

# Spiritual issues and recovery management

The Reverend Dr. Peter Crawford, Regional Coordinator, Victorian Council of Churches.

## **Towards a holistic approach**

There is a significant need for a holistic approach that doesn't segment personhood and eliminate the spiritual elements that frequently surface in disasters. In Australia we have tended to concentrate only on physical and now emotional aspects of recovery. Sometimes this has been to the extent that the community's or individual's ability to regain independence is hampered because we have overlooked other dimensions of the recovery process. Recovery is often incomplete if the spiritual dimensions are overlooked.

In unsourced work done by Phillip Morris at the Repatriation Hospital in Melbourne, it has been shown that intervention can make a significant difference in the first two years in overcoming post traumatic stress disorder, but that after that period there is little difference in response between those who have been counselled and those who haven't. In other words people can re-experience the initial stress and suffer consequent identity disturbance if they haven't recovered in a holistic way.

For example in the 1997 Dandenong Ranges fires we found that many people who had experienced the Ash Wednesday fires but weren't directly threatened at all by the 1997 fires nevertheless went through a re-experience of post traumatic stress disorder. They avoided any experience themselves of the new fires and indeed exhibited a number of numbing signs. A parallel is found in research into what enables people to survive the troubled teenage years. Research by Eckersley (1987, 1988, 1992, 1993) and Resnick (1988) has shown that the three factors that underpin a teenager's successful transition to adulthood are stable family relationships, supportive school relationships and a faith framework.

## **Why did it happen?**

This question can haunt people who have been through a significant disaster, especially when the disaster is the result

of human evil such as Port Arthur, Dunblane, Queen or Hoddle Street. This question is primarily a theological question. That is why it hasn't been well handled in recovery management over the years. Unresolved issues can hamper full recovery for individuals and communities. Our thesis is that with understanding comes acceptance and peace, and therefore there needs to be a theological presentation soon after the disaster, and indeed for some lengthy period after that.

Some ways to press towards understanding would include the concepts that the world we live in is not paradise—it's a fallen or damaged or fractured world and therefore we are not shocked when disasters happen. We see them as being a normal part of living in a damaged world.

We also understand that there is such a thing as human evil and sin and that this accounts for a great number of disasters. There is also natural evil where there are disasters like Tsunami, or earthquakes, or bushfires caused by lightning, and we see that this is not a direct action of God but rather just a part of being in a damaged world. Once we understand the causes and we source those causes either in nature or in mankind, rather than in God, we can understand that God is not our enemy. We are better able to recover when we see that God is on our side. Reconciliation is another vital concept that we will tackle in due course.

## **Ultimate issues**

The more significant the disaster the more sharply ultimate questions are raised about the meaning of life, what happens after death, and questions about good and evil. Has evil triumphed? Is there no justice? Is God acting in judgement on us all (perhaps in a capricious way)? Is there a God at all?

When there has been a loss of life as well as property, people begin to face up to these questions. When these ultimate issues are no longer camouflaged by material distractions people may realise

that the things they have centred their lives on have been less significant than they had thought. So it is important in recovery to consider what are the answers to these ultimate issues. Some key elements that need to be tackled are

- What happens after death?
- When people have been killed, is there any hope for those who are left behind of meeting them again, or is it absolutely the end?

One of the factors that helps people recover and recover well from disaster is hope, not only the security of knowing that it won't happen to them again, but the ability to view their future in a positive way and with significant levels of hope. Interestingly, one of the most affected groups in my experience are those who have been most independent prior to the disaster, and masters of their own destiny (including male farmers) and when that independence was threatened they suffered significantly.

These ultimate issues are spiritual questions addressed by most religions. However I believe that Christianity is unique at this point and can help people deal practically with grief and shock.

## **Guilt**

Guilt can only be overcome by forgiveness. Guilt is frequently experienced by people after a disaster. Survivors, even those whose properties have survived often feel an unreasonable sense of guilt. In order for someone to overcome guilt whether it is an objectively real guilt or only an irrational felt guilt, they need to feel forgiveness. Forgiveness needs to be declared, and needs to be declared by someone who has the authority to forgive. The person who can forgive is the one who has been wronged, or their delegate. However forgiveness is not a normal reaction, and is rarely expressed in clear language.

