred and will remain until long term recovery is achieved.

The conference remains involved in the essential work of disaster case management with survivors of the multiple disasters in Tennessee and Western Kentucky. As a result of the UMCOR grant celebrated at the 2022 Annual Conference, TWK Disaster Response is also active as a long-term recovery partner in multiple communities providing funding, construction management, and volunteer coordination. None of this work happens in a vacuum. TWK Disaster Recovery Ministry is a part of a network of long-term recovery partners who each take on a portion of their own community's recovery including volunteer coordination, spiritual care, construction, supplies, and donations management.

One of the great successes of the past year was establishing construction management as a part of the disaster recovery ministry. This has allowed the TWK Conference to be more fully in relationship with dozens of survivors. This relationship begins with the initial registration process and is maintained until the blessing of the home. Members of the TWK Conference have served as disaster case managers, construction coordinators, volunteers, contractors, and funders in the recovery journey of multiple survivors.

Early response and long-term recovery efforts are made equitable and efficient by quality preparedness training. This spring, several people have been trained or have renewed their training as Early Response Team (ERT) members. Additional trainings are planned throughout the remainder of 2023. Connecting Neighbors is another disaster ministry opportunity that ensures every congregation can be prepared when a disaster impacts their community. The Connecting Neighbors training focuses on family, church, and community preparation and response. Ministry overviews of Early Response Team and Connecting Neighbors ministries will be offered during lunch and learn opportunities at the TWK Annual Conference gathering this year. Chainsaws and hammers are not the only tools needed to serve in disaster response. Willing disciples with varying gifts and graces are vital to disaster ministry. Our hope is that United Methodists will be a part of preparation, relief, and response efforts in their communities before a disaster strikes so that when disasters occur, relationships are already built, and a plan is in place to bring survivors to a reality of new wholeness and healing.

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 and those impacted by the most recent storms. Additionally, grants from UMCOR, the American Red Cross, SBPUSA, the Community Foundation of Middle Tennessee, and the United Way of West Tennessee have helped make the relief and recovery work of the conference possible for these disasters. UMCOR continues to offer support through training and consultation on a regular basis as well. The support of our connection makes the ministry of restoring hope possible. Be there. Be hope.