



Jesus Hacked: Storytelling Faith

a weekly podcast from the Episcopal Diocese of Missouri
<https://www.diocesemo.org/podcast>

Episode 008: Before the disaster

Deacons Jerre Birdsong and Nancy Belcher talk about their role as “disaster deacons” and connecting the needs of the community to resources, disaster preparedness, the Episcopal Asset Map, and this ministry of standing with the vulnerable to which we are called. This episode’s host is Deacon Harry Leip.

Harry Leip: Welcome to JesusHacked, a weekly podcast about storytelling faith. I’m your host for today, Deacon Harry Leip, and I serve at Trinity Church in the central west end. As many of you may recall, in late 2015 in the St. Louis area, the Meramec River overflowed its banks in a historic flood. I don’t think anyone had seen anything quite like it before. And in the event people lost their homes and even interstates were closed for several days. In areas around the state and diocese, floods, tornadoes and other disasters have affected our communities and individual neighborhoods.

So, it was good news to me and certainly others, to hear that in the spring of 2016, almost about a year ago, our diocese began a new ministry of disaster preparedness with the hopes to be prepared for future disasters and other difficulties in the future. The topic of today’s episode is disasters, but more importantly, what you can do and what our communities can do about preparedness. For the conversation we’re joined by two of my diaconal colleagues, the Rev. Nancy Belcher, who is very busy serving at two communities, two churches, St. Alban’s in Fulton and St. Mark’s in Portland, and also by the Rev. Jerre Birdsong who serves at St. Mark’s in St. Louis Hills.

While officially known as the diocesan disaster coordinators, they're frequently known and referred to as our disaster deacons. Nancy and Jerre, welcome to the podcast.

Nancy : Thank you.

Jerre Birdsong: Thank you, Harry.

Harry Leip: So, I want to start because I am understanding that the disaster preparedness is under a banner of ERD. Jerry, can you tell us a little bit about what is ERD and what kind of disasters do they work with because I know some of our listeners may already be familiar with ERD, but not in the context of disaster preparedness.

Jerre Birdsong: Yes. Episcopal Relief and Development was founded in 1940 as the Presiding Bishop's Fund for World Relief. And they changed their name to Episcopal Relief and Development in 2000. They are the international relief and development agency of our national church, and as such they partner with the worldwide Anglican Communion, ecumenical agencies and local organizations all over the world to save lives and transform communities. Their primary programs are to alleviate hunger and improve food supply to create economic opportunities and strengthening communities, promoting health and fighting disease and by responding to disasters and rebuilding communities.

This has all been done on a global level, and they were not really involved in the Unites States until they expanded their disaster relief program to include a U.S. disaster program.

Harry Leip: And that's been fairly recently it sounds like?

Jerre Birdsong: It has been in the last two or three years that they've expanded to cover disasters in the Unites States.

Harry Leip: Okay.

Jerre Birdsong: So, what they are doing in that program are they say they inspire, connect and equip leaders of U.S. Dioceses in the Episcopal Church to prepare for hazards that might affect their communities, to mitigate the impact of disasters and to help vulnerable people to make a full and sustained recovery. They basically do that by doing three things in preparation of a disaster. They train leaders, such as Nancy and me, they provide just a wealth of resources on their website so that anyone can have access to these resources, not just Nancy and me, but everybody can access all the resources that they have. And then, in the case of a disaster, they will provide advice to us in real time during the disaster either by phone or through the social media.

They also have another program called Partners in Response where people can actually show up and help deal with the disaster. And finally, they have money that they can just make outright grants that we can apply for in the case of a disaster.

Harry Leip: Well, that sounds pretty comprehensive. I know when I looked at their site in preparation for this conversation, I saw one of their taglines which was, "Be not afraid," which I thought was a great, sort of, intro because again, I think when disasters hit us, many of us are unprepared for them, and we can be very frightened with that. But, it sounds like, Jerre, the ERD gives a really accessible framework to fit into that preparedness.

Jerre Birdsong: They do, and they are geared toward the disasters of floods, earthquake, tornadoes and ice and snow events, all of which we get in the Missouri area. We have many different types of disasters that we know it's not a matter of if we will have one of those disasters, but when we will have one of those disasters. Now, even though they are not intended to be used in the case of civil unrest or, we even have a nuclear plant in our diocese, if there was some type of even there, even though what we do is not geared towards those type of events, we could use the same principles to help out in that case, as well.

