

Mission in Crisis

Kurtis Smith

Abstract: In recognition of the tenth anniversary of Hurricane Katrina, this article addresses the missiological aspects of critical incidents (large and small disasters) and presents best practices for these fertile mission fields that are often “ripe for harvest.” Small crises can change individual lives. Massive disasters can transform entire institutional systems, economics, language, and even the nature of mission work. Through trauma and shared travail, people learn new patterns for life. This article proposes that (a) Christians in mission can respond to crises and help turn such events into “transformissional” moments, (b) the *missio Dei* might be helpfully defined as “a heavenly disaster response to the crisis of a broken world,” and that (c) the church’s practices in mission and ministry reflect the emergency of God’s passionate restoration of paradise in Christ’s gutsy response.

Introduction

A “disaster industry” thrives in the wake of 9/11, tsunamis in the Indian and Pacific Oceans, hurricanes like Katrina, the earthquakes in Haiti and Nepal, and various other natural or human-caused incidents, such as the refugee crisis from war in the Middle East, school shootings, and data hacking. Disaster experts say that “the U.S. has made crucial progress in disaster readiness.”¹

Former Executive Director for the State of Minnesota’s Emergency Medical Services Regulatory Board, Pam Biladeau, holds a Master’s Degree in Homeland Defense and Security from the Naval Postgraduate School and certifications as an Emergency Manager, Firefighter, and Emergency Medical Technician. Biladeau is also an active Lutheran follower of Jesus. She, too, believes the United States has made progress in disaster readiness. “We have greatly developed our preparedness and response systems as well as volunteer management—since Hurricane Katrina.”²

In addition, Biladeau references Psalm 127 in the context of disaster response, “Our preparedness and response structure, through the National Incident Management System, is much stronger and more developed than ever before, but I

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believe all the relief efforts in the world languish and become stagnant without Jesus. Scripture tells us that unless the Lord builds the house, it is useless for the builders to work on it.”³

Certainly, we have learned much about disasters in the past ten years. While acknowledging the value of updated disaster preparedness, crisis management, and crisis communication plans, this article will focus on mission matters. If Christians are to respond well to Biladeau’s call for crisis response in the name of Jesus, missiologists must provide helpful language, insights, and strategies for responding to such a mission field. There are also benefits to thinking about mission in light of disaster response as a whole.

The Disaster Field as Mission Field—Mission Metaphors Explored

After Hurricane Katrina, I had the privilege of working professionally with thousands of Christian volunteers over the course of the next five years. Many people from the region, like me, recognized the incredible outpouring of Christian love along the Gulf Coast. One conversation I vaguely recall talked about how followers of Jesus were motivated. The conversation concluded, “Christian compassion comes from our guts.” I’m not entirely sure who made the comment; it wasn’t me, but the phrase certainly struck me.

When we study the New Testament Greek word frequently translated as “compassion,” *σπλαγχνίζομαι*, we learn about an emotional reaction from our guts or bowels.⁴ However, the English word “compassion” seems to fall a bit short to illustrate the depth of Jesus’ response from His guts in such passages as Matthew 9:36–38, Matthew 15:30–32, Mark 1:40–42, or Mark 15:32. Followers of Jesus, filled with His Spirit, do reflect His response to people in need—from their guts. Christian volunteers do bring more than natural help. Followers of Jesus carry into disaster scenarios the supernatural Lord of the wind and the waves. They represent a God who brings to storms of life a peace that passes all understanding. They offer means of grace, mutual consolation, and hope.

In what might be characterized as a somewhat ironic evangelistic move, a Somali Muslim friend of mine once gave me the following bumper sticker: “Those who are sure of their outcome are the most generous.” Followers of Jesus know that this world is not their home, and they are sure of their future. Because of that fact, they are often willing to sacrifice their belongings, their bodies—in fact, their entire lives—for the sake of others and not themselves or their own salvation.

