

IN THE WAKE OF DISASTER

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*Religious Responses to Terrorism
& Catastrophe*

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To the victims of Hurricane Katrina

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Preface

The faith community is often the first to respond to natural disasters and acts of terrorism. Even before Hurricane Katrina made landfall near New Orleans on August 29, 2005, churches were taking in evacuees, and within forty-eight hours after the hurricane hit, they were delivering emergency supplies to victims—well before Federal Emergency Management (FEMA) workers arrived on the scene. This is not an unusual occurrence. In smaller communities, local religious leaders often coordinate the immediate disaster response and later clean up after hurricanes, tornadoes, floods, fire, or acts of terror. Even in larger communities, especially when it comes to providing emotional support, many often turn to the faith community. For example, after September 11, Red Cross workers on the scene in New York City noticed that disaster victims and family members often pushed past clinical psychologists to talk to people with collars on.¹ Disasters and acts of terrorism not only inflict physical damage and loss of life but also leave emotional and spiritual wounds that need healing before victims can rebuild their lives.

In the Wake of Disaster is for people of faith who wish to learn more about disaster preparedness and response, for public policy makers who seek to better prepare their communities for disasters, for emergency response personnel and mental health professionals wanting to know how the faith community can assist them, and for social and behavioral scientists studying the role that religious faith plays in coping with natural disasters and acts of terrorism. Despite the many ways that faith communities can help, their activities often go unrecognized and are seldom integrated into local, regional, or national disaster preparedness and response operations. This book seeks to facilitate that integration by providing information about the unique characteristics and capacities of faith-based organizations and outlining how the formal disaster-response system in

the United States works. It is a must-read for those wanting to expand the religious community's role in disaster response and overcome the many barriers and turf battles that now prevent this from happening. The ultimate goal of this book is to increase the resiliency of our communities in the face of disasters by developing the tremendous resources that lie within our faith communities.

Here clergy and faith communities will find information about the psychological, social, and spiritual effects of trauma, the operation of the emergency response system in the United States, and the role that religious faith and faith communities can play in disaster preparation, response, and recovery. The book addresses not only the psychological consequences of disaster but also the spiritual consequences and the effect that spiritual injury may have on the long-term mental health of survivors. It documents the extensive activities of faith communities in meeting the emotional and spiritual needs of disaster victims. It provides practical information on how clergy and faith communities can become better prepared and who to get to know, such as the Red Cross, local emergency management groups, mental health crisis teams, and others.

Federal, state, and local government leaders will find this book a key resource for faith-based responses to disaster that will assist them in developing plans to integrate mental and spiritual care into their emergency management systems (EMS) that respond to natural disasters (hurricanes, floods, earthquakes) or terrorism (explosive events or biological, chemical, nuclear/radiological, cyber attacks, or a combination thereof). Better integration of faith-based efforts with these government services will not only improve the services provided to victims of disasters but also help EMS personnel (firefighters, police, health care providers, etc.) deal better with the emotional and spiritual trauma to which they are exposed so they can remain effective and functional. This will require a system-wide effort to overcome the barriers that faith-based organizations face when responding to disasters. These barriers are described and detailed recommendations to overcome them are given.

Mental health professionals will find useful information on the role of religion and spirituality in coping with disaster stress and trauma. I examine what clergy and faith-based organizations are currently doing to

provide mental health care to victims of disaster. The spiritual needs of trauma victims and rescue workers are described and information provided on how mental health providers can assess and address these spiritual needs, and when to refer to trained spiritual caregivers. This information will help to enhance collaboration and cooperation among mental health providers and faith communities and minimize conflict and competition (as so often exists today).

Finally, social and behavioral scientists who study factors that impact emotional and social functioning after disasters and during recovery will find this book a treasure trove of information about studies examining faith-based interventions and their effectiveness, which will assist researchers design future studies in this area.

The information contained here was originally gathered on request of the Center for Mental Health Services (CMHS) of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS). Sources include a comprehensive search of the scientific literature using multiple online databases, a review of the DHHS Mental Health All-Hazards Disaster Planning Guide for state mental health authorities (which in many ways parallels the tasks of faith communities in working together with other disaster-related organizations), and extensive discussions with secular and religious professionals involved in mental health responses to local and national disasters. The result is a relatively concise and yet comprehensive guide for appreciating and integrating faith-based resources into local, state, and national efforts to help our communities deal with the immediate and long-term consequences of natural disasters and acts of terrorism.

