

Churchgoers rush relief funds via Internet: Efficient emergency giving

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Although tsunami recovery supplies destined for nations bordering the Indian Ocean were slowed at first by transportation bottlenecks and chaotic conditions, churchgoers were able to speed generous donations via computer to relief agencies responding to the widespread tragedy.

The death toll—heaviest in Indonesia, Sri Lanka, Thailand and India—was estimated at more than 150,000 people.

Facing an overwhelming need to feed and shelter millions of survivors of the earthquake-generated waves that struck islands and shorelines on December 26, religious and secular relief organizations made it relatively easy for donors to contribute.

Within days after the tsunami, it was apparent to Kristen Sachen, head of disaster response for the United Methodist Committee on Relief, that a Web site, [MethodistRelief.org](#), was a popular way of giving. By December 31 online donations had reached \$445,000, said the United Methodist News Service.

“Fortunately, we were online quickly and were able to offer people an efficient, functioning site within a few hours of the first news reports,” Sachen said. “This is an amazing response.” The relief office’s phone lines would probably have been tied up for lengthy periods if the online option to put donations on credit cards did not exist, she said. Nor did the agency have to wait until Sunday, January 2, for the first surge of donated cash and checks to replace UMCOR’s initial \$100,000 in relief issued from funds on hand.

In a similar use of a Web site focused on tsunami relief, Church World Service, the ecumenical relief agency supported in part by the 36 members of the National Council of Churches, pointed potential donors to [FaithfulAmerica.org](#), the NCC-sponsored Web site.

The initial 9.0 magnitude earthquake struck 100 miles off the northwestern coast of Indonesia's island of Sumatra. "We have a long-established presence in Indonesia with more than 100 staff persons," said Rick Augsburger, director of CWS's Emergency Response Programs. On December 28, plans were laid to deploy an emergency assistance team to hard-hit Banda Aceh, Indonesia, with 5,000 blankets and 35,000 health kits, a shipment valued at close to \$500,000.

In addition to sending first shipments of supplies to Sri Lanka, the NCC sent Shanta Premawardhana, its interfaith relations director, to his native Sri Lanka, then on to Indonesia. The NCC dispatched \$1 million in emergency relief and set a fund-raising goal of \$5 million.

Former Presidents George H. W. Bush and Bill Clinton were appointed by President George W. Bush to lead a national fund campaign to channel donations from individuals and groups through established relief agencies such as CWS, World Vision, the Red Cross and numerous others.

That was not expected to dampen giving for immediate needs and larger recovery efforts by church members through their denominations, judging from early responses by Protestant congregations and agencies.

- Three top officials of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) on January 3 wrote to its 2.5 million members a letter saying they were "moved and encouraged" by the outpouring of prayer and material support. At that point, more than \$300,000 had been contributed to Presbyterian Disaster Assistance. The church executives asked members to consider contributing further to a broader \$2.5 million appeal for tsunami relief.
- Besides \$93,000 in assistance it provided shortly after tragedy struck, the United Church of Christ has pledged to raise an added \$207,000 to assist victims. Its initial online appeal yielded \$70,000 from nearly 600 UCC members and friends, a spokesperson said. Besides working with Church World Service, the UCC is aiding partner churches in India and Sri Lanka. The UCC also cooperates with the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in support of two missionaries in affected areas of Sri Lanka. The Disciples leadership has pledged to raise \$250,000.
- Boosted by an initial gift of \$146,000 from the large All Saints Church in Pasadena, California, Episcopal Relief & Development sent some \$250,000 in emergency funds to affected areas. The agency purchased 1,000 temporary shelters to be used by the

Diocese of Colombo in the (Anglican) Church of Ceylon (the former name of Sri Lanka). The shelters, approved by the World Health Organization, are not only water-resistant but also use a material containing an insecticide that combats malaria and houseflies.

- The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America released \$150,000 in immediate funds, one-third of that amount to be directed through Action by Churches Together (ACT), an umbrella relief body related to the World Council of Churches and the Lutheran World Federation. The ELCA sent \$30,000 to support efforts by the United Evangelical Lutheran Church in India and \$20,000 for work in Indonesia.

Among other denominations, American Baptist Churches in the U.S.A. also worked through partners who in turn purchased medicines, cooking utensils, shelters and health kits. By January 5 the American Baptists had designated \$45,000 in existing funds, \$30,000 of that sent through Church World Service. CWS was also aided by the Reformed Church in America with a \$50,000 donation that covers the shipping cost of one emergency airlift of supplies. The Christian Reformed Church in North America, receiving most donations at first by Internet and phone, had sent \$30,000 by January 4 and was committed to raising \$2 million in long-term care.