Indeed some of the people we have counselled have felt that what has happened has been a form of punishment. They have linked their sense of guilt to the disaster and so become both victim and cause.

When we consider guilt we see that the churches have a role to play because guilt, especially irrational guilt, is best overcome by assuring people they've done nothing for which they ought to feel guilty. There is no one, including God, who would hold them guilty. The assurance that God does forgive is a tremendous release to people, and becomes even more powerful when it is based on the fact that God has personally paid the price to procure forgiveness. This can bring a sense of cleansing and restoration and lead to harmonious relationships in a unique way.

Individual guilt can damage relationships. It can bring about lines of division in a community and even corporate guilt can be a significant element. There is a need to allow survivors to celebrate their survival without any sense of guilt. Being able to say, 'it is good that we have survived, it is good that our properties have survived', and for the rest of the community to support them and agree that this is worth celebrating.

#### Some practical issues

Here we consider the role of clergy and of the churches. The churches can play a significant role in helping a community to prepare for disaster. For example, in the Dandenongs, the churches work alongside the other emergency services. By working together on committees they help build bonds of community that will enable the community to cope with a disaster.

These bonds can also help preclude later divisions especially when it is seen that the churches are one group who aren't in it to promote their own cause but are there as the glue between the other different groups. The churches also have a role in providing the lubricant for networking, which is mutual care, and also providing an understanding of how communities can work together and bridge natural divisions whether they are racial or sub-cultural.

Also in the Dandenongs we have regular church services where all the different emergency services are invited and a leading public figure is there to honour them and acknowledge their work. In this way morale is lifted and there is a sense of community bonding. In the event of an emergency the churches play a very significant role. They are able to assist in grief, by conducting major events like funerals and annual memorial services and so on.

There is also the role, especially in Victoria, of outreach visiting. For

example in the 1997 fires the Victorian Council of Churches, together with the Department of Human Services, organised outreach visiting very quickly to some 1700 affected homes.

We ought not to overlook the role of prayer. At the time of writing we are facing one of the worst bushfire seasons in living memory and prayer services were held before the beginning of the fire season asking God to protect lives and property through the Dandenongs. It will be very interesting to see the effect after the fire season has passed.

Some reasons why churches are among the most strategic groups to be used in emergency recovery are:

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**Churches are local groups. They are a natural part of the affected community — an integral part with local sensitivity. Because of their local presence they are usually ready to serve their neighbours. They are rich in human resources. Their people are available in larger numbers than most other community groups, and they are ready to work 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.'**

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- They are local groups. They are a natural part of the affected community—an integral part with local sensitivity. Because of their local presence they are usually ready to serve their neighbours.
- They are rich in human resources. Their people are available in larger numbers than most other community groups, and they are ready to work 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. That was certainly our experience after the Ash Wednesday fires. For perhaps two months we had someone virtually working around the clock insuring that the recovery process moved forward.
- There is a low financial cost in churches, unlike other recovery groups.
- Those who are there are volunteers and are motivated by love and by a sense of self-sacrifice and are trained to care. This is fundamental to their philosophy of life.

