

GROWING Together

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WHEN DISASTER STRIKES – HOW CHRISTIANS RESPOND

The pictures are dramatic and disturbing. Volunteers rescue stranded shorebirds coated with oil. Crowds run for their lives as fiery towers come crashing to the ground. Unsuspecting vacationers are swept away by an enormous wave that appears without warning.

We are regularly bombarded with news of devastation. Whether far away or close to home, the spectre of human tragedy and suffering has a profound effect upon our lives. We react with horror and ask ourselves, “How is this possible? Could it happen to me?”

Yes, we are all vulnerable – an unsettling realization, to be sure. And most of us want to do something to help. But what? Send flowers? Attend a rock concert? Make a donation? To whom? Will it reach those who desperately need it?

When a disaster takes place half way around the world, we know of it almost immediately. The news media enable us to watch and listen in as events unfold and emergency personnel begin to respond. But is this simply another form of “reality TV”?



Which events get reported? Why are the eyes of the world focussed on one disaster while another goes unnoticed? Once the story has played itself out, will we ever hear of these people again? Understandably, we grow tired of such news when it becomes a steady diet. It's easy for us to flip the channel and move on.

In recent years the public has responded to disasters with huge outpourings of sympathy. But these are short-lived and fail to address issues of long-term structural development. As a result, the poorest remain most vulnerable. 1.2 billion people live in absolute poverty – less than \$1 a

day. Despite Canada's reputation as a compassionate nation, many countries give far more generously to foreign aid.

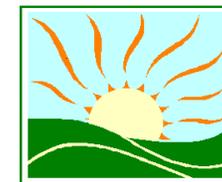
Christians have a special interest in all of this. As followers of Jesus we cannot stand idly by. What can we do?

The first response is to be informed. We cannot ignore these issues or pretend they are not our responsibility. They are. Jesus said, “Just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it (or didn't do it!) to me,” (*Matthew 25:40*). When news of disaster arrives, we are called to do more than flip the channel.

The second response is to hear Christ's call to community. Suffering has the ability to draw us all together as families, communities and nations. Suffering can strengthen the bonds of our common humanity. Truly, “If one member suffers, all suffer together ... if one member is honoured, all rejoice together,” (*1 Corinthians 12:26*). From suffering comes the recognition that we are not alone.

The third response is to act with compassion. We remember Jesus' great commandment “to love one another as I have loved you,” (*John 15:12*). Knowing ourselves to be loved by God, we in turn are able to share that love with others. Every prayer that is offered, every hour that is volunteered, every donation that is made, brings God's love to the world.

The fourth response is to cultivate an attitude of hope. Disasters confront us with need that is sometimes overwhelming. But we are not discouraged. Shorebirds recover, towers are rebuilt, Tsunami warning systems are set in place. Our hope comes from God whose purpose is to bring new life to all creation: “See, I am making all things new,” (*Revelation 21:5*). For Christians, disaster is never the final word. The final word is from God. And it is always a word of hope.



GROWING TOGETHER is a series of five Sunday bulletin inserts for the ecumenical education of Christ's faithful.

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