Effective disaster response involves entire dedication, the whole person serving, and the whole Body of Christ. Despite my personal experience working in disaster scenarios, I must admit that I am not a naturally-gifted caregiver. I struggle to serve and comfort others when and where others might do it with ease. Other Christians

are especially gifted at ministering to those in crisis. The key is for all of us to work together as the Body of Christ, volunteering (or might I suggest, dedicating) our personal gifts when applicable, so that Jesus is recognized as the ultimate hero.

It is easy to sing disaster volunteer praises when looking back at the “Cajun Armada” and the literally millions of volunteers that came to help after Hurricane Katrina, but there are downsides to be addressed. Sin always enters in, and the habit of thinking as the “First World Church” that will save others according to what feels good for us easily takes over.

Jesus offered both mercy and message to hurting people. But questions arise in the modern world. How are we supposed to respond to those in need? How might we prevent paternalistic disaster responses? Is direct charity an appropriate response in the case of emergencies, or as Christians must we always lean toward development-minded practices? Are charity and development mutually exclusive? How have social gospel and prosperity gospel theologies impacted our various Lutheran styles of crisis response in mission?

Pause for a moment and consider which actions you would choose and the reasons for them. In responding to Hurricane Katrina, would you have handed out crosses at the celebration/dedication of restored homes, or would you hold back on the gift in order not to offend a potential nonbeliever? Would you have accepted government funds for your projects’ tasks or declined so that you might freely share God’s Word with a victim? How much time, energy, and money would you spend on the reconstruction of houses and communities as opposed to verbal proclamation of the Gospel?

During the Hurricane Katrina response, those of us in Christian disaster response leadership engaged in significant debate about the relationship between mercy and message. There is not enough space to explore and answer all of these complex issues in one journal article. Suffice it to say, I have learned that sometimes instead of paying a person’s light bill it is more spiritually transformative to go and sit with him in the dark.

Transformation occurs at the intersection between the passions of the world and the Passion of Christ. How does it occur? During disasters, individual ultimate allegiances and corporate idols are chaotically shaken to their roots. Victims cry out as their hopes and dreams are devastated. It is at such “disastrous locations” that the passions of people can be transformed by the Passion of Christ. God sends missionaries to meet people at these crossroads. The Word of Christ can bring hope and comfort through the Holy Spirit. Missionaries in disaster zones may become midwives for passion-filled transformation. Crises are “transformissional.”⁵

How might we prepare for such transformissional moments and learn to be effective in gutsy disaster response?

Mission Education—Best Practices for Mission in Crises

Gutsy responses to crises can both help and hinder service. Some Christians are ready to charge in to help. Such quick responses can often mean the difference between life and death. However, strong mission education and good training for disaster preparedness can bring a helpful response and prevent second disasters. What best practices must missionaries to disaster fields learn, and how might we express them?

After Hurricane Katrina, one of my roles was to direct (Re)Institute, a restoration education and evangelism training center that worked in partnership with LCMS World Relief and LCMS World Mission to train people in mission-minded disaster response around the nation. After four years of Katrina relief and response work, there was a lot to tell about best practices for God’s mission in a disaster zone, and we endeavored to share the experience and knowledge with others.

(Re)Institute’s mission was “to prepare and involve people for disaster outreach.” Always bathed in prayer, our model for disaster outreach took the form of a four-week model: two weeks of preparation before entering the disaster zone, one week of guidance in the disaster zone, and one week of reflection after the time of volunteer service. We hoped to help transform critical incidents into critical events for Jesus.



Figure 1. (RE)Institute Model by Kurtis Smith © 2008.

Our (RE)Institute model worked well for its time. I continue to use it when consulting with churches about disaster preparedness today. Now, there are many other resources and training opportunities from the Federal Government, specialized non-profits, and other Lutheran agencies working in disasters such as Orphan Grain Train, Laborers for Christ, Lutheran Church Charities, Lutheran World Relief, Extra Mile Ministries, Camp Restore, etc. FEMA works with local communities and emergency response teams to offer Citizen Emergency Response Team (CERT) training. The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod has developed its own process and program: Lutheran Emergency Response Teams (LERT). Much of what we taught in those days around the country through (RE)Institute, in partnership with LCMS departments, can now be found in the current LERT training manual—a strong resource for anyone interested in this topic.

