

Relief groups mobilize to aid Japan

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As the extent of the death and destruction from the massive disaster in Japan came into focus, religious relief organizations were sending and supporting teams to assess the damage.

Groups such as World

Vision and Baptist World Aid had teams on the ground determining what kinds of experts and supplies will be needed in the recovery from the earthquake and tsunami that struck March 11.

Rachel Wolff, a

spokeswoman for World Vision, said a relief manager who had worked at the scenes of earthquakes in Haiti and Pakistan was stunned by the extent of the destruction. "He told me that this was unlike anything he's seen anywhere around the world," she said.

A team of Baptist

World Aid workers from the U.S., Singapore and Hungary has arrived in Japan and others are on standby, said Eron Henry, a spokesman for the relief organization of the Baptist World Alliance. By March 14, team members had sent photos of scenes from the tsunami's aftermath, with people housed in shelters and cars covered in water and debris. Henry said the aid organization expects to cooperate with other Baptist organizations in its response.

"We have learned the importance of coordinating a response so that there's no duplication, so there's no overlap and no confusion," he said.

The United Methodist Committee

on Relief is taking the same approach, said Melissa Hinnen, an UMCOR spokeswoman. But she added that it has been difficult to reach partners many time zones away who already have their hands full. "We're just

waiting to see what they tell us their needs are," she said.

"The damage and loss of life is almost impossible to comprehend," said Michael Kinnamon, general secretary of the National Council of Churches.

"Spiritual support and healing ministry will be required long after the initial impact of the disaster," said Kinnamon, referring to the NCC's relief partner Church World Service and other organizations. "We pray for the faith and patience to remain committed for as long as it takes," he said.

The Church of the Brethren's Mission and Ministry Board was meeting in Elgin, Illinois, when news of the quake and tsunami came. Brethren disaster ministries made plans to support CWS and its partner in relief efforts. Likewise, United Church of Christ and Christian Church (Disciples) relief officials sought to coordinate their plans.

Meanwhile, many U.S. congregations—Christian and Buddhist—had started planning their responses to the crisis.

An aide to Bishop Koshin Ogui of the predominantly Japanese-heritage Buddhist Churches of America on March 14 drafted a letter to national leaders about donating to a relief fund for victims of the quake and tsunami.

"There is great empathy for the people of Japan and wanting to do something to help ease the difficulty," said Gerald Sakamoto, minister of the San Jose (California) Buddhist Church. —RNS, other sources