

Stephen B. Roberts and Willard W. C. Ashley, editors, *Disaster Spiritual Care: Practical Clergy Responses to Community, Regional, and National Tragedy* (Woodstock, VT: Skylight Paths Publishing, 2008), 375 pp.

Oklahoma City, Andrew, Katrina, Columbine, September 11, Exxon Valdez, and the Tsunami are names of recent tragedies that have heightened our awareness of disaster. Although disasters are as old as war, pestilence, and natural catastrophes, human-made disasters or inadequate response to natural disasters have intensified suffering and made them more difficult to respond to in our time. Because we live in a time of tension, terror, and turbulence, we need to have a disaster plan. Such preparedness is both individual and systemic. The editors of this book have amassed a comprehensive collection of essays that address a wide range of issues they believe must be anticipated and prepared for before a disaster occurs. Individuals need to have a “go bag” near their beds if they need to evacuate and go. Every religious congregation needs a disaster response plan. Communities need to identify and mobilize the resources they have to respond to a disaster. This preparedness has been proven to be necessary because the majority of people affected by a past disaster have realized at some point that they “do not have the strength, faith, and ability to cope.”

Like any collection of essays, there is repetition and some unevenness of quality. However, the breadth of issues attended to means that there is something for everyone amidst an abundance of information and suggestions regarding *Disaster Spiritual Care*. The range of details that are discussed in these pages leaves nothing to chance. Numerous full-page boxes summarize information about the response to disaster and what we need to know to provide the needed spiritual care. They could also become handouts for a congregational discussion about the need for preparedness. Whatever training in spiritual care we might have had is beneficial but not sufficient. The most chaotic emergency room experience is different from working in a shelter after a hurricane or at a disaster morgue.

Interspersed throughout the book, I found wisdom that has application beyond preparing for a disaster. “Before you show how much you know, show how much you love” is wisdom for ministries of care wherever they occur. “Blessed are the flexible for they shall not be broken” is a truth that is certainly applicable in every human crisis as well as disaster spiritual care. Because of the diversity of the contexts in which we live and in which disasters may occur, we need to “demonstrate culturally competent hospitality.” After we decide as individuals and as congregations and communities what we can do, we must decide what we will do. “Stay where people can find you” certainly encourages restraint of our impulse to rush to the scene of any kind of crisis. Finally, the most compelling statement for me was this: “The willingness to be wounded may be all we have to offer.” Compassion that converts empathy into transformative healing begins with the willingness to be affected by stories we hear and the suffering we see.

The appearance of a book preparing for disaster is a reminder that

there is a persistent level of fear in the culture. As we plan for disasters that might occur, we also need to be cautious about being manipulated by fear. There is ample reference to the importance of self-care for caregivers responding to a disaster. However, there is inadequate exploration of the emotional implications of this mandate for disaster preparedness for living in this time. The presumption that there will be a disaster for which we must be prepared creates a low level of anxiety or fear in the society that must also be attended to by faith communities. Not everyone can anticipate disaster in a comprehensive way without becoming fearful. The focus on fear in this volume of *Reflective Practice* is an invitation to consider the abuse of fear and ways to live with fear.

The journey of healing after disaster requires that we attend to the complexity of grief that is evoked by violent death of any kind. We have become increasingly aware that how people die affects the way we grieve. Those who mourn a violent death know very well it is an illusion that everything can be reversed or undone and that there will be time for everything. After the trauma has subsided, the work of grieving continues. It is remembering that makes hoping possible. The work of Edward Ryneason—*Retelling Violent Death* (New York: Routledge, 2001) and *Violent Death: Resilience and Intervention Beyond the Crisis* (New York: Routledge, 2006)—emphasizes that restorative retelling of the life of one who as died violently is necessary in order to restore hope. (For further information about restorative retelling after violent death, see <http://www.vdbs.org>.) After disaster, communities will need to reweave the fabric of their lives together always including the story of violent loss.

Even if you don't mobilize your family or congregation or community to the level of disaster preparedness mandated by this volume, it is an important resource for ministry with people in crisis. One of the side-benefits of mobilizing a community or town to a common plan for disaster response is that people will be talking across religious and cultural differences. In that sense, preparedness may also be prevention.

Herbert Anderson, editor, *Reflective Practice*
Pacific Lutheran Theological Seminary
2770 Marin Avenue
Berkeley, CA 94708
E-mail: handerson@plts.edu