

Lesson 2: The Value, Landscape, and Language of Religious and Cultural Communities in Disasters

Lesson Overview

This lesson provides an overview of literacy and competency in relation to religion and culture. This includes a discussion on the role religion plays throughout the United States, as well as the key partners that may be engaged during a disaster operation. Additionally, we will look at the language used in these communities.

Upon completion of this lesson, you should be able to:

- Differentiate between literacy and competency.
- Recognize the diversity of the U.S. religious and cultural landscape.
- Describe the key partners that may be engaged during disaster operations.
- Successfully engage religious and cultural communities by using appropriate vocabulary.

Literacy and Competency

In the previous lesson, we discussed in general why it's so important for emergency management professionals to develop religious and cultural literacy and competency. But what exactly do we mean when we use the terms "literacy" and "competency?"

Religious Literacy is a basic understanding of the history, sacred texts, beliefs, rituals, and current manifestations of multiple faith traditions. Here, literacy refers to the ability to understand the intersection of religious people and the social, political, and cultural life of the larger communities they inhabit.

Religious Competency is the ability to navigate and engage each faith community as a trusted, knowledgeable, and effective partner in a disaster setting.

In short, to possess religious competency, you need to possess a level of religious literacy. A basic understanding of the different religions and cultures will enable you to effectively engage with these groups.

Religious literacy is:

- Knowing and understanding the community where you work
- Understanding the needs, concerns and missions of your partners both locally and nationally

Religious literacy is NOT:

- Becoming a scholar in the field
- Serving only your own religious community

Religious competency is:

- Providing culturally and religiously appropriate disaster services to the whole community
- Relationship-building that is trustworthy and sustainable
- Being more effective in the field

Religious competency is NOT:

- Checking the box
- Being politically correct
- Meeting so-called “inappropriate” needs

By obtaining religious competency, you are not simply meeting “special” or “inappropriate” needs. These are core needs that will enable you to effective work in the field.

One analogy is that of a job interview. You would not go to a job interview knowing nothing about the company you are interviewing with. Instead, you would prepare by conducting the appropriate level of research so that you are well-informed for the interview.

Before we move on to the next subject, it should be noted that religious competency isn’t simply a static skill – you can’t learn it all and be done. This is because expression of culture and religion are always changing and often differ among communities.

Because of this, you will need to keep learning about different religions and cultures throughout your career. You’ll need to challenge yourself to build upon the skills and knowledge you already possess in order to improve upon what you and your colleagues are doing in the field.

Role of Religion

So far in this lesson, we’ve looked at literacy and competency, the difference between the two, and why competency is important. But why focus on religion?

Religion plays a central role in the lives of most Americans.

- 77% of Americans are affiliated with a religious tradition (Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life U.S. Religious Landscape Survey (2014), <http://religions.pewforum.org/reports>).
- 38% of Americans would expect to rely on the faith-based community for assistance in the first 72 hours after a disaster (“[Preparedness in America](#),” FEMA, August 2014).

In terms of numbers, there are approximately 345,000 congregations in the U.S., compared to 105,000 schools/universities. In fact, congregations are second only to retail stores and shops in the United States.

Religious Diversity in the US

While 71% of Americans identify as Christian, there are nearly 200 denominations and religious traditions in the US with representation from almost every major world religion. This brings social, cultural, ethnic, and linguistic diversity to both urban and rural settings.

For example, consider Arizona. The second largest religion practiced in Arizona is actually Hinduism. Another example is Mississippi, which has Islam as its second largest religion.

The list below presents the second largest religion in each state.

State	Second Largest Religion
Alabama	Islam
Alaska	Buddhism
Arizona	Hinduism
Arkansas	Islam
California	Buddhism
Colorado	Buddhism
Connecticut	Judaism
Delaware	Hinduism
District of Columbia	Judaism
Florida	Islam
Georgia	Islam
Hawaii	Buddhism
Idaho	Buddhism
Illinois	Islam
Indiana	Islam
Iowa	Islam
Kansas	Buddhism
Kentucky	Islam
Louisiana	Islam
Maine	Judaism
Maryland	Judaism
Massachusetts	Judaism
Michigan	Islam
Minnesota	Judaism
Mississippi	Islam
Missouri	Judaism
Montana	Buddhism
Nebraska	Islam
Nevada	Buddhism
New Hampshire	Judaism
New Jersey	Judaism
New Mexico	Buddhism
New York	Judaism
North Carolina	Islam
North Dakota	Islam
Ohio	Judaism
Oklahoma	Buddhism
Oregon	Buddhism
Pennsylvania	Judaism
Rhode Island	Judaism
South Carolina	Baha'i
South Dakota	Islam
Tennessee	Judaism
Texas	Islam

