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Looking anew at sanctuaries from harm

Centuries ago houses of worship served their communities as islands of safety and shelters from terror and natural disaster. That purpose has faded over modern times, but recent hurricanes should prompt a back-to-the-future re-examination of the role of these institutions in formal emergency planning.

Houses of worship and their affiliated buildings of all faiths are under-served markets for energy efficiency and renewable energy upgrades. They have not been actively courted by developers for a variety of reasons.

Houses of worship can be difficult to do business with. In contrast to corporations or governmental entities, houses of worship are small in size but big in need; have complicated decision-making processes; operate within tight budget constraints; are tax exempt; and by their very nature are usually one-off customized projects. Financial institutions are wary about using houses of worship as collateral for loans. Nevertheless, there are many of them nationwide, with big opportunities for cutting their gas, electric and water utility bills, so both the budget savings for them as well overall environmental impact could be large.

Over time we began to realize too the incredible untapped potential for them to serve as key nodes in community disaster planning. Given their relatively

large physical presence with spare space indoors and out-door parking, houses of worship could serve as key convergent points for first- responders and havens for their neighbors in time of trouble, if they are properly prepared beforehand.

Houses of worship are embedded in every community and could provide a more realistic haven than having the dispossessed flock in massive central facilities. For example, during Hurricane Katrina 16,000 people crowded into the New Orleans Superdome, where they had to be protected by National Guard troops armed with machine guns.

These institutions would need to be “hardened” in the lingo of security planners to be able to go off-grid, if necessary, or to draw only minimally on those resources in support of suddenly increased usage. Many, if not most, would need:

- Full energy and water efficiency upgrades, including solar water heating;
- Back-up, reliable power capabilities, with no supply chain, using on-site renewable energy generation tied to battery storage;
- Modernized kitchens for storing critical medicines and food tied to battery banks for refrigeration and propane backup for stoves;
- Fully integrated web communications;
- Area self-powered lighting.

These rejuvenated houses of worship would also necessarily need to be included in planning and preparedness exercises. First-responders would need to be closely acquainted with their facilities and staff -- and vice versa. Some stocking of supplies might be required.

This effort frankly needs to be kick-started by the federal government, because houses of worship won't--and in many cases, can't--spend the money for this level of upgrade. Since these would have national benefits, Congress should consider including in any infrastructure bill seed funding to state governments for pilot projects to test in key locales this concept of refuge centers or convergence points for police, firefighters and other emergency personnel. Houses of worship from any faith should be eligible to qualify. That decentralized approach would also help create new jobs, develop clean technologies markets with a resultant reduction in regulated emissions (particulates, mercury, sulfur and NOx) as well as carbon, and create resilient islands within diverse communities.

Former solar industry association executive director Scott Sklar and former senior George W. Bush administration official Doug Faulkner co-founded Jacob's Ladder Energy Group, a joint venture aimed at helping houses of worship and affiliated buildings cut energy and water bills