



Self-Care After a Disaster

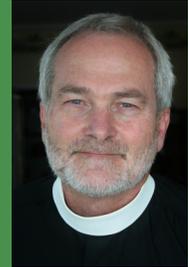
After disasters, opportunities for ministries abound for congregations: whether it be meeting immediate food and water needs, assisting with clothing and shelter, helping people wrestle with questions about why such events occur, or in the long-term, supporting emotional and spiritual recovery. Such assistance does not come without a price. Clergy in major disaster areas experience 75-100% turnover following disasters. First, clergy rightly experience serving those in need as their calling, but too often, clergy take on the role of “Superman,” overextending themselves physically, emotionally and spiritually. The outcome ranges from exhaustion, burnout and loss of personal faith – impairing their ability to continue supporting the disaster victims or their congregations – to conflict with their congregations, marital or family problems, substance abuse and suicide.

We spoke to the Rev. Bill Livingston, who worked as the Canon Pastor-Missioner in Mississippi after Hurricane Katrina. His role was to support coastal clergy and their families in the years following the storm. He shared some of his insights about how and why clergy should prioritize self-care in a post-disaster context.

CARE FOR THE CAREGIVER

Why are clergy and other caregivers at such high risk of burnout?

Caregivers face stressors from all directions. They have to deal with whatever losses they've personally sustained in the disaster, as well as the losses their



Biography



The Rev. Bill Livingston worked in community mental health services for 23 years and served as Canon Pastor-Missioner for the Diocese of Mississippi providing pastoral and spiritual support to clergy and communities impacted by Hurricane Katrina.



Fast Facts



CAREGIVER: a person who provides direct care (as for children, elderly people, or the chronically ill)

COMPASSION FATIGUE: the “cost of caring” of working with victims of trauma or catastrophic events that shows itself as spiritual, physical and/or emotional fatigue and exhaustion.

“Compassion Fatigue” in [Disaster Spiritual Care: Practical Clergy Responses to Community, Regional and National Tragedy](#), Rabbi Stephen Roberts and Rev. Willard W.C. Ashley, Sr. editors



community is facing. A natural response of caregivers, especially clergy, is to place the needs of others above needed self-care. They might experience “compassion fatigue” after months of listening to stories of pain, loss or despair. Clergy in particular might be dealing with the loss of a building as well as a marked decrease in member-generated income, thus leaving the budget at a deficit. Additionally, as the congregation experiences post-disaster disillusionment, anger and frustration will arise. These emotions may result in blame, thus creating or escalating parish conflict. The weight of these multiple stressors can be quite overwhelming.

What is “Compassion Fatigue”?

Compassion fatigue happens when one too closely identifies with the pain and suffering of those s/he serves and then reacts to that compassion. At the first mental health summit we had after Katrina with a group of therapists, one participant shared, “My day consists of meeting one person after another and hearing their stories of loss and their disillusionment about losing their homes and living in a FEMA trailer. I finish my day and drive home to my own FEMA trailer.” Though this person was supporting others, she was not getting support herself to process her own grief and loss.

Even if the clergy-person is not personally affected, after hearing enough stories of loss s/he might begin to experience personal grief.

What is the danger of getting burned-out? Shouldn't folk just keep working until they NEED a break?

Many clergy are willing martyrs. As shepherds they feel it is important to keep working until every one of their sheep is fed. But as author, the Rev. Flora Slosson Wuellner, points out in her book *Feed My Shepherds*, “The starving shepherd may end up devouring the sheep.” I witnessed this same dynamic in the months following Katrina. The clergy who burned out took a serious toll on the very communities they were trying to help. I encourage the caregivers I work with to make the decision not to be the hero every time. Instead, when they feel worn thin they should monitor their own level and try to be realistic about how much they can give. Taking a break, finding someone to talk to, and cutting back on hours are all corrective actions that can help caregivers to regain balance and better serve their communities.

Symptoms of Compassion Fatigue:



- Dread of working with certain congregants
- Difficulty separating work life from personal life
- Nightmares
- Recurring or intrusive thoughts or images
- Silencing or minimizing congregants' stories
- Difficulty concentrating
- Elevated “startle” response
- Avoiding thoughts, feelings, conversations, or places associated with trauma
- Lack of interest in meaningful or enjoyable activities
- Decreased functioning in nonprofessional situations
- Feeling lack of skill about issues you previously felt certain about
- Loss of hope – hopelessness
- Lack of energy and enthusiasm
- Increased transference issues with certain congregants
- Depression or constant sadness
- Mood swings
- Rigidity, perfectionism or obsession about details
- Thoughts of self-harm or harm to others
- Questioning the meaning of life
- Loss of purpose in life
- Anger at God, loss of faith, questioning religious beliefs
- Decreased interest in intimacy
- Isolation or loneliness
- Increase in interpersonal conflicts

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Easier said than done; any suggestions on how to set boundaries and ask for help?

Caregivers are often busy people even in a non-disaster context. Therefore, it is important not to overload your schedule. Planning blank spaces into your calendar is one technique for dealing with the inevitable emergencies and unplanned pastoral visits that arise in a post-disaster context. Another tactic for avoiding overload is to set a regular time to get together with staff or dedicated volunteers so that you are reminded to delegate tasks to others.

It is also important to set aside time for rest and exercise so that you can maintain your own health and vitality. Consider building in Sabbath time: daily, weekly, monthly, annually. Getting out of “emergency mode” is a great way to regain perspective. If you cannot imagine taking a full day off each week, build in mini-Sabbaths throughout the week by setting aside a couple hours here and there. Use this time to practice spiritual disciplines like prayer or meditation. During longer breaks, get out of town. A trip into the non-disaster world will act as a reset button, allowing you to see things through new eyes when you return.

Pencil these activities into your calendar and treat them like any other important meeting. It will be tempting in a post disaster context to spend long days and even vacation days at work; the needs will seem insurmountable and you may even feel guilty leaving to attend to other aspects of your life.

Your family and friends are important resources for maintaining balance. Prioritize positive social contacts. Taking personal time might feel like a luxury, but it is vital for maintaining vision and being the pastoral presence your community needs.

Often clergy neglect their own families after disasters – at the time when they are most needed as spouse or parent. They do so risking harm to those they love, so they need to set aside time for their spouse and children.

Finally, seek a spiritual counselor who you can check in with on a regular basis. This person does not have to be locally based. Having a safe and steady go-to person accompany you through this process will come in handy as you work to navigate a healthy relationship with your work, community and family.

Effects of Stress on Clergy:



- **Signs of excessive stress:** Clergy stress most frequently expresses itself as fatigue or guilt over not meeting all expectations, frustration of not being able to determine appropriate boundaries, and depression.
- **Stress on clergy families:** Clergy families are also significantly affected by the disaster. The stress in families is evidenced in comments from clergy spouses: “I didn’t sign up for this! It’s just more than I can handle.” “I seldom saw him before the storm. Now I never do.”

“From Honeymoon to Disillusionment to Reconstruction: Recognizing Healthy and Unhealthy Coping Mechanisms and Encouraging Resiliency” in [Disaster Spiritual Care: Practical Clergy Responses to Community, Regional and National Tragedy](#). Rabbi Stephen Roberts and Rev. Willard W.C. Ashley, Sr. editors

Additional Resources



For more resources on disaster chaplaincy, please see the following online resource:

- “In Their Words: How Disaster Chaplaincy Changed my Ministry”
- “Tips and Lessons: 10 Tips for Responding to a Disaster in Your Community”

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