

# SNAPSHOTS OF FAITH, HOPE AND GROWTH IN DISASTER RESPONSE CHAPLAINCY

by Robert H. Munson, ThD.  
and  
Celia P. Munson, Clinical Chaplain (CPSP).

## Abstract

**This paper considers the practical role of chaplains, as religious professionals, serving within the setting of a disaster, whether natural or man-made. While religion is often considered in terms of structures or individual belief, its sociological function is key in recovery from disasters. Religion provides an interpretation for crises of the past, as well as perspective for addressing the uncertainties of the future. Disaster response chaplains utilize pastoral care, informed by social sciences, to provide short-term guiding, sustaining, healing, and reconciling. Disaster Response Chaplains recognize that there are religious resources within the community and individuals to aid recovery.**

**This paper takes a few “snapshots” of experiences with various disasters in recent years in the Philippines to identify key insights regarding the appropriate roles of chaplains within the context of disasters. In many communities the primary source for social healing is found within its religious institutions. Many communities, in fact, lack alternative resources. Unfortunately, these local religious resources are in a state of crisis as well in times of community disaster. Thus, chaplains as outsiders, provide a needed role in pastoral care until the time that local human and institutional assets are able to function properly.**

Does religious care have a place in times of crisis? Disaster Response Chaplains serve based on the presumption that the answer is “Yes” and that both the faith of an individual and of a community may aid in healing after a natural disaster. Such a role does not depend necessarily on the specific religion or faith, but in the function of religion within a culture. According to Bronislaw Malinowski, religion provides two major sociological functions. First, it provides a system for dealing with the future unknown. Second, it provides answers for a community in times of crisis. These two functions, then, are directly applicable after a natural disaster. The latter function provides perspective and meaning for the disaster crisis. The former function gives perspective for dealing with the unknowns in the return to (a new) normal.<sup>1</sup>

A noted cultural trait of Filipinos is their strong religious fervor and faith. As individuals, they have a strong belief in the divine. Most commonly, this faith is more than just expressed as individuals, but in community as well. Such faith is commonly identifiable in structured communities of faith, or organized religion. But even those who do not identify themselves as religious often see themselves as spiritual and seek comfort in the divine.

The following are a few snapshots of disaster response that, perhaps, will be instructive in the role of faith and disaster response chaplaincy in the healing of individuals and communities after a disaster.

## 1. Religious Faith and Hope

*One of our teams (Bukal Life Care)<sup>2</sup> travelled to Iloilo to work with the survivors of an island that*

*stood in the path of Typhoon Yolanda. Baliguian Island is a small flat island of 800 residents on just a few hectares of land. Its location in the Visayan Sea without shelter of nearby land made the residents' situation particularly precarious. Curiously however, there was no loss of life due to the storm. According to the residents, a miracle happened. Now, this article is not about miracles, but the perspective of the residents. According to the islanders, as they were praying for relief, great waves were coming their way sure to overwhelm them. Then, suddenly, a bright light from an unknown source shown and the waves dissipated. The residents believed that God answered their prayers and they were rescued from sure death.*

*Disaster Response chaplains did come to the island after the event, but found that the people had a positive outlook due to the faith. As such, their role there was limited, and the focus was more on reestablishing community social structures and economic livelihood.*

Interpreting the above even as a miracle, of course, is not the only possible perspective. Others could question the recollections, and the interpretations of the events of the storm. They may choose to focus on the physical destruction on the island and the considerable economic loss resulting from the storm. Some might reject a spiritualistic interpretation, while still others might see fit to blame God. In man-made disasters, it may seem quite easy to find someone to blame, but who can one blame for a typhoon? Natural disasters are, after all, commonly referred to as “acts of God.”

The key point here is that the people of Baliguian see themselves as having been blessed by God. This perspective has proven to be helpful in their recovery, and even allowed them to help those on neighboring islands. The people of Baliguian Island have hope for the future. They now often describe their place as Miracle Island. Disaster Response Chaplains cannot produce miracles, but they can help people utilize their own faith perspective to have hope for a better future.