Harry Leip: So living in the Midwest gives us everything except for hurricanes, and every once in a while we get a brush of those too.

Jerre Birdsong: And the tsunami. I'm not afraid of the tsunami hitting us in Missouri.

Harry Leip: [laughs] Okay, well there you go. That's something to look forward to. Well, I know one of the tools, or as I understand it, one of the ways that communities can plug in, is the, what I've heard referred to, as the Episcopal Asset Map. And I know that there's been discussions in the last year or two about that in this diocese, and communities using it. Nancy, I know you've worked with people in it and certainly your own community also with that. Can you give us an idea of what that Asset Map is and why it's such a valuable tool for preparation.

Nancy Belcher: It is a wonderful tool, Harry, and it has many uses, not just the disaster piece. And I'll get to that too, but it is a way to look at your church, your congregation, to see who you are, what gifts you've been given, and what assets are gifts that can be used for God's mission. So this map to me helps everyone see their ministries that they're doing, which is very important to deacons, of course. It shows what's going well. It is also a tool that may say to you, we've been doing this for a while, now we need to change and do something else. We all know that all of our parishioners are endowed with gifts from God, and so this is a way to become more aware of what those gifts are, what our church's identity is and how we are engaging in God's mission.

All of our congregations are on the Asset Map for the Dioceses of Missouri, which is huge. All 99 dioceses in the Episcopal Church are on the map.

Harry Leip: Really?

Nancy Belcher: Yes.

Harry Leip: Okay. Great.

Nancy Belcher: That just happened, which is wonderful; however, that doesn't mean we're done because we're not. There are still ways that we need to ... Each

congregation in the Diocese of Missouri needs to go on the map and look at it and update it and spread the joy of what's going on in the congregations.

Harry Leip: And if I understand correctly, and please correct me if I'm wrong, I believe the Asset Map is pretty comprehensive because I think, as I helped Trinity look at it, it has everything from what ministries you're involved with to almost the practical, like, do you have showers on site? Do you have a commercial kitchen?

Nancy Belcher: Right.

Harry Leip: Do I remember that correctly?

Nancy Belcher: You do remember it exactly right. And that's where the disaster piece comes in. It's what physical assets would be useful in a disaster like a kitchen, meeting space where you could actually put up beds, or volunteers. Or, you could house supplies or whatever. That's one piece on the Asset Map. And again, there's so many ways to use it. But, what we did at St. Mark's in Portland and St. Alban's, we sat down together as a congregation and filled this map out. It helps to get the wisdom of all the people in your congregation together to actually fill it out and say, "Oh wow, we used to do this, and now we do it this way" or whatever. And so, it's a great discernment tool, as well as a great way to spread the joy of what you're doing in your congregation.

Harry Leip: And that's really interesting because it sounds like what you're sharing, Nancy, is that tool is not just for the priest-in-charge when they have five minutes over here just to do a couple check mark boxes. I like that you said it's a tool of discernment because the community can come together and sort of talk about the things that they do well, their physical assets like we were talking about kitchens and those things, but also, sort of, to see where they might want to intensify things in the year to come. I like the idea that it's also helping the community learn about the community.

Nancy Belcher: It is, it is. And one person doesn't need to do it all. That's why we are in community. The wisdom in that group will find things that maybe the priest has forgotten about or someone else has not thought of. Again, at St. Mark's, we didn't have wi-fi, and so we adjourned, took four or five, I think we had four laptops, went to the only business in town, which is a local bar and grill-

Harry Leip: [laughs]

Nancy Belcher: And sat around with the leadership of the church and talked about what we wanted the map to look like and what our assets were and what we needed people to know about us.

Harry Leip: And how was that? I just, I find that interesting that you all were there with the laptops up, sort of the community gathered to talk about the community. How did that go over?

