



Disaster Response – In Their Words

How Disaster Chaplaincy Changed my Ministry

I use the skills I learned as a disaster chaplain every day. Pastorally speaking, every crisis is a disaster for the person who is sitting there in front of you. Some disasters happen on a community-wide or global scale and others are more personal. The skill set I gained as a disaster chaplain has changed the way I do ministry.

Disaster Chaplaincy is not something I always knew I wanted to do. I went to my first training with NOVA (National Organization for Victim Assistance) because a parishioner of mine at the time was working for the Secretary of State in Arkansas and asked me to attend. I wasn't eager to go, but I agreed because I didn't want to turn her down. I was surprised to find that I loved it.

The training was about degrees of stress that people experience. It really resonated with me because to some extent disaster response is what clergy do every day; it is just a matter of scale.

After the training I was so excited about the work that they asked me to be on the Attorney General's disaster response team. I agreed. I thought it would be easy; I remember thinking, "disasters never happen." But immediately, of course, two things happened. First, there was a tornado in Beebe, Arkansas that all but wiped out the town. I went down and worked with the first responders. One paramedic I talked to had been digging through rubble and found her own child who she had left in the care of her mother. It was surreal. I remember going back to my wife and son that night and seeing how my life had changed knowing that 20 miles away this had happened.

Shortly after that, an American Airlines flight ran off the runway in Little Rock. On the way to the hanger where they were originally sending me, I got the call that both a parishioner and dear friend were on the flight. I was re-routed to the hospital as their priest, and though both survived, it was life-changing for me.

I was already aware that this parishioner didn't really like God, and I knew this wouldn't help. When I got there she was on so much medication that she had



Biography



Bishop Greg Rickel is the Bishop of the Diocese of Olympia in Washington State.



Fast Facts



DIOCESE:

Episcopal Diocese of Olympia

SIZE: 31,000

SPIRITUAL CARE PROVIDER:

Any person who assists others to draw upon a spiritual perspective as a source of strength and hope in difficult times. These persons certainly include clergy, chaplains, other ministers, counselors, and any persons considered the appropriate person to provide this service by their own faith community.

"Emotional and Spiritual Care in Disasters" in *Community Arise* training curriculum.
www.communityarise.com



ballooned up to the point of being unrecognizable. The staff had to convince me it was her. Guessing at what she might be feeling I wrote on a pad of paper, "This is just sh*tty—no way around it." She began to cry and then thanked me for acknowledging that. She said that was what she needed to hear. She said she needed to believe in a God who acknowledged that this was a crappy thing to have happen. I knew that it was important that I was there to experience that moment with someone who had been impacted.

I have carried these stories into the work I do now as Bishop. When there was flooding south of the Diocese a couple of years ago, the training I had made me feel more prepared and more useful to those who had been impacted. For example, a parishioner lost her home to the flooding and was living in temporary housing. Drawing upon stress debriefing training I had done with NOVA, I understood the importance of providing a place for that person to process their loss. That presence can be a great gift and highly underestimated by those who have not been through a disaster before. In that conversation I felt like I was able to be a true minister.

With that in mind, I am now trying to figure out how we, as a diocese, can be better trained and prepared for disasters. I think preparedness at the diocesan level is about creating a plan that can be implemented when

the time comes; it is about having the skills and connections before a disaster.

The unfortunate part about disaster preparedness is that you never know if you have succeeded unless a disaster occurs, but there is still a lot you can do to ease any situation. In the Diocese of Olympia I would like all congregations to have a disaster preparedness plan, knowing who will respond and how. We are working on making this vision a reality.

I believe a diocese basically has one power, the power to convene. Our diocese would need to provide that in a disaster. It is my dream to have a plan that would make that convening role possible.

When Episcopal Relief & Development came and offered a training last year, there was great turnout with more than 60 interested people. The folks who participated were eager to do the trainings, so that seems like a great first step at convening around disaster preparedness.

Preparedness and chaplaincy skills are something that we all use daily.

I know this first-hand, and look forward to other clergy and laity learning more about the rewarding work of disaster response.

Get Involved:



- **Sign up for Ready to Serve.** Episcopal Relief & Development's US Disaster Program manages a database of individuals willing to serve in disaster response, their skills, training and contact information. Sign up at: www.er-d.org/VolunteerForm/
- **Red Cross.** Train to be a Red Cross volunteer or take a class. View the training and volunteer opportunities available under "Preparing and Getting Trained" at: <http://www.redcross.org>
- **National Organization for Victim Assistance.** Find more information about trainings in crisis response with: <http://www.trynova.org/help-crisis-victim/crisis-training>

Additional Resources



For more information on chaplaincy and disaster spiritual care, please see the following online resources.

- "Tips and Lessons: Self-Care After a Disaster"
- "How To: Providing Pastoral Care to Immigrant Workers"

Share your own disaster response stories or tips to help a community in need at www.episcopalrelief.org