Whatever model or tools are used to train Christians for disaster response, *a first practice or habit for Christians to learn is to recognize the disaster fields all around them*. We must pray to see the world as God sees it and hear the world as God hears it. As we do, we recognize that the need for Christ’s compassion is both far away and close by. Hurting people are everywhere, and most people—both Christians and people not yet in love with Jesus—are survivors of one disaster or another. Maybe not everyone has survived a super typhoon or gone through anything as dramatic as an earthquake, but a hurting person has usually experienced some form of crisis in his or her life. If some have not experienced a large disaster, they may have gone through a quite personal crisis such as a house fire, a rape, or a suicide in their family. The disaster industry calls all crises, big or small, “critical incidents.”⁶ Critical incidents can lead to critical, life-changing events by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Let me be clear: Recognizing that disaster fields are ripe for harvest does not mean that Christians should become “evangelistic ambulance chasers.” No one should ever capitalize on someone else’s suffering. Instead, it simply means that people are readily looking for hope-filled answers to their problems and followers of Jesus have the most loving, hope-filled answer on earth. Christians can offer a real way, truth, and life for today’s problems. We have eternal answers for temporal issues. People are literally crying out to be saved—one rarely has to convince victims of their need for a savior in these scenarios. Therefore, we should pray to the Lord of the Harvest because the fields are ripe with suffering people, but caring, well-trained laborers are few. And, when hurting people are crying out for hope, we need to be ready to give a reason for the hope within us, and do it with gentleness and respect (1 Pt 3:15).

A second practice and habit is to act with prudence. We must think clearly when disaster strikes. When people heard about Hurricane Katrina and the flood in New Orleans, many volunteers dropped everything and came to help. Of course, some of these didn’t stop to check where they might stay, or what they were going to eat. In

fact, some didn't even realize that gasoline was not going to be available for them to use for a return trip. Other people meant well, so they sent clothes to the disaster zone. Little did they realize that there weren't many people living in the disaster zone who needed clothing because most of them had evacuated and became displaced. It was the displaced people who needed clothing, and most of them were scattered throughout the country. For example, when we evacuated, our family had only packed a few summer clothes and our swimming suits that we thought we'd need for a weekend at a hotel. Weeks after the storm, and back home to my clothes, I spent a whole day working to empty a church parking lot of clothing that had been dumped there for victims. None of the clothing was needed. It was in the way of our recovery. Some of the clothing was even for winter weather, useless in the Louisiana heat!

If you plan to volunteer, take time to learn and gather information about the disaster zone. It will help you be more productive when arriving on scene. In catastrophic scenarios, early volunteers must be self-sustaining and self-supporting, as there might not be electricity, water, food, bedding, or phones (even mobile phones might not work) to communicate. Know the climate and weather forecast for the time and place you are planning to serve. Know the language, history, and geography as well as cultural details. Knowing these facts may make the difference between opening doors of hope for survivors and creating another disaster. If nothing else, gathering information about their community shows survivors that you truly care about them. (It is interesting to note how much disaster volunteer preparations parallel that of missionary training!)

Volunteers especially need to take into account the actual situation of people suffering a disaster, testing their assumptions against what they see and hear. For me, a favorite Eastern parable makes the case. Dave Gibbons wrote about the parable in his 2009 book, *The Monkey and the Fish*. I've heard the story told by various others in years past. It goes something like this:

A monkey had survived a mighty storm and sat up in a tree while eating a banana. He swapped disaster stories with birds as they rested above the rushing river below, flooded after the deluge. As the monkey looked down he noticed fish struggling in the swirling waters; they were jumping but didn't seem to be getting anywhere fast. So, the monkey decided to help. He hung down by his tail and snatched one of the struggling fish out of the water and threw it up on shore. The monkey smiled as he thought of the great service he'd done and proclaimed to those who might listen, "Look how I've made that fish happy—see him flopping about!" Eventually the monkey grew very proud of his volunteer service, as he observed the fish becoming more and more peace-filled. Little did the monkey realize that he'd killed the fish.