Nancy Belcher: Oh, it was wonderful. It was. I mean, it was the leadership of the congregation. Now, granted, it's a smaller congregation, and you have that luxury of being able to do that, but it was a way to have fellowship and fun and also doing something

to spread the word about what's going on in that small congregation. Episcopal Relief encourages vestries or leadership to do this, to actually update the map twice a year, rather than having it a static tool, you do once, put it on the shelf and it's gone. I think that's the key is it is something that is, as you've used that word Harry, organic, that needs to change and grow. Once you have actually put in your ministries and the things you do, it's a great tool to find out who else is doing things and what they're doing and to learn from them.

If you're doing ... like at St. Mark's, we do elder ministry. We can look at the Asset Map and see who else does elder ministry, not only in the diocese, but in the whole Episcopal Church, and find out what they're doing, contact them, if we so desire, and change and grow.

Harry Leip: Great. And then, like you were saying earlier, I'm assuming then if there's a, heaven forbid, but a disaster in this part of the diocese, then we can sort of have an idea of what parishes are surrounding that could have kitchen facilities or overnight facilities to sort of help in the overall recovery and assistance with that community.

Nancy Belcher: Yes, absolutely. All that is available to be marked on the map. Any kind of physical asset, as well as the assets of the people.

Harry Leip: Wonderful.

Nancy Belcher: Yep. It's a fun tool. [laughs]

Harry Leip: It sounds like it, sounds like it. Jerre, I want to spin this back to you, so hearing about preparedness and the Asset Map, why is that so useful for the diocese? Obviously, Nancy gave us a lot of ideas about the sermon and about community, but a lot of times when we have a disaster, it is all hands on deck and a lot of times a lot of people want to help, but perhaps they don't know exactly how to do that. So, how is this useful for the diocese, this planning that you and Nancy are spearheading?

Jerre Birdsong: That's exactly right. People do want to help their neighbors, all their neighbors in the case of a disaster, but people don't know what to do. What Nancy and I are doing, we are involved with the disaster community in the state so that we have the connections already with all the folks that will be on the ground in the case of a disaster. When the word goes out with what the needs are for that disaster, we will get that information. Then it's very helpful for us to have the Asset Map so we'll know what resources that we have available so we can match up the needs to the resources. Something as simple as, "I want to send money, but I don't know where to send money to." Of course, people come out of the woodwork asking for money. In a disaster, you don't know whether they're legit or not. Well, we'll have the contacts that we can tell you exactly where the money should be sent to make sure that it is used the way that you want it to be used.

There are certain items that are needed in a disaster. For example, in that flood in Eureka, our friends, the Methodists, sent out the word to all of their parishioners to make up flood kits consisting of a bucket and all sorts of items

specifically, exactly what they needed to go into that bucket, and then they were able to distribute those where were needed. Otherwise, people feel like they want to help, but they don't know really what the needs are, then they send some things that are not helpful. I've even heard of the situation where there was a disaster and so many people sent so many stuffed animals [laughing in background] that they had to use some of their resources that should be working on the disaster, "Well, okay, what do we do with all of these stuffed animals?" So we are there to make sure that the needs and the resources do fit up with what's really needed

And then, there's also the physical presence. Some people may want to help on sight, and so we will have the contact so that we can tell people what they can do when they are on sight in case of a disaster.

Harry Leip: So I'm hearing that there's a, call it a word, a bit of coordination that you all, and people who are working with you all, sort of bring to the table this idea of a coordinated response when it's needed, when it's called for.

Jerre Birdsong: Yes, that's exactly the purpose of these organizations, to make sure that we are working all together to achieve the same things, and that we are not duplicating efforts as a part of that. That we mostly each have our specialty and that would, in our case, hinge on the resources that we have available.

Harry Leip: Wonderful. Nancy, I'm curious. I know that Jerre stepped into this role initially, and then you, within a couple months, you joined him in this wonderful opportunity, can you share a word or two? What drew you to this possibility, this ministry of preparedness?

Nancy Belcher: I think, again, as a deacon we look for the vulnerable in a situation, and how will that group be helped, especially in a disaster, but in any situation. In Calloway County, I'm in the county with the power plant, so-

Harry Leip: That would be the nuclear power plant.

