

Mennonite Disaster Service

Introduction

Mennonite Disaster Service is a network through which various constituencies of the Anabaptist churches can respond to those affected by disasters in North America. While the main focus is on clean up, repair, and rebuilding homes, this activity becomes a means of touching lives and helping people regain faith and wholeness. Mennonite Disaster Service workers are volunteers who serve without pay. They carry out their disaster assistance activities, supported by the larger regional and bi-national network, in a spirit of cooperation with the various agencies of the government and other volunteer disaster service organizations. MDS continues to average over 3,000 volunteers a year.

Their organizational structure is made up of four regions in the United States and one in Canada. Within the five regions there are 50 local MDS units. These units have the primary responsibility to represent MDS in a disaster response within their own geographic boundaries and regions. The MDS regional and bi-national offices are organized to assist and support the units in effective operation of disaster recovery programs.

The major response of Mennonite Disaster Service to most disaster situations will be supplying volunteer personnel for cleanup, repair and rebuild operations. Special emphasis will be placed on helping those least able to help themselves, such as the elderly, disabled, widowed, etc. Although the major thrust of their traditional disaster assistance is in the areas of post disaster cleanup and build repair, MDS personnel are willing to expand their areas of involvement where there is a need and when a sufficient number of volunteers are available.

In most cases, the MDS network will not provide for the purchase of building materials, anticipating that these will come from other sources. MDS will require no fees for services provided. Assistance from other agencies for food and housing for volunteer support is usually welcomed.

Mennonite Disaster Service, a joint effort of Mennonites directed toward aiding those suffering from natural disasters had its beginning in Kansas in 1950. Yet MDS began before that date in more casual ways. For generations mutual aid has been a principle practiced by Mennonites and Amish. Barn-raising is probably the granddaddy of MDS. When a farmer's barn burned down, his neighbors agreed on a day to build a new one. Often before the day was over a new barn had been built.

Older members of Kansas and Oklahoma communities remember that when a tornado struck, "the people from Kansas" came to help clean up. Assistance was spontaneous, unorganized, and unsophisticated.

Organization and Trial by Fire and Water

At a picnic of young married couples from the Pennsylvania (now Whitestone) Mennonite Church in Hesston, Kansas, MDS as we know it began to take shape and form. Many of the people present wanted to continue the positive witness to their neighbors that they had begun as conscientious objectors in Civilian Public Service during World War II. Living in an area plagued by drought, tornadoes, and floods they looked for a practical application of their Christian faith not only in a time of national crisis, but also in time of peace.

During the weeks that followed that picnic they shared their convictions with members of a corresponding Sunday school class of the Hesston congregation in a joint meeting. Enthusiasm for this new venture burst forth at the informal discussion over refreshments after the meeting.

A committee of five persons was appointed with the first step to circulate a questionnaire in the two Hesston congregations. What skills were available? Carpentry? Cooking? Typing?

Welding? Nursing? Airplane piloting? Were people available at a moment's notice? What equipment could be furnished?

The newly formed organization, Mennonite Service Organization named John Diller as the first coordinator. The first call for assistance did not come until May of 1951 when during a period of heavy rains the Little Arkansas River flooded and Wichita called for help. By 11:00 that night 45 men and 4 trucks were in Wichita building sandbag dikes. A week later volunteers were called to Great Bend, Kansas to help in similar work.

In March 1952 a tornado swept through White County, Arkansas. The question arose, "What are we going to do about Arkansas?" Representatives of the Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) constituency churches within a 40 mile radius of Hesston met to discuss the disaster in Arkansas and whether it would not be well for them "to organize and get ready to step right into a disaster area and go to work as a unit, rather than go in as small groups, independent of each other, yet all under the name Mennonite." Minutes of that meeting record that it was the general feeling that Mennonites should unite under one organization so that they could work more effectively, devoting less time and money to administration and more to service. It was further pointed out that relief organizations and city officials preferred to work with one body, which represented all groups, rather than with a number of small organizations.

The new disaster committee consisted of men from each branch of the MCC constituent churches wanting to cooperate. They were instructed not to take the place of existing relief committees, brotherhoods, and service organizations, but to provide help to them as needed.

For the next several years the disaster committee mobilized at least once a year to help in major disasters in Kansas, Oklahoma, and Nebraska. The committee also tried to establish a contact person other than the pastor in each congregation. Whenever word came of a disaster every Mennonite church in the state was telephoned to gather volunteers.

From the early days of the movement, MDS workers ate with Red Cross volunteers and used Red Cross cots at night. By 1966 the Red Cross officials were looking for MDS when natural disasters occurred.

The definition of disaster was expanded to include the chronic as well as the acute crises, destruction caused not only by nature, but also by acts of man. MDS was the first disaster organization to send workers to repair houses in urban low income areas. Inner-city work, rehabilitating ghetto homes, continues to be an important aspect of MDS work.

The organization that began so small grew as its activities increased. A headquarters was established in Hesston. Training schools for field directors were begun in 1955. A mobile office was added in 1956. A film was produced in 1958. Rescue teams were trained and assembled in 1959. Radio equipment was added in 1960.

The program that had begun in Kansas didn't stay there, however. It was an idea whose time was come. Other states organized MDS units patterned after the Kansas model as the need arose, forming along geographic lines. In Canada the pattern of development was much the same. Disasters have generally been south of the border. Help has flowed again and again to United States communities. Only occasionally has reverse activity been experienced.

Mennonite Central Committee (MCC), the inter-Mennonite relief agency, called the first wide-scale meeting of interested persons in 1955 in Chicago. There the representatives of regional groups adopted the proposal that a national coordination committee be established composed of one representative from each of the constituent groups. In 1961 the national committee as executive coordinator hired a young attorney by the name of Wayne Clemens,, and by 1962 MDS had become a section of MCC.

MDS currently involves more than 3,000 Mennonite, Amish and Brethren in Christ churches and districts that are divided into 50 units, 15 representative areas, and 5 regions (4 in the US and 1 in Canada).

At the 25th anniversary observance of MDS at Hesston, Kansas, speaker Elmer Ediger said, "It has been as spontaneous a movement as we have had. It has shown that ordinary people, if they are dedicated and put in a place of need, can do great things."

MDS wants only to remain an organization of the people for the people –to the glory of God. "The volunteer should be given first place," says John Diller, as the one who has watched the little movement expand into the extensive service organization MDS is today. "All others only help to keep the road maintained so that the volunteer can get out to the person who needs his assistance." -Adapted from Day of Disaster, Katie Funk Wiebe

In 1993 MDS was incorporated as a 501-C-3 non-profit organization separate from the Mennonite Central Committee, but working closely and with the same spirit as MCC. This was a year that saw an extraordinary amount of disaster activity, as work continued with the devastation of Hurricane Andrew and the Midwest Floods. Through the assistance and perseverance of the MDS network, the organization continued to grow and increase its disaster response capabilities.

Source: Kentucky Amateur Radio Web Site – www.kyham.net