Acknowledgments

This book would not have been possible without the help of Joanna Hill and Laura Barrett of Templeton Foundation Press and disaster experts Francis Gunn,¹ Zahara Davidowitz-Farkas,² Johanna Olson,³ and David Pollock.⁴

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Introduction

Each year millions of residents of the United States incur injuries or property damage that result from disasters, costing as much as \$1 billion a week.^{1,2} This does not include cataclysmic events such as Hurricane Katrina, which may eventually cost over \$200 billion³ and has taken over one thousand lives.⁴ While this book focuses on disasters in the United States, the reader should not lose sight of disasters happening regularly all over the world of much greater scope than any that have ever touched this country—from the December 26, 2004, tsunami in the Indian Ocean that killed 275,000 people⁵ to an October 8, 2005, earthquake that killed 83,000,⁶ injured 75,000,⁷ and left 4 million homeless⁸ in Pakistan.

Faith-based and community organizations (FBOs) serve a critical role in the immediate and long-term response to natural disasters, unintended human-caused disasters, and intentional acts of terrorism. That role, however, has yet to be clearly described or fully comprehended.

Although occasionally referred to in off-handed ways, faith-based organizations have received little attention from government and emergency management agencies, and little sustained effort has been made to integrate their activities into formal disaster preparedness and response systems. The potential role of FBOs became evident when the United States was stunned by the 9/11 terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and Pentagon. A national survey of the U.S. population published in the *New England Journal of Medicine* one week later reported that nine out of ten Americans turned to religion in order to cope with the fear and uncertainty that these events caused.⁹ A national poll sponsored by the Red Cross after 9/11 reported that 60 percent of respondents said they would be more likely to seek help from a spiritual caregiver than either a physician (45%) or a mental health professional (40%).¹⁰

During the first few days after Hurricane Katrina, while FEMA and other government agencies were organizing their response, religious orga-

nizations provided immediate assistance to victims.¹¹ Before the storm hit, evacuees found housing, supplies, and fellowship in churches that opened their doors to them. Immediately afterward, many local religious organizations, as well as those in surrounding states (as far north as Michigan) served as emergency shelters providing refuge for hurricane victims. One church in Baton Rouge fed sixteen thousand people daily during the week after the storm. Other churches from all over the country collected donations of money and supplies such as paper goods, clothing, food, and school supplies, and organized teams of volunteers who traveled to the Gulf Coast to distribute them. One of these churches sent eighteen semi-truck trailers worth of supplies to shelters and other agencies during the first week. As time passed after Katrina, religious organizations continued to provide services ranging from neighborhood cleanup activities to building showers, helping victims find jobs, even providing free haircuts.

The widespread lack of recognition and appreciation for the faith community's role in disaster response is surprising given that Quakers, Mennonites, and the Salvation Army have been involved in helping disaster victims for over fifty years, and almost every major religious denomination in the United States has participated in disaster relief during the past fifteen to thirty years.

Why do faith communities play such an important role? Disaster expert Francis Gunn gives ten reasons:

1. Faith traditions and local faith communities are considered a primary means of spiritual and social support.
2. Faith traditions often include rituals, worship, and prayers that are viewed as a means for accessing divine intervention, divine power, protection, and healing in times of threat or trouble.
3. The very presence of a faith tradition in the community, often symbolized by a church, synagogue, mosque, etc., testifies to beliefs that have endured the test of time, causing these institutions to be viewed as "cornerstones" of a community.
4. Most faith traditions preach or teach a message that can serve as a source of strength to calm peoples' fears and fortify peoples' belief and hope. This message is sometimes communicated through parables or stories that have endured for generations and may be easily accessed because they live on in the consciousness of believers.

5. Religious leaders such as priests, ministers, rabbis, and imams may be automatically associated with “God coming to our aid.” They are often viewed as providing reassurance, the promise of divine help, and a comforting, healing presence.

6. Most faith communities train their clergy to assist people in times of loss and tragedy and many clergy have considerable experience with supporting people through these difficult times.

7. Faith communities have a tradition of coming to the aid of their fellow believers. This provides a natural source of assistance in meeting physical, emotional, and spiritual needs. It also gives people the powerful message, “You are not alone in this; we will be with you.”

8. After other “emergency services” have served their purpose and are withdrawn from a community, people know that their faith communities will remain there to be an ongoing source of support.