Matthew 7:12 is true: “Do unto those as you would have them do unto you.” But as disaster volunteers and missionaries we must also consider 1 Corinthians 9:22–23, “To the weak I became weak, to win the weak. I have become all things to all men so that by all possible means I might save some. I do all this for the sake of the Gospel that I may share in its blessings.”

Consider this true story. Disaster mission volunteers were proud of their efforts restoring a house destroyed by Katrina; why, volunteers had even put up drywall to separate the bathroom from the master bedroom. Then the owner, who five years earlier had worked so hard to build the house in the first place, returned. “I waited all my life for a bathroom of my own. But you have decided what was better for me and my family. I know that this is a small thing and I should be grateful, but no one asked me what I wanted. . . . I wanted my own bathroom.” Christians in mission in and after a crisis must listen first and understand the real needs and desires of victims before taking action.

Prudent listening cannot only clarify needs and prevent further disasters, it can be a balm for the pain experienced during critical incidents.

A third practice and habit is to share our disaster experiences and thereby learn to empathize.

Sharing stories of hurt can help survivors and volunteers relate to one another, empathizing as fellow travelers in the human journey. Often it is through sharing stories of suffering when God’s presence becomes real, and His story becomes our story. If we listen closely to God, Jesus relates to us among the debris of our lives: through His own story of suffering.

In another example, after the tsunami in Banda Aceh, Indonesian teachers and others recounted their loss of family members, students, and school buildings. One man told of fleeing with his family on his motorcycle, only never to see them again. He swam alone desperately, then was thrown up on the side of a hill. But his story did not end there. The man turned to the listening group, which included my father, and said, “You don’t know how great it is to tell my story. I’ve never shared this story with anyone else. Telling it now, removes the pain.”

This is an example of the importance of allowing others to tell their stories. One cannot effectively relate to survivors unless one is willing to note their presence and share in their pain—attempt to relate. It’s OK to ask, “How did this disaster affect you and your loved ones?” Not everyone will want to share, but if a survivor desires to talk, take the time to listen.

Sharing disaster tales may open the door for hope in Jesus to be shared, by the disaster response missionaries or by those who have, in Christian faith, suffered.

On the occasion of LCMS World Mission’s 100th Anniversary celebration, it was my role to help tell the story of the growth of God’s mission during the

humanitarian crisis of Liberia's civil war. I listened to many stories of survivors and recorded them on video. Through a translator, one of the women I interviewed told of how her country was gone, her own home was destroyed, her husband and sons were all killed by rebels, and how we stood at that moment over the bones of her community. I was in awe of this woman and hurt for her. She, however, smiled all the way through our interview.

At first I thought my questions weren't getting through to the woman. Was she in denial? Was I not listening? Was I not relating?

Eventually, I asked through my interpreter, "Why are you smiling?"

She answered in the only English word she used during our interview. . . "Jesus!" This widow had lost everything and yet through all her pain, she could still smile because of the Christ.

In listening to the woman and hurting with her, Jesus' love for each of us became clear to me, and we related to one another as fellow travelers in the struggles of life. As the woman witnessed what God had done for her, Jesus became clear to me among the debris. Together, we shared hope in Christ. Our interdependence—the way God created us to be—was restored. It was a transformative moment for us both.

Recognition of crisis, prudent listening, and empathetic sharing, these are important steps in the practice of mission in crisis. Then there is much work to be done. It has been said that "one of the church's greatest evangelistic opportunities is to systematically, competently, efficaciously and compassionately distribute aid, solace and hope to masses of people who are paralyzed by shock, trapped under rubble, hemorrhaging profusely or overcome with grief. This level of preparation [and effort] requires an investment of time, energy, resources, and selfless risk..."⁷

Faith-based volunteers active in disasters can learn a lot about this work from others, such as first responders or agencies like the Red Cross or the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA). The government now has a wealth of training materials and resources from which to learn and be a part of that unity. It is worth becoming "NIMS compliant" (National Incident Management System certified) if you or your missionary team desire to regularly serve when disaster strikes. At a minimum, such training will familiarize you with the terms and acronyms used by government workers in disaster scenarios and help you find such places as the EOC (Emergency Operation Center) where volunteers can sign in to help.