## **2. Unfinished Business**

*I (Celia) saw Anna (names here are changed) during crisis group intervention after a local man-made disaster. She was there but not REALLY there. She was staring afar with a blank look on her face, and she was not interacting with others in the group. At the end of the group session, she slipped out quietly without being noticed. I would not have paid much attention to her except that her niece approached me and related how her aunt had not been the same since the death of three of the members of her family in the recent disaster.*

*During the break for lunch, I saw Anna again... sort of by herself, though she was busy helping in the dining hall. I made my way to her to introduce myself. I asked her how she has been doing, and if it was okay if we could talk in a more private place.*

*Anna began to talk about her daughter, Sandra. Sandra had always been an obedient daughter. But three days before the disaster, Anna discovered, unwittingly, that her daughter was planning to marry a man. Anna was convinced that this man was NOT the right husband for Sandra. She had not been informed and had not been sought for blessing. Because of the depth of her disapproval and anger, Anna slashed herself in the abdomen publicly. She felt that doing this would demonstrate the intensity of her rejection of Sandra's choice for a husband, and her own unhappiness with not being consulted.*

*Three days after the slashing event, disaster struck the community and among those killed were Anna's husband and two of her children (including Sandra), Sadly, there was no reconciliation before this tragedy. Anna, Sandra, and other members of the family had unfinished business. It will take time for Anna to come to terms with this-- a horrible event compounded by the fact that it occurred without a chance to be reconciled.*

Disaster response chaplaincy, although informed by the social sciences, has its grounding in historical pastoral care. Pastoral care focuses on guiding, sustaining, healing, and reconciling.<sup>3</sup> All four of these areas come into play in times of crisis. In the case of Anna, at least three of those four were great needs.

One difficulty with crisis care is its short duration. One comes into the lives of those who have suffered devastation, and tries to provide some small amount of closure or comfort. Yet when there is unfinished business, more time is needed to care for those who are experiencing complicated grief. The duration for pastoral care needed far exceeds the time available. Fortunately, every community has religious professionals for whom individuals may be referred. That is certainly advantageous in remote areas where other care is not readily available. In the case of Anna, local pastoral care resources were available. In fact, our group was invited by a local parish. Not all pastors, priests, and other religious professionals, however, have been well-trained in pastoral care skills. So an important role in disaster preparedness is not only to have trained disaster response chaplains, but to have local religious professionals trained in basic pastoral care skills.

### **3. The Desperate Search for Meaning.**

Disasters are a time of chaos-- psychoemotional, social, physical, and economic. It is also a time of spiritual chaos as the individual and community come to grips with existential concerns. Humans seek meaning, understanding the past, and predicting the future. A common question after a disaster is "Why did this happen?"

*After Typhoon Yolanda there was a considerable "industry" in the Philippines, and even beyond its borders, of religious professionals who sought to provide answers. A similar phenomenon happened in churches and other religious institutions in the United States immediately after 9-11. The 9-11 incident was man-made, however, with a person and group to blame so the perspective given was considerably different than for Typhoon Yolanda. A common theme was that Typhoon Yolanda occurred because God was punishing the Philippines. The exact reason for the punishment varied, but there was a strong belief that God was angry and lashing out at the Filipino people.*

*One of these religious professionals was often quoted. A few months before, he had made a prediction regarding earthquakes and storms hitting the Philippines. A strong earthquake in Bohol in September, and a typhoon hitting Samar and Leyte (two of many locations noted) appeared to many to add credence to this man's words. I (Robert) had written on my weblog some on these alleged prophecies noting the low predictive value of them.<sup>4</sup> Earthquakes and storms in the Philippines are extremely common, and one is destined to be proved accurate as long as one gives no limiting details (such as when it will occur, or the nature of the devastation). I noted the large number of people who were forwarding edited versions of the "prophecy" and others who were actually falsely reporting fulfillment of another prophecy, flesh-eating bacteria in Pangasinan, made by the same individual. After one false report was turned into a news report and aired on a major channel in the Philippines, my website received over 3000 hits in less than three hours. More typical site activity is 20-25 hits per day.*