Nancy Belcher: [laughs] Yes, I had attended, yes, nuclear power plant, and actually Calloway County kind of got me started even before Jerre asked me to be part of this. Calloway County is very active, as you can imagine, in disaster preparedness, working with the local agencies, like the Red Cross Emergency Management, SEMA, the State Emergency Management Association. All of those groups are interested in helping, not just the vulnerable, but anyone who's involved in a disaster, and I think that's where deacons come in. It's like, we want to be sure that there's a segment of the population that does not get overlooked. Being involved in some of these not-for-profit organizations, I'm involved in at least two of them, that they deal with the unmet needs of the vulnerable.

That's more contacts, more networking that just keeps kind of mushrooming out and making contacts and going forward, helping those that are going to be affected the most severely by a disaster.

Harry Leip: I like that one two punch, that idea of networking in community, sort of in the mix.

Nancy Belcher : Yes.

Harry Leip: All right. Thank you for that. Jerre, would you like to add anything to that because I know in certain way, it does seem like a diaconal role, the possibility of this.

Jerre Birdsong: It really is because people are vulnerable. Jesus is there with the vulnerable people. We're to be there all together with them. What happens in a disaster is that the people that are already vulnerable become even more vulnerable, even to the point of being in a life threatening situation, and then other people that don't think of themselves of being vulnerable at all, they think of themselves as the helpers in situations like this, and then they become the vulnerable, as well. So, it really is that the need for presence of the church increases in the case of a disaster. We are there to provide that presence.

Harry Leip: Absolutely. I love that idea of the needs of the world coming and intersecting with the church because, of course, that is very much one of the ways that the diaconate, one of those gifts that the diaconate brings to the church.

Jerre Birdsong: Yes, I think that's exactly why the leadership of the diocese looked to the deacons to perform this work. Because not everybody doing this across the country are deacons, but they made that decision here, and I think it was the right decision.

Harry Leip: Mmm-hmm [agreed] Great. Thank you both for that. Let me ask one, sort of last question, which may be sort of a wrap up for us, is how can people get more involved, both individuals and communities, get involved in this good work. I know as part of the podcast, we will have additional information available for people to look on the web, but on an individual level and a community level, how can people get involved in this effort?

Jerre Birdsong: Yes, there are big things that individual congregants and congregations can do. The first is to do disaster planning as a congregation. I mean, if a disaster hits, and it happens to hit your congregation, you will have to do planning for that disaster but that would go a whole lot better if you are able to do that planning ahead of time where you don't have the time constraint, where you aren't doing it in the middle of the disaster. The ERD has resources available at three different levels for congregations to go in and do disaster planning. There's one level that you can just do by getting together in a couple of hours, and then it takes it all the way to a level where you can meet over several weeks and come up with a very detailed disaster plan. The resources are there on the website, so I think that a congregation could do that by themselves; however, if you would like to have Nancy or me to help you with that, we would be glad to do that.

Another thing that there are resources available on the ERD website to conduct training on individual disaster plans for individual residences. So again, just a wealth of resources and someone can go in and get those resources off the website, and then offer disaster planning so that individuals could do this in their own homes. The other way that people can get involved is to work with Nancy and me at the diocesan level. There is plenty of work to go around in the

case of a disaster. [Laughing in background] We would love to hear from people that would be willing to work with us at these times, as well.

Harry Leip: Great. So it sounds like both modes of education. There are resources that people could look at, plus, again, Jerre, with you in St. Louis and Nancy with you in Mid-Missouri, it sounds like you're very happy to travel to communities, do a noon forum, adult education, and work with communities to get this rolling.

Jerre Birdsong: Yes, that's some way that we can actually make ourselves available to do that. I have to admit the resources that are available from Episcopal Relief and Development are so good that you might not need us, but we'll be glad to help out if you do.

Harry Leip: Wonderful.

Nancy Belcher: But if you have food, we will travel.

Harry Leip: There we go.

Nancy Belcher: [Laughs] And wi-fi.

Harry Leip: Have food and wi-fi, we will travel.

Nancy Belcher: That's right. That always helps.

Harry Leip: Well, thank you. Thank you both, Nancy and Jerre, our wonderful disaster deacons for being with us.

Nancy Belcher: Thank you.

Harry Leip: And we very much appreciate your conversation.

Nancy Belcher: Our pleasure.

Jerre Birdsong: Yes, thank you, Harry. [Recording ended]