Finally, rest is also an important practice and habit in mission in crisis. Wildland fire fighters are required to work no more than three weeks on the line and then must take time off in order to rest. If they don't rest, they become a danger to themselves and the rest of their team.⁸ "Studies show that working 12 hours or more

per day is associated with a 37% increased risk of injury.”⁹ The same goes for faith-based disaster volunteers. Learn from my mistake. In responding to people after Hurricane Katrina, my wife had to pack us off for a family vacation because I was suffering from classic compassion fatigue.

Critical Incident Stress Management (CISM) is one form of rest for first responders to disasters. Just as missionaries returning to their home country and youth groups returning from gatherings need debriefing, those who have shared heart, hands, and whole being in crisis response need safe places to share their experience.

Reestablishing relationships at home after serving “away” in a disaster zone is another part of mission in crisis, and it may be hard. The experience may have evoked personal issues—loss or abuse, for example—or evidence of issues for others, such as pornography or drug addiction. Some caregivers feel as though their time away has earned them a certificate to criticize their church. Others may have to suffer criticism of their work or time away. Keeping a relationship with Jesus in this time is a necessity and a challenge for responder and people “at home.”

Chaos Isn’t All Bad: Interpreting the Learning

In the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, for a homeschooling exercise, my wife had our kids write out a list of all the consequences of the disaster. They wrote down such things as losing favorite toys, losing friends, losing their swing set, losing their church building, etc. Then they realized that there were some positive things. Our eldest daughter Sophia had several opportunities to share publically about her experience. She readily proclaimed, “We started out mentioning negative things and then realized that there were actually more positive than negative items. The best thing was that out of the storm people came to share Jesus with other people. Some people are now Christian because of the storm. . . . It’s just like the Bible says ‘all things work for the good of those who love God!’” (Rom 8:28).

Every global crisis and individual disaster deserves God’s compassion and may be an occasion for speaking God’s Good News. Are we confronted with victims of sexual abuse and family violence? Might there be war refugees in our midst? We can listen, serve them with dignity, and when the time is right share the Gospel.

There is much to learn professionally from crisis response agencies, local and international. Strengthening the relationship between mission and crisis transforms critical incidents into critical events for Jesus. The events and the people who experience crises are not our resource for social, political, or emotional gain, and certainly not for nurturing a sense of our righteousness because we are so good. Our righteousness is complete in Christ. However, our humble service may be the occasion for others to enjoy His righteousness, His love. As well, might the mission of God be the restoration of the world the way it was created to be in the first place?

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In Conclusion

Ultimately, all mission fields are disaster fields; otherwise, there would be no mission. There is brokenness everywhere, and no mission field is without it. The old saying is true: “The only difference between the rich and poor in a flood is the size of their debris piles along the curb.” Sin, evil, death, and destruction are around every corner. We all experience suffering; and, at some points of desperation, we might even ask, “Is God to blame?”

We can read the title of this article in one of two ways. On the one hand, we might take the title as a negative statement that God’s mission is in trouble. We can focus on our pain. We can question our practices. We can wish that our churches would participate in God’s mission with the gutsy and urgent responses of disaster volunteers. We might even suggest that all theology be practiced in light of the emergency that our communities are headed to hell—and on this point I might agree.

On the other hand, we might take an alternative view for mission in crisis: God’s mission is active in moments of crisis.

“Look Mommy, a broken house!” exclaimed our two-year-old son when we first drove our family back through the wreckage of our hurricane-ravaged city, Slidell, LA. Tears covered our faces, for we didn’t know how to respond. After some silence, our son proclaimed in faith, “Don’t worry, Daddy will fix it!”