It is quite common for a victim of disaster to ask "Why did this happen?" For some it is quite tempting to answer this question or queries on existential concerns; but this is not advisable. First, it is quite likely that the chaplain does not know. Consider, the flooding in Cagayan de Oro back in 2011. If a victim asked six people the reason the devastation occurred, he might get several answers. One might say it was caused by a combination of heavy rain and illegal logging. Another might say that it was the unfathomable will of God. Yet another might say it is some sort of cosmic punishment. One might blame the victim for building their house in the flood plain. All of these

answers are either unhelpful or uncertain. Second, seeking to replace personal religious tools with that of the chaplain during a time of instability is likely to be harmful. Some religious professionals believe a time of crisis is a good time to proselytize-- to replace the belief structure of victim with that of the care provider. However, the chaos of the disaster is not aided by the chaos of spiritual reassessment. It is not a time for another major change and verbal assent to change is unlikely to have permanency anyway. Frankly, if the chaplain is fully convinced that his/her answers for the crisis are superior to that of the survivor--- the best way to help them see this is through actions that demonstrate godly care and concern for the individual.

There is an intense need of people to find meaning in times of major crises. Even claims of divine punishment and pandemics were grasped at in desperation because it seemed superior to embracing uncertainty. Viktor Frankl has noted the connection between surviving the unthinkable (in his case, German concentration camp) and the ability to find positive meaning and purpose.<sup>5</sup>

Disaster Response Chaplains walk a fine line here. Chaplains help the traumatized to find meaning without imposing meaning. This is even more challenging since not all religious meanings are equally beneficial for healing. Keith Pargament has noted that there are numerous ways that individuals cope, find religious meaning.<sup>6</sup> For one person, their understanding of God as loving and concerned for them is not shaken in tragedy, but in fact find meaning in growing closer to God, and being supportive of others who are suffering. Another person may embrace the interpretation of God as vindictive or unconcerned. Such diverse interpretations may be seen as supportive of the facts from their own religious perspective, but they are not necessarily equally beneficial in the processes of sustaining, reconciling, and healing.

#### **4. Ministry of Listening Presence**

*In 2010, our group was invited to go to a small community in Benguet that had survived landslides. We did a medical mission (standard short-term medical care, with dental and minor surgery). We also tied to it crisis stress defusing for survivors. For children, this involved play, as well as some art therapy. For the adults, the main activity was simply listening. The residents greatly appreciated our visit. During our ocular visit (site check before the actual mission) a truck was there dropping off relief goods for the community. In fact, one of the rooms at the community school had a considerable amount of relief goods that had been dropped off by various government and charity groups.*

*One of the residents told us, "Thank you for coming. Many have come to give us things. And we do very much appreciate that. But you were the first that actually asked us what happened, and then took time to listen. Thank you."*

"Simply listening" is not that simple. People struggle at this. We all have the tendency to only listen in part. We often are easily distracted by other things going on external to the conversation, and we commonly are more focused on our inner voice and how we will respond, than we are to what we are to respond to. "One of the greatest gifts you can give a person is your full, undivided, attention, trying your best to understand what that person is trying to say."<sup>7</sup>

If one takes time to listen, the stories are worth hearing. Some children in this community noted their main sorrow was tsinellas (footwear sometimes known as flip-flops). A number of them found the next day that their tsinellas had been washed away in the storm. They had come home and, out of habit, left their tsinellas outside of the door only to find them gone the next day. Some would say that this is a trivial matter, but to these children it was a great loss. These children come from families of limited means. They are responsible to guard and protect the limited items in their

possessions. I (Robert) recall my father describing how at the beginning of the school year, his parents bought him a pencil, and he was to keep and protect that one pencil. He would describe how he would very carefully whittle down the writing end bit by bit to ensure that it would last the entire school year. These children, survivors of the typhoon lost things entrusted to them. Their stories may seem trivial, especially compared to those who lost far more in that area, but the loss was important to them--- and so the loss IS important. Another man described how he risked his own life going back to his house to get his jeepney (vehicle in the Philippines used for public transport). Although he lost a great deal in the storm, his entire family survived, along with his jeepney, his source of income. While some could, justifiably, be bitter about their losses, he was grateful to God for what he still had. His sacrificial help in the medical mission was, in part, his way of expressing thanks to God. This story was inspirational to us, but the stories of hurts and losses and anger with God are just as important to be heard.