State	Second Largest Religion
Utah	Buddhism
Vermont	Judaism
Virginia	Islam
Washington	Buddhism
West Virginia	Islam
Wisconsin	Islam
Wyoming	Islam

Similarly, individual counties within the states will differ in terms of their populations. While Christianity is the largest religious group in all counties, the second largest tradition changes depending on where you are.

One example is Erie County in New York, where Buffalo is located. Here, the second largest tradition is Islam.

Another example is Shelby County in Tennessee, where Memphis is located. In this county, Judaism is the largest non-Christian tradition.

These examples illustrate the level of diversity that exists throughout the United States. This diversity often brings with it complex perspectives on government as well as disaster response and preparedness.

Faith Communities

When considering the vast number of congregations and the role they play in American society, it should come as no surprise that faith transcends worship areas. People of faith may live, work, and worship in three different geographic areas. However, it's important to understand that faith communities are more than just congregations.

Congregations

Congregations are what you would think of when you think of churches, mosques, and synagogues. However, congregations refer to the people, and not the buildings.

Denominations and Judicatories

Denominations and judicatories are groups within a religion. For example, Eastern Orthodox is a denomination of Christianity.

Federations, Networks, Conferences, and Associations

Federations, networks, conferences, and associations are groups that include members of different religions working toward a common goal.

Schools, Colleges, and Theological Institutions

Schools, colleges, and theological institutions are secondary or post-secondary educational facilities that enable students to develop and explore their religious beliefs.

Social Service Organizations

Social service organizations offer benefits and facilities such as education, food subsidies, health care, job training, and subsidized housing.

Hospitals and Clinics

Several hospitals and clinics offer health care services that may have a basis in religious ideology.

Burial Societies and Cemeteries

Burial societies and cemeteries are organizations of people who join together for a common financial or social purpose, often based upon a shared religion.

Disaster Human Services Organizations

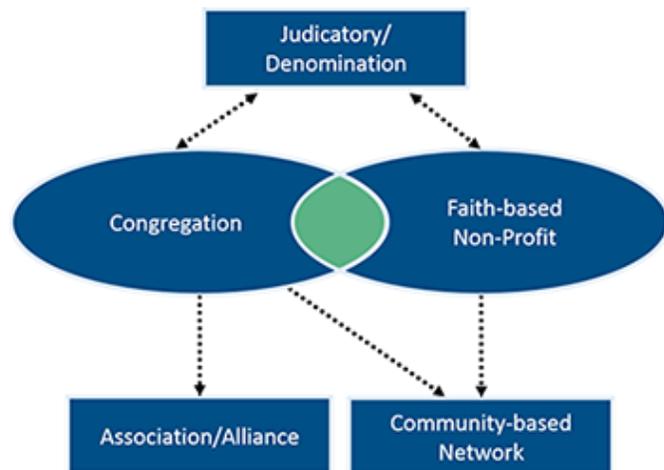
Disaster human services organizations help ensure continued service delivery when emergency events disrupt services and address unmet human services needs created or exacerbated by the disaster. Many of these organizations operate under religious mission to serve. One example is the United Methodist Committee on Relief (UMCOR).

Clubs and Youth Groups

Clubs and youth groups are organizations of people, usually under the sponsorship of a church, who will work for the common good of the community.

Interrelationships

The interrelationship among denominations, congregations, and other organizations is shown here. It should be noted that congregations have affiliations with national faith-based organizations, but these links are not always strong.



Oftentimes, when a disaster occurs, a local organization known as a Long Term Recovery Organization (LTRO) will form. An LTRO is typically made up of faith communities, including congregations. It is important to include diverse groups in the LTRO role who are not NVOADS. By including these diverse groups, it increases the level of outreach to the community.

