The Episcopal Diocese of Western North Carolina
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Severe Weather & Natural Disaster Readiness

Practical guidance for recognizing local hazards, making timely decisions, and using parish emergency procedures

CORE IDEA: Know the hazards most likely to affect your parish. Monitor reliable warnings. Decide early who can shelter, evacuate, delay, cancel, or close.

Know Your Local Risks

Every parish faces a different combination of hazards. Begin with the events most likely to affect your location and congregation.

- Severe thunderstorms, damaging winds, hail, and lightning.
- Tornadoes.
- Flooding and flash flooding.
- Winter weather and extreme cold.
- Extreme heat.
- Wildfire or smoke where applicable.
- Earthquake or other locally relevant hazards.
- Secondary effects such as blocked roads, power loss, water failure, or communications disruption.

Warnings and Alerts

Do not rely on a single warning source. Use more than one reliable method when practical.

- NOAA/National Weather Service information and alerts.
- Wireless Emergency Alerts and local emergency-management notifications.
- Weather radio, local broadcast information, or trusted weather applications.
- Direct information from law enforcement, fire, emergency management, or utility providers.

A watch generally means conditions are possible or favorable; a warning means the hazard is occurring, imminent, or detected and action may be required. Follow the specific instructions issued for the event.

Decide Who Has Authority

- Identify who may delay, cancel, relocate, or close a parish activity.
- Identify who may direct shelter or evacuation when conditions change quickly.
- Name alternates so the decision does not depend on one person being present.
- Make sure staff, ushers, ministry leaders, and key volunteers know who is making the decision.

Make the Decision Early

SHELTER	Use Shelter in Place when remaining inside provides better protection and a suitable location is available.
EVACUATE	Use Evacuation & Accountability when the building or immediate area is unsafe and a safer route and destination are available.

DELAY / CANCEL	Avoid bringing people onto the property when forecast conditions or travel hazards make attendance unsafe.
CLOSE	Close or suspend operations when the building, utilities, access routes, or surrounding conditions cannot support safe use.

Identify Safer Areas Before They Are Needed

- For severe weather, identify interior areas away from windows and large unsupported roof spans when practical.
- Know whether everyone can reach the selected area, including children and people with functional needs.
- Identify alternatives if the preferred area cannot safely hold everyone.
- Do not wait for a warning to decide where people should go.

Know Who Is in the Building

- Consider worship, offices, classrooms, nursery areas, kitchens, meetings, contractors, and outside groups.
- Children's programs and organized groups should maintain practical attendance/accountability information.
- During an emergency, tell responders about anyone believed to be missing and where they were last known to be.

Expect Utility and Communications Problems

- Weather events may interrupt electrical power, water, heat, air conditioning, internet, or cellular service.
- Keep flashlights and basic emergency supplies accessible.
- Know how critical building systems respond to power loss.
- Use Power Outage & Utility Failure when infrastructure problems become part of the incident.

After the Immediate Danger

- Do not assume the property is safe simply because the warning has ended.
- Check for structural damage, downed lines, flooding, broken glass, gas odors, water intrusion, and other hazards.
- Follow instructions from emergency officials and utilities.
- Document significant damage or incidents and communicate them through appropriate parish and diocesan channels.

The Parish as a Community Resource

After a disaster, a church may become a natural gathering place. Decide beforehand what the parish can realistically provide without creating additional risk.

- Do not promise shelter, feeding, charging, medical support, or other capabilities that the building and volunteers cannot sustain.
- Coordinate with diocesan and community disaster-response partners when broader support is needed.
- Protect parish staff and volunteers from becoming the only response system for a community emergency.

Five-Minute Parish Readiness Check

Parish leaders should be able to answer:

What natural hazards are most likely at our location?

How will we receive reliable warnings if one system fails?

Who can delay, cancel, shelter, evacuate, or close?

Where are our safest practical shelter locations?

Can children and vulnerable people reach them?

How will we know who is in the building?

What will we do if power or communications fail?

If these answers are unclear, they are useful priorities for the parish safety plan.

Related Parish Safety Resources

Use this guide with:

- Shelter in Place
- Evacuation & Accountability
- Power Outage & Utility Failure
- Getting Started: Parish Safety Plan

The Goal

The goal is to recognize hazards early, make decisions before conditions force them, and use the parish's existing shelter, evacuation, accountability, and communication procedures effectively.