Chaplains need to be a listening presence, allowing individuals and groups to express their fears, struggles, sorrows, hopes, and joys. This is a ministry because people need to be heard.

## **5. Helping the Helpers**

*In late 2009, several of us decided to band together to help out people in our community who had suffered loss from Typhoon Pepeng. In a neighboring barangay, a major landslide due to the storm had killed over 70 people. Some were close relatives of friends of ours. It was a very sad time. As we sought to find our role, we became aware of the needs of those who were involved in recovery-- in this case body recovery. Young men and women from the local police training school were conscripted to help. They were bused up to the site every morning to work and bused back late in the day, for several weeks. At first, they were given no tools but their bare hands to dig looking for the dead. With the end of the storm, the area became very dry and the mud turned to dust. Our group, another ministry, and a nearby church were able to provide some items to help the helpers. These included shovels, face masks and gloves. Later we were able to do group stress defusing to help them process their experience. We also did a medical mission with them, since a high percentage of them had developed respiratory problems from dust inhalation.*

We think of Primary Victims (or survivors). We may also think of Secondary Victims--- family, friends, and neighbors of those who were most directly affected. But the Tertiary Victims... the disaster responders... need help as well. The cadets struggled with health problems, but emotional problems as well. Some had dug into the ground with bare hands and come across bodies. This is difficult, but perhaps compounding the difficulty was that they were conscripts, not volunteers. They needed to know that people cared about them.

## **Conclusions**

We are religious beings. Even those who reject formal religions, seek meaning in their lives and in the world around them. In times of disaster, not only may one be affected physically, structurally, and socially, but one's meaning structure and social ties are disrupted. Chaplains can help.

It is also recognized that other respondents may have to deal with religious or spiritual issues of victims. As such, it is beneficial for all caregivers to have some level of orientation in how to address religious or existential concerns. Ignoring the beliefs of victims is ill-advised, as is challenging those same beliefs. Victims must understand that they are able to ventilate freely without being judged or condemned.

People need to know that there is hope for the future and that life can again have meaning with meaningful relationships. Things may never return to normal, but there is hope for a New Normal. Chaplains work to fulfil such needs. People need to see the love of God expressed in a personal way, that recognizes their humanity and their need for hope, their need for connection, their need for love.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup>“Bronislaw Malinowski: The Role of Magic and Religion” (<http://www2.fiu.edu/~bassd/malinowski.pdf>) in excerpt from “Culture” by Bronislaw Malinowski, from *Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences*, Seligman and Johnson eds. Volume IV (Macmillan Publishing, 1931), 634-642.

<sup>2</sup>Bukal Life Care, Baguio City, Philippines. <http://www.bukallifecare.org>.

<sup>3</sup>The four-fold ministry of pastoral care was first so identified by Clebsch and Jaekle. *Pastoral Care in Historical Perspectives*, (Prentice-Hall, 1964).

<sup>4</sup>Some discussion on this is in our blogpost, <http://munsonmissions.org/2013/12/08/prophecies-and-typhoons-and-plagues-in-no-particular-order-part-ii/>

<sup>5</sup>Viktor Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning* (Beacon Press, 2006). Originally published 1946.

<sup>6</sup>Kenneth I. Pargament, Harold G. Koenig, and Lisa M. Perez. “The Many Methods of Religious Coping: Development and Initial Validation of the RCOPE.” *Journal of Clinical Psychology*, Vol. 56(4), 519–543 (2000). This article looks both at the roles of religion in helping individuals cope with crisis, but also ways to measure this.

<sup>7</sup>Charles Benton quote, Virginia Baptist Disaster Response Chaplain.