

## Providing Spiritual Care in a Disaster

Psalm 23 reminds us that though we walk through the shadow of the valley of death we need fear no evil. How Christians respond to disasters is not just a physical matter of recovering and repairing what has been lost or damaged physically. It is a spiritual matter primarily. Not only can we rebuild homes and replace lost physical possessions, we can meet the spiritual needs of those who have suffered. We can offer hope and spiritual healing. We can help people accept what is gone and begin a new life in the spirit of 1 John 3:17-18: “If anyone has material possessions and sees a brother or sister in need but has no mercy on them, how can the love of God be in that person? Dear children, let us not love with words or speech but with actions and in truth.”

The church should be among the best qualified, able and prepared for the spiritual care of victims of disaster.

### How Can We Care for Disaster Victims Spiritually?

- LISTEN. LISTEN. LISTEN.
- Let the victim tell his or her story. They aren't looking for a dialogue or conversation.
- Spend time one on one with disaster victims.
- Support victims as they grieve what has been lost.
- Remember that victims are highly stressed and anxious so they may say or do things they might not in normal circumstances.
- Do not judge the victim's circumstances or how they came to be in them.
- Try not to make promises you cannot keep.
- Don't try to act like a counsellor if you aren't one. Know when to refer victims to doctors, psychologists or other therapists.
- Don't use clichés or trite answers to difficult questions.
- Never explain the disaster to the victim as God's judgement or as a reckoning for sins of the person or the community.
- Get training if you wish to be involved in providing emotional care.
- Help victims to recognize what has been spared, such as life or some possessions.
- Remind victims of where their hope comes from.
- Remind victims of the supports that are there from them: church, family, friends etc.
- Help the victims find their own meaning in the events that have happened.
- Always remember that the victim is traumatized and may have lost loved ones or everything they own.
- Platitudes are useless.

- Help victims find symbols of hope and to discover the hopeful and redemptive realities of their current situation.
- Build a relationship.
- Ask permission before praying for victims. Accept it if they say no.
- Don't try to answer the difficult questions like 'Why me?' Why has God let this happen? Why do bad things happen to good people?
- Don't neglect the victim's physical needs for food, shelter, warmth as part of spiritual healing.
- Offer hugs and compassionate physical contact, such as holding hands, when appropriate.