



AACS Applauds New FEMA Policy Codified into Law: Churches May Now Receive Disaster Aid

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Washington, D.C.—On February 9, 2018, as part of the Bipartisan Budget Act, a recent change in FEMA policy, which allows houses of worship to receive disaster aid, was officially codified into law.

The change in policy came after two Florida synagogues and three Texas churches sued FEMA for access to disaster aid following the devastation of Hurricanes Irma and Harvey. When the Supreme Court demanded FEMA give an answer for its exclusionist policy, and in light of the *Trinity Lutheran* case last year, FEMA declared a new interpretation of policy allowing churches to receive disaster aid.

While FEMA’s policy was a huge step in the right direction, it still needed to be codified into law. In initial versions of the bill, Congress walked back on the broad interpretation FEMA just adopted, which would have made it difficult for some houses of worship to qualify for disaster aid. However, the law that passed February 9 included FEMA’s broad interpretation, allowing houses of worship and religious schools access to the same disaster aid offered to community centers, libraries, zoos, and other secular nonprofits.

In addition, the policy affirms the role churches play in providing care and support for communities in need. Many churches offer food, shelter, and encouragement to those suffering from devastating storms. By helping storm-damaged churches, FEMA recognizes the importance of religious institutions as a core part of the community, one that deserves equal protection under the law.

AACS Legislative Director Jamison Coppola praised the inclusion of the policy in the Bipartisan Budget Act, stating, “The change in FEMA policy removes some of the barriers government has erected to keep religion out of public life. Churches and religious organizations, like our Christian schools, now have the same standing in FEMA’s eyes as any other nonprofit, signaling a victory for Christians across the country.”

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