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Getting to know me, you've probably realized that I love a good gathering. Bring the people, set out the food, toss in some good conversation topics, and I'm there. (Bonus if there's water nearby!) This past fall, at our annual synodical disaster response conference, I was invited to come east to experience the regional gathering of the Southeastern District of the LCMS. And really—who could resist a trip to Myrtle Beach, South Carolina, in February?

(For the record, this year brought unseasonably cold temps—LOL.)

It was a truly uplifting event, with encouraging words from District President Rev. Bill Harmon, updates and impact stories from communities devastated by Hurricane Helene, and reports on how LCMS Early Response Teams (LERT) have stepped up to meet ongoing needs. If anyone is interested, there is still a lot of work to be done, and deployments to North Carolina are still happening—even 17 months later.

In my opinion, a good conference offers multiple ways to learn, and this one delivered. I appreciated the traditional lecture-style sessions, hands-on learning opportunities—hanging drywall and mudding were the ones I chose—and round-table discussions with scenarios and reflection. The rooms were filled with a wide range of experience, from seasoned volunteers to complete newbies.

LERT isn't just about cutting trees, although some teams certainly specialize in that. Does your congregation want to host Basic Training to learn why the LCMS is involved in disaster response in the first place? And from there, talk about the gifts and talents in your congregation that can be used—both in your own community and in responding to natural or man-made disasters? Did you know you can volunteer for just one day or as long as you wish during a deployment? Do you have congregation members who could use hands-on help? Are you interested in engaging volunteers of many ages? (LERT starts at age 14.)

We also heard from several RSOs (Recognized Service Organizations) within the LCMS. These groups have clarified their missions, and some have intentionally built disaster response branches. Here in IDW, we have RSOs doing wonderful work—with different focus areas, but all serving faithfully.

Is every congregation in our district a full-blown LERT outlet? No. Can you gather with others in your circuit to form a team and help with needs in your area? Absolutely. Does this require someone other than your pastor to lead it? Yes.

Pastor Paul Ernewein, who leads the RSO Forged by Fire, says it best: "Just feed people." He means feeding them with actual, good, freshly prepared food—but also feeding them with the Word and love of Christ.

In the LCMS, we have so many ways to reach out and serve others in gratitude for the greatest gift God has given us: salvation through Jesus Christ. If you're already plugged in—thank you! If you're searching for a place to get involved, talk to your pastor or other group leaders, or reach out to me.

As I said at the start, I'm always up for a good chat... and if we can do it over food, even better.