Of course, it was my assumption that my son was talking about me. I was Super Dad! Throw on a cape and I could cure the world! Little did my son know about my finite abilities; I was not capable of rebuilding a house. Before the storm, I had trouble fixing a shower curtain. I was a church worker who, like many others, was trained in book smarts—with very few practical skills. Yet, I was his father, and dads can do anything in their sons’ eyes.

Then again, maybe my son wasn’t talking about me. Later, my wife and I realized that our son had made a profound statement if taken in the context of our faith. As children of God, we don’t have to worry—our Heavenly Father will fix it!

In his innocent statement, my son captured a truth for all ages. God, our heavenly Father, fixes our brokenness. He does it by sending His one and only Son, Jesus, down into the debris of our broken world. God changes a catastrophe into a *eucatastrophe*, a term coined by J. R. R. Tolkien: a sudden and favorable resolution of events in a story; a happy ending.¹⁰

While we were yet broken, Jesus became the ultimate volunteer and relocated from heaven to live among us: experiencing our pain, crying with us, loving us, bringing water, sharing meals, and restoring our spiritual, physical, and communal needs. He didn’t come to hand out credit cards or argue with the government; rather, Jesus came without gloves or steel-toed boots and took puncture wounds in His hands and feet in order to give us ultimate relief for eternity. Among the debris, Jesus

brought hope. He even lost His life in the process so that our lives might be restored. There is no need to worry: Daddy fixed it.

In fact, God sent His Son, the heavenly carpenter with special skills, to craft our dead “wooden” souls into beautiful living works of art. Jesus did that by transforming the dead wood of His cross into a life-giving hope. He now sends out His apprentices with their own gifts and learned skills—carrying their own dead-wood crosses to transform the world. With the words of their Craft Master echoing in their ears, their movements—patterned after Jesus by discipleship—apostolic carpenters artfully bring others hope for life.

God served in mission in crisis. God knows that we live in a world of suffering. In fact, He is actively suffering with us. He sits with His arm around us as tears fall from our eyes when we look at a charred picture after a house fire. He works with us as we fill sand bags to prepare a city for oncoming waters. He is buried with us when the building walls collapse on every side. Jesus is Among the Debris.

Neither Jesus, victims, volunteers, missionaries, nor this article end in debris. Jesus rose from the catastrophic debris of death, and through Him so shall we. As missionaries in disaster zones, we share God’s hope-filled work and story with others while rejoicing in peace that passes all understanding!

Endnotes

¹ Emergency Management Commentary, “Katrina and the Next Crisis,” Chicago Tribune, August, 27, 2015.

² Personal communication September 2015.

³ Ibid.

⁴ <http://biblehub.com/greek/4697.htm>.

⁵ “Transformissional” is a term coined by Steve Ogne and Tim Roehl and can be explored more in their 2008 text, *Transformissional Coaching: Empowering Leaders in a Changing Ministry World* (Nashville, TN, B&H Books).

⁶ At the time, the use of the term, “critical incident” was a helpful parallel to the current LCMS Ablaze Movement’s term for evangelistic moments, “critical events.” During (RE)Institute presentations, I would encourage disaster volunteers to think about how they might turn critical incidents into critical events for God’s mission.

⁷ Mark Neuenschwander and Betsy Neuenschwander, *Crisis Evangelism* (Ventura, California, Regal, 1999).

⁸ U.S. Department of Agriculture, “Wildland Firefighter Health and Safety Report” <http://www.fs.fed.us/t-d/pubs/htmlpubs/html02512815/page02.htm>.

⁹ Center for Disease Control and Prevention, “Wildland Fire Fighting Safety and Health,” <http://blogs.cdc.gov/niosh-science-blog/2012/07/13/wildlandfire/>.

¹⁰ In Tolkien’s definition, as outlined in his 1947 essay *On Fairy-Stories*, “eucatastrophe” is a fundamental part of his conception of mythopoeia. Though Tolkien writes about myth, the term is also connected to the Gospels. Tolkien calls the Incarnation the “eucatastrophe of human history” and the Resurrection the “eucatastrophe of the Incarnation.”

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