9. People who might be wary or hesitant to seek mental health support or services might still be willing to turn to their faith community for similar types of support since there is no “stigma” attached to such help.

10. Many faith traditions have regional, national, or even global networks that can help to provide assistance, financial and otherwise, to a local faith community. When it comes to gathering monetary resources, most faith traditions are trusted organizations to which people will feel comfortable contributing. Thus, they are good resources for helping fund disaster assistance.

I’d like to add that with the Internet religious organizations have a way of obtaining online financial donations that can be immediately used for helping victims. Legal barriers and chains of approval that slow government agencies from providing such resources do not stand in the way of religious organizations, which can make these funds available almost instantly.

Overview

Because of the tremendous role that faith communities play in responding to disasters, especially in addressing psychological and spiritual needs, that role needs to be carefully examined, its scope and value more fully appreciated, and ways to expand and support such activities more

completely explored, which are the purposes of this book. I briefly summarize each chapter below.

Chapter 1 examines the psychological and spiritual responses to disaster, emphasizing the psychological stages that victims go through after the initial trauma. Understanding normal responses to trauma will help faith communities know when their help is needed most and what kind of help is needed at different points in time. The impact that disaster has on religious faith is also explored, since injuries to spiritual worldviews may underlie long-term negative psychological reactions to trauma.

Chapter 2 discusses national, state, and local emergency management systems (EMS) that become active when disaster strikes. More fully, understanding the existing EMS will help faith communities see where their efforts can be most effective. Gaps in the formal emergency response system are highlighted, especially in terms of providing psychological and spiritual care over time.

Chapter 3 explores the role that religion plays in coping with stress in general and then reviews research on how religion has helped victims of disasters in particular. The chapter also examines how religion helps people heal psychologically and move on with their lives after severe trauma and loss, and discusses how religion may strengthen them to deal with future life traumas.

Chapter 4 moves from religion as a personal coping resource to religion as a force that motivates people of faith to help victims of disaster. Here I review studies that describe the role of clergy and lay volunteers in responding to natural and manmade disasters. A palpable religious presence has characterized virtually every major disaster in U.S. history, and may be one of the major reasons why our communities have bounced back as quickly as they have.

Chapter 5 describes faith-based organizations that have in recent years been involved in disasters, focusing on special units within these organizations that are mobilized whenever and wherever disaster strikes. Virtually every major religious group has such a response team, and these teams are described. I also examine organizations that have developed in order to coordinate volunteer and faith-based efforts during disasters. Such organizations came about because of a fragmented and disorganized faith

response in the past that wasted resources and even impeded relief efforts in some instances.

Chapter 6 provides details on how faith-based efforts can be coordinated at the local level, depending on the size of the community affected. Also discussed are suggestions by disaster experts on who should lead such efforts in order to maximize the contributions of spiritually motivated individuals and religious communities.

Chapter 7 focuses on how faith communities can get ready for such events, and thus be the givers of help rather than the victims. For faith communities to have their maximum impact, they must be sufficiently organized and informed prior to disasters so that they can immediately mobilize resources. I review a disaster plan on how faith communities can ready themselves to ensure the survival of their own members as well as meet the needs of others in the community who may be affected.

Chapter 8 examines barriers and obstacles that stand in the way of faith communities being more fully integrated into the formal disaster response system. Lack of information on how to respond, territoriality and competition, lack of cooperation and coordination, and differences in theology can prevent religious volunteers and organizations from becoming a central part of our nation's response to disasters.

Chapter 9 examines ways to overcome these barriers through research, education, leadership, and changes in attitude. Based on suggestions by disaster experts, I make specific recommendations that EMS agencies, public policy makers, mental health organizations, and faith communities can implement in order to address barriers to integration.

Chapter 10 makes observations about the relevance of this topic to faith communities, government agencies, and mental health professionals, and emphasizes the future impact that individuals and communities of faith can have in helping communities not only bounce back after disasters but also become stronger and more resilient as a result.

A section on resources provides information on Web sites, organizations, books, pamphlets, and published research that will help the reader obtain more in-depth knowledge about the role of FBOs in responding to disasters.

This volume represents the most detailed examination to date of

what faith communities can contribute to our response to natural disasters and acts of terrorism. While we will always heavily rely on the formal EMS system to respond to the immediate needs of disaster victims, that system alone is not sufficient. The short-term and long-term psychological and spiritual needs of victims are simply too great. Those needs require a healing community that understands and, over time, supports and loves them back to health and wholeness.