

Lutheran Disaster Response Task Force

Ways to Address Spiritual Needs

For

Victims of disasters and emergency responders

A disaster can change lives within seconds, usually without any warning. The suddenness of the event often leaves the victim(s) temporarily numb as the extent of the disaster often is beyond their initial comprehension. Of course, the immediate physical and medical needs of survivors must be addressed by the first wave of emergency responders. The safety and initial physical and medical needs are to be given the highest priority.

In the midst of the trauma that accompanies a disaster of any size, it is easy to overlook the spiritual needs of those who have experienced the event. But, in recognition that recovery from a disaster requires far more time, energy and financial aid than most people realize, it is wise to remember that shortly after the event, people begin to reflect on the traumatic experience and how it has affected them personally. Eventually the individual(s) begins to recognize and acknowledge the reality that their world has been altered dramatically and perhaps, permanently. The magnitude of the event is usually too much to absorb at one time, especially at the outset. The time between the crisis event and this growing understand occurs at both a different time and in a different way with each of the individuals affected by the disaster. It is important for those who are the immediate responders to those affected by the disaster to be aware of this emotional and spiritual reaction of those they have some to help and be able to provide for these needs as well. These needs frequently require the on-site presence of individuals who have been specially trained for such catastrophic events. This reality must be part of any plan to assist the victims of any disaster.

Most of the survivors have experienced a loss of some magnitude. In addition to the death of family members and friends, many experience the loss of their health, home, personal property, treasured family mementos, pets, livelihood, and community. There is usually a disruption in a person's sense of peace and security plus the feeling of loss of control over their lives. Frequently an individual is confronted by the shattering of one's world-view and faith. Beliefs that were once firmly held are now open to questioning and doubt. Most need time and assistance to adjust to the inevitable changes in their lives. Core values and beliefs need to be patched together. Such tasks can be daunting for those whose lives have been altered so profoundly. The presence of spiritually trained individuals at this time can be invaluable.

Many people turn to their faith to help them to make sense of these experiences. They turn to their faith traditions to reaffirm their sense of security and that their God is still in control. Familiar traditions from their faith backgrounds - scripture, prayer, songs, presence of religious professionals, symbols, etc. - can be comforting to those who are experiencing such a monumental disruption in their lives. It can be helpful to remember that others have experienced similar catastrophic events and eventually have been able to recover a sense of normalcy. Their lives have been permanently changed, but it is frequently helpful for victims to realize that there is still a reason for hope. Nothing will ever be the same, but they need the reassurance that the chaos they are presently experiencing will gradually subside. The presence of spiritual advisors/guides can make a valuable contribution to this process.

It is even easier to overlook the similar spiritual and emotional needs of the responders to a disaster. Those who are present to help the recovery from a catastrophic event are also greatly affected by the experience, even if they have participated in recovery efforts before. Each disaster is unique; each disaster responder reacts differently with each additional crisis.

Frequently the responders are so focused and so devoted to the recovery efforts that self-care and spiritual care become low priorities. Long hours, inadequate food and shelter, plus emotional connection to the victims can quickly deplete a volunteer's physical and emotional resources. A responder might question his/her own world view and/or belief system. Trained spiritual advisors should be alert to the spiritual needs of their fellow volunteers. This reality is addressed with the attached documents. And - don't forget that the spiritual advisors also have spiritual needs and would benefit from assistance to spiritually 'process' the experience.

It should be noted that the following resources are primarily devoted to the spiritual needs of Christians. The writer of this document is a Lutheran (ELCA) minister so the resources reflect this background. It is imperative to remember that individuals who have experienced a catastrophe come from a variety of faith traditions. The resources should be adapted accordingly.

Attached Documents -

- 1) Scripture passages - quoted from the NRSV translation.
- 2) Prayers
- 3) Suggested worship outlines (pending development)
- 4) Resources for the Spiritual Care-givers (pending development)

Sources -

- a) *In times of Catastrophe - Victorian Bush Fires, Feb. 2009, compiled from various resources by Pastor Andrew Ruddell Rainbow Lutheran Congregation*
- b) *Various Prayers - ELW, Pew Edition and ELW Pastoral Care*
- c) *North Tasmania Lutheran Parish - Service of Prayer, Comfort and Thanksgiving during times o difficulty*
- d) *General Assembly Mission Council, Litany for God's People in Times of Distress, Presbyterian Church, USA*