- There is a sense of continuity— there is a long-term commitment. After the Ash Wednesday fires the last group still working were the churches, and they are still there working.
- The churches are not motivated by greed or wanting to build empires. They are there to help the local community.
- Their resources are mobile and fast to react. For example, in the 1997 fires one of the first agencies to be ready to provide evacuation centres, meals and so on, were the churches.
- The churches are significant because they have a natural infrastructure that will help in the follow-up process.
- There are also international links, that provide not just prayer support but inspiration and advice and financial support. Those same international links mean that even local people involved in the churches have a world view that helps underpin their lives in times of stress by giving hope and meaning and joy. Out of that robust worldview comes the ability to survive, and that ability to survive can be contagious in an affected community.
- There is a national network behind the churches so that they are not standing by themselves but are backed by resources from right around the country. That certainly shone out during Ash Wednesday.
- The churches are practical. They can do things that almost no other group can. For example, in the Ash Wednesday and 1997 fires, we did things like providing childcare and creches, transport where it was needed, meals, overnight accommodation, long-term accommodation, counselling, pet care, family reunions and the distribution of free plants, so that there was a sense of life and ongoingness in the recovery.
- The churches have large buildings and appropriate facilities for recovery work. As we face this fire season our properties are listed for a refuge centre, an evacuation centre and a recovery centre.
- Most people accept the help of clergy and of the trained volunteers from the churches because they are seen as being neutral and trustworthy.
- The churches are experienced in organising and running large-scale public events. This was true in the aftermath of Port Arthur. The churches are able to address not

just physical but also emotional, social, spiritual and economic needs. This includes playing the role of advocate. After Ash Wednesday there were some communities who had fine human resources and were able to take advantage of the aid that was being offered. Other communities were poor, and had little in the way of human resources. They found that it was the churches that stepped in to argue their case in terms of fair aid distribution.

In terms of multi-culturalism the churches are committed to bridging divides in the community and this can aid recovery at a community level.

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Reverend Dr. Peter Crawford has been the senior pastor of St. Mark's Anglican Church in Emerald, Victoria since 1981. Cockatoo, a township within the parish was devastated by the Ash Wednesday bushfires in 1983. Peter's book '*Beauty from Ashes*' (Acorn Press) tells a part of the story of that town's recovery from the disaster. As a regional coordinator for recovery work under the Victorian Council of Churches and the State Government Department of Human Services, Peter was deeply involved in the 1997 Dandenong Ranges bushfires.

## United Nations 1998 World Disaster Reduction Campaign Prevention begins with information (cont.)

published in the 1998 campaign report and will be used as part of the substance for discussion in the 1998 Internet conference.

### *Compile information kits and success stories*

Compile the information collected on the most important hazards in your country and the potential solutions in the form of printed, audio, or audio-visual information kits and send it to the IDNDR Secretariat in Geneva by 15 September 1998. The material will be published in our 1998 campaign report which will go to all our partners worldwide and to the international press.

### *Hold a round table on natural disaster prevention and the media*

Focus on the most important issues, problems and solutions in your country with regards to the finding, production and dissemination of information in the realm of disaster prevention, discuss it with the officials, the professionals and the concerned population. Send your recommendations to the Secretariat by 15 September. The results will be published in the 1998 campaign report.

### *Make a list of useful contacts*

Make a list of relevant persons to contact with reference to natural disaster management in your country. Give the list of natural disaster management

professionals to your partners in the media so that they have sources of information on natural disaster management issues.

### *Involve pupils and communication students*

Encourage pupils and communication students in your country to report on natural hazards, disasters and natural disaster prevention measures in your country. Send the material to the IDNDR Secretariat by 15 September 1998. The material will be published and the winner will receive a small grant to further his or her work in disaster prevention issues.

### **Links to other sources of information**

The IDNDR Secretariat has produced an extensive list of further contacts in the field of natural disaster management. The list is in the form of websites and can be viewed under the 'links to further contacts' section of the following website: <http://www.quipu.net:1997/> and <http://www.reliefweb.int/>.

For more information on the IDNDR RADIUS initiative, please visit the RADIUS home page: <http://www.geohaz.org/radius/>; for information on the UN Task Force on El Niño, coordinated by the IDNDR Secretariat, please click on 'latest on El

Nino' (under 18 December 1997) at <http://www.reliefweb.int/>.

### **Support materials**

A series of support materials and guidelines for activities are proposed by the IDNDR Secretariat to help you celebrate the campaign theme.

These include:

- 2 posters
- 1 press kit
- 1 video
- stickers
- 2 information leaflets on IDNDR

The IDNDR Secretariat looks forward to your feedback on the above mentioned activities and encourages you and your organisation to write back with proposals for further activities and information on potentially related events.

For more information, please contact:

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