

Care for the Caregivers

“God is our Refuge and Strength, an ever-present help in trouble.” Psalms 46:1

Perhaps no other challenge will give the immense sense of satisfaction than responding to the needs of people affected by a disaster. By nature, a disaster creates a crisis that brings with it high emotion and a feeling of loss of control. A listening ear and gentle spirit will bring much healing at these times.

Perhaps no other challenge will zap as much energy and strength from the one responding. The emotional drain experienced from continually listening to sad and grieving people can be enormous. While the burdens of those talking may lighten, the caregiver’s load is becoming heavier.

Perhaps no other challenge offers such an opportunity to share God’s love and grace with those whose faith is being tested. People deal with stress and pain in various ways and thresholds vary, but without the comfort that comes only from the Lord, hope for the future (and recovery) is elusive. This is what the Church’s ministry is – offering real Hope in a hopeless situation!

Spiritual/pastoral care is important for survivors. Pastoral care is also vital for clergy, disaster staff and others on the front lines, enabling them to regain strength to continue their response work and avoid burnout.

Simply stated, frustration comes with disasters. Things just do not go right most of the time. Obvious and easily changed things don’t get changed. Supplies don’t arrive, etc. Things are not planned, started, delivered, finished, or evaluated on time. Tempers grow very short and fault finding is raised to an art form.

Frustration can be a killer to an organization, a recovery effort, and to individuals and families. Burnout causes caregivers to feel exhausted and less confident about themselves. They expect the worst - and usually get it. Their job performance deteriorates and their troubles at home with family increase.

Caregivers need support, a friendly ear, some time off, contacts and encouragement from friends and bosses, and, most of all, prayers.

Mini-vacations - three or four weekend overnight events a year - can also make a big difference for clergy. In the early days after a disaster, these might take the form of meetings focused on organizational, financial, and physical rebuilding issues accompanied by spiritual care, reflections, and relaxation/recreation components.

Special retreats and respites should be scheduled with rest, reflection, and spiritual care as the primary objectives for participants and their family members. They do not necessarily need to have a subject focus, although that can sometimes make the event more attractive.

Denominational leaders and agency executives should be involved in support of clergy, staff and caregivers. Their support can take several forms:

- Calls or letters saying “I am thinking about you, praying for you”
- Special support for clergy/staff/caregivers and encouragement to get away for rest and recreation

- Special recognition of the importance of their ministry/service and what they are learning about the dynamics of ministry/service in disaster recovery
- Opportunity for the clergy/staff to share their learning and experience with the church/agency
- Recognition that clergy/staff are going through a very intense, exhausting, and life-changing event

Stages of grief usually consist of denial, anger, disillusionment (depressions), and hopefully, acceptance before recovery happens. The order and length in each stage varies with each person. These are normal reactions to an abnormal situation. Caregivers are also subject to these stages as frustration begins to affect them.

It is vital that the caregiver (clergy, volunteers or staff dealing with the disaster) also have a chance to talk about how this has changed their world. Counseling services for individuals and families should be made available to all Lutherans affected. Staff should be encouraged to use the counseling services provided through LSS's Employee Assistance Program (EAP).

Clergy Care is available to every Lutheran clergy and their family for counseling services. Each Judicatory has funds to help their clergy cope with "burn-out" and other effects of the disaster. The clergy should be encouraged to ask for this help. It includes funds to take some time off with their family.

Time should be taken for rest and relaxation for the whole staff involved. The work is demanding and intense on the front lines. Workshops, staff meetings, and the like should incorporate some learning but also fun, laughter, sharing time and relaxation. The longer the involvement in the disaster, the more fun, laughter, sharing and relaxation is necessary. **As the planning/presenting committee provides the R & R for other staff, they themselves are missing out on it. Care should be taken to meet their needs for R & R also.** *At the end of the disaster, it should not be discovered that the disaster worker was sacrificed for the cause.*

The mission of LSS truly must apply here. *"Guided by God's love and grace, Lutheran Social Services of North Dakota brings healing, help and Hope"* to the caregivers!

"I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me." Philipians 4:13