

Spiritual Care: Bringing God's Peace to Disaster

Disaster recovery programs can rebuild and repair homes and replace physical losses, but they will be unsuccessful unless they *meet the spiritual needs of survivors and their communities*. In fact, disaster recovery is ultimately a spiritual matter - helping people accept their losses and positively begin life anew. What an opportunity for the Church to serve!

Pastoral care is vital to individuals who have experienced loss of family, friends or belongings. It is also vital to staff and volunteers who are assisting in the recovery work.

Pastoral care helps people:

- Find meaning in the events that have occurred
- Understand the God is not punishing us by sending this disaster
- Transcend those events to a deeper faith in God which gives us peace the world cannot give
- Discover the many good blessings present in the experience
- Find new meaning for life, new anchors for living, and concrete symbols of hope

The work has an evangelical aspect that proclaims and demonstrates the Gospel of Christ's death and resurrection, whereby we are certain of our salvation no matter what befalls us.

Spiritual care is about providing hope. It conquers three major enemies of hope:

- Civility and repression that say "don't complain"
- The "We have been blessed. We only had...damage". "We can manage" attitude that depends on our strength alone.
- The "We can solve everything ourselves" attitude – again depending on our strength alone.

Spiritual care involves guided listening that stimulates both personal reflection and expression within a variety of contexts including worship, study, retreats, small groups and support groups. It meets needs of survivors and caregivers alike.

Spiritual Care vs. Mental Health Care

Spiritual care enhances traditional stress management techniques of mental health by addressing the tough spiritual questions like "If God loves me, why did this happen?" As spiritual questions are resolved, mental health recovery is expedited.

Disaster survivors confront spiritual issues concerned with the transformation of the world as they knew it. They need the active listening of mental health care that helps them address issues of coping. But they also need the spiritual care that reveals to them a loving and caring Almighty God who hears them and has graciously granted salvation to them in spite of what happens on earth. Retreats, spiritual counseling, Bible Study, and worship are important in helping disaster survivors come to a new relationship with:

- Themselves
- Their property
- Their community
- Their God
- Their past, present and future

A high degree of cooperation must exist between mental health workers and the religious community. Mental health outreach workers are highly skilled in their area and the religious

community can help them gain the trust of disaster survivors. Together, much more can be accomplished.

Community-Focused Care

Effective pastoral/spiritual care for both survivors and caregivers occurs within the context of community. Individuals and families can be healthy only in healthy communities. The community - carriers of so much of the people's memories, traditions, hopes, and healing power - ultimately sustains the dreams, visions, and the life of the people.

When a community is disrupted, people exhibit varied behavioral problems. The ties that provide important psychological support to individuals in times of stress are not available.

Pastoral/spiritual care appreciates the value of community symbols - a building, tree, neighborhood or church, for example. When the symbol is gone, there may be a sense that the town is gone. When the symbol is restored, there may be a feeling that the town is back. A disaster may also create new symbols about the town's ability to recover. Pastoral/spiritual care helps a community restore its old symbols as well as recognize and incorporate new symbols into its history.

The Importance of Worship

Worship is an important component of spiritual care. Worship affects the shape, character, and hopes of a community. It embraces hope for the future. Through Worship, we are reminded of God's presence in our lives and gain strength through Word and Sacrament. Worship affirms that God is indeed still alive and well, and, in spite of the chaos around us, God never stops loving us.

Prayers can promote healing in lifting up feelings and concerns that people may not be able to express directly. Preaching and the liturgy can encourage disaster survivors to express their feelings of anger, fear, doubt, and even hatred of God, and offering reconciliation with God through Christ.

Worship can also help disaster survivors through:

- **Remembering.** Scripture about God's presence and care for people in the past and how God helped them go through hard times.
- **Doxology.** A time for praise. Stories of God's goodness. Signs of God's presence now. Hymns of praise and thanksgiving.
- **Grieving.** A time to experience the sorrow of loss and then work toward new relationships.

***Our God, our Help in ages past,
Our Hope for years to come,
Our Shelter from the stormy blast,
And our eternal home.***



"Guided by God's love and grace, Lutheran Social Services of North Dakota brings healing help and hope."