

## SHOULD OUR CHURCH BE A SHELTER TO EVACUEES?

As Christians we are called to welcome the strangers in our midst, and to help those in need. The urge to provide assistance to those fleeing storms can be very tempting.

AWF Disaster Response Coordinator Amelia Fletcher states that a good option is to **offer your facility through the Red Cross**. The Red Cross is looking for churches to serve as shelters, particularly along the I-10 corridor. Their Chapter Center (222 N Baylen St, Pensacola, FL 850-432-7601) is providing free training for volunteers every day at 1:00 PM, from Sept. 7 - 9. In addition to training they will perform background checks, and register them as certified volunteers. The Red Cross can also help churches qualify as certified shelters. Such approved shelters are often eligible for financial assistance from federal or state emergency funds as well as for other types of support.

We have been hearing the term "**Samaritan Shelter**," but have not been able to get a good definition of what this actually is. It seems to be a term for a place that just takes in evacuees and works to care for them as best they can. We *strongly* recommend that you think things through fully before deciding to be a "Samaritan Shelter." **This is not a simple matter of opening the doors to the fellowship hall and letting folks have a place to eat and sleep.** There are many things to consider:

1. Have you cleared this decision with your Board of Trustees and your pastor? Have you cleared it with the District Superintendent? Is our Conference Disaster Response Coordinator (Amelia Fletcher) aware of your decision?
2. How will your church function with evacuees on site? Are you willing to give up your worship space on Sunday or your fellowship hall on Wednesday evenings for four to six weeks? Do you have enough bathrooms? Showers? Internet and phone connections? What about cleaning and maintenance?
3. How will you provide for the needs of evacuees for a period of several weeks (food, medicines, health care, communications, clothing/laundry, etc.)?

4. Who will staff the shelter? You will need at least two people on site, around the clock, 24-7.
5. What about security? Will evacuees have access to your entire facility? Are you prepared to deal with difficult people?
6. How long are you willing to provide shelter? Once you accept evacuees, you are committed to caring for them until the need passes, which can stretch into weeks. If their homes have been destroyed and they have nowhere to go, do you have a plan to help them find somewhere to go?

In the urgency of the moment it is tempting to take immediate action to address very real needs. We want all who have a heart for their fellow human beings to make decisions that are well informed and to be adequately prepared to carry through until the needs are fully met; these are complicated decisions that should not be made without planning ahead. Please also remember that there are many ways in which your church might serve evacuees without becoming a shelter (i.e., a resting place for volunteers, a staging site for supplies, etc.)

Please contact your District Superintendent for guidance and help in determining whether your church should be a shelter for disaster evacuees. Any decision to become a shelter **MUST** be approved by your District Superintendent.