

## PRESS RELEASE ON NAGEP ROUND TABLE, FEBRUARY 17-19 2009

An explosion at a propane plant in Toronto's west end forces the evacuation of thousands of people. Flooding in the Winnipeg area drives hundreds of residents from their homes. The World Health Organization (WHO) raises its pandemic alert to Level 6 as the number of confirmed cases of human-to-human transmission of the H1N1 flu rises in North America and Europe. Recent news stories such as these have brought the issue of emergency and pandemic preparedness to public awareness. What role do churches and other faith-based groups have in the event of a natural or human-made disaster, a pandemic outbreak, or other similar catastrophic event?

This question has been the focus of the National Advisory Group for Emergency Planning (NAGEP), an ecumenical group working under the Faith and Witness Commission of the Canadian Council of Churches. In conjunction with the Public Health Agency of Canada (PHAC), which made the event possible, NAGEP organized a three-day long Round Table conference on emergency preparedness in Toronto from February 17-19 2009. The first such event of its kind, it brought together leaders of various member churches and faith groups, government representatives, and other stakeholders for a unique opportunity to learn together and engage in dialogue about the church's possible role.

And learn and dialogue they did. Representatives of churches and faith-based organizations learned about the command structure in effect in the event of an emergency/critical incident. They also learned about the need to make contact with local Emergency Management Organization (EMO) officials to insure they have a presence in advance of any public emergency response. Government representatives learned that a major element of faith-based groups' response in times of tragedy is the provision of pastoral and spiritual care for those struggling with grief, loss, and uncertainty, providing a source of hope and meaning at a time when faith may be fragile. They also learned that spiritual and pastoral care is something qualitatively different from clinical psycho-social care, the category into which it tends to be lumped. And church leaders shared with each other the theological motivation for becoming involved.

One significant presentation shared the results of a major study by the US Department of Homeland Security on lessons learned in the aftermath of the response to Hurricane Katrina. The report concluded that the devastated areas served by churches and volunteer community organizations showed the greatest resilience, or capacity to respond to and recover from the disaster. And contrary to the expectation that government agencies would take the lead with faith-based organizations (FBOs) and non-government organizations (NGOs) acting in a support capacity, the report concluded: "In many service areas, FBOs and NGOs did not augment government response. Rather, they took the lead, and government augmented their efforts. In some communities they were the only ones to provide shelter, food, or medical services for days or even weeks."

Though the task is daunting, the round table laid a solid foundation for a better working relationship between churches and government officials in the area of emergency preparedness. Participants offered a number of suggestions and recommendations for future steps. And church leaders learned how they might serve their congregants and extend their Christian care and service to their communities with advance planning and collaboration.

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