Key Partners in Emergency Management

National Voluntary Organizations Active in Disaster (NVOAD) is a nonprofit, nonpartisan, membership-based organization that builds resiliency in communities nationwide. It serves as the forum where organizations share knowledge and resources throughout the disaster to help disaster survivors and their communities.

A majority of the national members of NVOAD have a religious affiliation (approximately 36 of 57 as of October 2015). Furthermore, local congregations are among the most visible and likely sources of aid and trusted information post-disaster. As a result, many disaster lifecycle operations are led, funded, and staffed by those who are active in the faith communities, including NVOAD members.

In the immediate aftermath of hurricanes Katrina, Rita, and Wilma, it was clear that the emergency management community needed to engage Houses of Worship and Emerging Cultural Communities in all stages of the disaster sequence. Houses of Worship and Emerging Cultural Communities are those organizations where groups of people come together to perform acts of devotion veneration, or religious or cultural study.

In 2006, the **DHS Center for Faith-based & Neighborhood Partnerships (DHS Center)** was created by executive order to help emergency managers effectively engage with these groups. The DHS Center delivers training and technical assistance to faith and community-based organizations, providing subject-matter expertise to help communities successfully partner with other emergency management components.

Careful! Terminology Can Be Confusing

In this lesson, we've discussed what religious and cultural competency means and why it's so important. So how do we actually improve our religious and cultural competency? The first step is to start speaking the same language as those you are trying to help. By using the same words and the same terms that the affected individuals use, you will be better able to communicate and make a difference.

Inclusive Terms

When considering the terminology that should be used, it is important to use the terms that are inclusive and resonate with all your stakeholders. Let's take a look at terms that can be used to ensure your messages are as inclusive as possible.

Clergy vs. Religious Leaders

Clergy refers only to ordained, often Christian leaders. However, not all religions have clergy. Examples of religions that do not have clergy are Islam and Sikh. On the other hand, all religious traditions have *Religious Leaders*, whether they are ordained or not.

Church vs. House of Worship

A *Church* is the building where most Christian denominations worship. On the other hand, a *House of Worship* is the building where adherents of a given religion worship. Houses of worship include not only churches, but also gurdwaras, mosques, synagogues, temples, and so on.

House of Worship vs. Congregation

A *House of Worship* refers to the building, while a *Congregation* refers to the people.

Faith Community vs. Faith Communities

A *Faith Community* (or Religious Sector) is an amalgamation of many groups with varying beliefs. It is best to avoid this term. However, the term *Faith Communities* acknowledges the existence of many groups with varying beliefs.

Additional Terms

In addition to ensuring that the terms you are using are inclusive, it is also important to use terms that ensure a shared understanding.

FBO, NGO, and CBO

Terms like FBO (Faith-based Organization), NGO (Non-government Organization), and CBO (Community-based Organization) are rarely used by faith communities when referring to themselves. It is best to avoid these terms.

Faith-based Social Services

Faith-based Social Services is a term that includes programs run by faith-based organizations, such as soup kitchens, shelters, and job programs.

Ecumenical

Ecumenical refers to multiple Christian organizations, and does not include non-Christian faiths.

Inter-religious

Inter-religious describes multiple faith communities meeting or gathering together, but not combining religious doctrine, liturgy, or beliefs.

Interfaith

Interfaith describes multiple faith communities doing something religious together, such as prayer or a worship service.

Multi-faith

Multi-faith refers to groups doing something together within their own belief system.

Use of Acronyms

The language used by FEMA and other Emergency Management organizations may be significantly different than the language used in the affected faith communities. The FEMA Acronyms, Abbreviations, and Terms (FAAT) list has 6200 acronyms and is 70 pages long. Using these acronyms when engaging faith communities will likely create a barrier to understanding and hamper engagement efforts.

For example, the FEMA term for a congregation is an FBO (Faith-based Organization). However, those in the congregation do not talk about themselves being part of an FBO. They talk about themselves being a congregation. As a result, any flyers used for outreach that contain the acronym FBO will likely be ignored.

In many cases, there are acronyms that are used by the government that may mean something entirely different when used in religious communities. Below are a few examples where the use of the acronym alone may lead to confusion.

Acronym	Religious Community	FAAT
CWS	Church World Service	Compressed Work Schedule
PDA	Presbyterian Disaster Assistance	Preliminary Damage Assessment
TSA	The Salvation Army	Transportation Security Administration

Lesson Summary

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