



URBAN CURRENT

Serving a traumatized community

Hurricane Sandy. The Newtown school shooting. The West, TX, fertilizer plant explosion. The Boston Marathon bombing.

Whether it's a natural disaster, terrorist attack, or tragedy in a small town, a community can be brought to its knees with varying levels of shock, sorrow, pain, anger, and life upset. The New Testament church ought to be spiritually and physically prepared to serve its community, even if they themselves are victims.

We remember shootings at Wedgewood Baptist, Fort Worth, and New Life Church in Colorado. Think of the churches in the path of hurricanes that have suffered damage to their own properties, in addition to the losses of congregation members. How does a church prepare to not just serve itself, but the community?

When tragedy strikes, there is a spiritual layer for believers. Where is God? What is God doing? Why is God allowing this? How could God allow good people to be killed, or injured, or affected so dramatically?

In addition, what are the spiritually oriented questions that will arise in the community?

Of course, there is also the emotional impact ranging from shock to anger.

There may be congregational connection to an event. I spoke to a couple of pastors in Boston after the bombing. The worship leader of one church was the wife of one of the FBI swat team leaders. For sure there were church members in the area who worked at some of the hospitals where victims were taken. Then there were all of the personal connections with participants or spectators at the marathon. I did not know until that day that one of our members was running. She had quite a testimony of God's protection when she returned home.

These are times of tremendous spiritual opportunity. We pray for such open doors. We do not pray for or hope for horrific events. When they come, we need to seize them for the gospel's

sake and use them for eternal purposes.

Consider a short list of simple ways we can serve Christ and our community in a time of need.

PRESENCE The Word came to dwell among us. Don't underestimate the ministry of presence. Where can you go as a pastor? As a believer, where might your presence be needed or helpful? You can always show up and offer yourself.

RESOURCES Physically, what can we offer? Most of us have property. Many churches have opened their buildings as feeding stations, triage areas, meeting space. This is not the time to hold back. Equipment — tables, chairs, sound systems, vehicles. Remember, a local church is an incredible network. Even a small congregation could gather a pile of baby supplies in short order with a simple request.

PRAYER We are people of faith. Prayer is always appropriate. My comrade in arms and prayer partner, Pastor James Meeks, was teaching on the power of corporate prayer earlier this year. Chicago, having experienced a horrific murder rate the year before, was on track early in 2013 to match or surpass that bloody pace. He challenged the church to pray for a reversal of the murder rate from the month before. The month before had been 41. He led the church to pray God would hold the number of murders to 14 or below. He did this on TV! At month's end, the news media was abuzz with an inexplicable, very welcome record-low murder rate for that month — the lowest in 50 years — 14 people killed. February thru April had the lowest murder rate since 1963.

SCRIPTURE We are people of the Book. Scripture speaks to everything. It is always appropriate to bring God's Word to bear, privately and publicly. I remember President Bush reading

from Isaiah 40 after the space shuttle exploded.

PROCLAMATION Sometimes circumstances demand that we dispense with whatever we had planned to preach and bring an entire message related to the crisis. Maybe more would be needed in the face of something of a larger scale. Even a short statement, bringing God's truth to bear, speaking comfort and strength in the face of a tragedy can be helpful and powerful.

For years we have served violence-wracked neighborhoods. I came to realize no one really knew what to do, not only to prevent the shooting but in its aftermath. When an innocent kid gets killed on your block, you are traumatized. You're grieving. You're angry. You want justice. You experience emotional confusion and frustration.

Alonzo Zuniga, an eighth-grader, was gunned down about a mile from us. We took a couple hundred people to the block. We prayed. We sang. We preached Jesus. We offered a reward of several thousand dollars to help catch the killer. The weather was warm. All the neighbors were out on their front steps. We had teams go from door to door offering to pray with people. We showed up. We acknowledged that the neighborhood had been traumatized. We didn't just sing; we brought money to pursue justice. We didn't just hold a meeting and leave; we offered personal ministry to residents. Our reward was the lead story in the news. To my knowledge, no church had ever done this before. Simple. Personal. Effective.

"I am among you as one who serves."

by Charles Lyons, Pastor
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