THE 7 STEPS OF DISASTER RESPONSE MINISTRY

It’s Time to Act. Be Part of the Solution.
INTRODUCTION

Do you watch natural disasters and man-made crisis situations unfold and wish you could make a difference? Do you have a heart of compassion to help others in the midst of their worst crisis?

Anyone can see the physical damage that an earthquake, tornado, flood or hurricane leave behind. Communities and non-profits will often rally together to clean-up and rebuild—but what about the damage that is harder to see?

Disaster survivors lose much more than just personal property during a natural disaster. Many lose loved ones, their sense of stability, a way of life, and even their sense of safety. Internal damage, such as trauma and loss, is much harder to see. Because of this, it is often an overlooked aspect of disaster response. All too often, people are left to cope with the trauma on their own, and end up falling through the cracks. The government is not designed or equipped to meet the emotional or spiritual needs of disaster victims. Since so many survivors have no interest in stepping inside of a church—what are we, as believers, called to do?

As the Body of Christ, we need to be ready to step into the places of people’s pain and loss. During dark and challenging times, it is imperative for the Church of Jesus Christ to arise and be ready to go out to share the light and the hope that is within. After all, this is when the world needs us most!

If a disaster struck your city today, would you be ready to minister God's love to the unique spiritual and emotional needs of those in the wake of crisis? Would you know what to say? Or more importantly, what not to say?

Here are seven essential steps that will help you to be effective in disaster response ministry. With these steps, you can bring comfort and healing to your community, loved ones, or anyone who has been through a traumatic event.
“But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.” Acts 1:8

When ministering to those who have endured crisis or disaster, we need to not only bring comfort, but the power of the Holy Spirit into the situation. Opportunities often arise quickly on a disaster site, so you want to be ready. It is important to remember, we are not the rescuer—He is. Disasters can be overwhelming, and there is so much we do not see and understand.

We need the Helper to help us help them! A simple way to approach a crisis ministry situation as it arises is a short but powerful prayer, "Holy Spirit Come."

By inviting the Holy Spirit, you are invoking the power, wisdom, and comfort of God into this ministry opportunity. We cannot do this in our own strength. This prayer states your dependence on God and your faith in Him to show up in the individual's place of pain.

Think of it this way—you are being invited to perform spiritual and emotional first-aid, and you need the Great Physician in the room to guide you through. Pray this and He will.
MEET BASIC NEEDS

A disaster survivor will be in a much better place to receive ministry if you attend to the basic imminent needs they have at that moment. This could be simple things like serving them a hot meal, a cold drink, or giving them a warm blanket. It could also be bigger things, like addressing their need for medical attention or accommodations for that night.

A good rule of thumb is that you want to address “basic needs” in the hierarchy of physical first, emotional second, and then the spiritual. For instance, if someone is injured, hungry, has a migraine, or their family members are still be missing—they will not be ready to receive disaster response ministry.

Keeping this hierarchy in mind honors the person, takes into account their personal dignity, and shows them that you care. It is important to note that depending on how long it has been since the disaster has occurred, the basic needs will vary and change over time.
LISTEN

We all can be better listeners. Often when people are speaking, our tendency is to be thinking about what we want to say and looking for the first opportunity to do so. Good listening takes patience and is paramount to being effective in Disaster Response Ministry.

People who have suffered loss, or endured trauma, often need to process what has taken place to them over and over again. It is very important for the disaster response minister to validate the way the person is feeling at that moment with compassion and care. Someone who has suffered loss or trauma could be feeling an array of emotions that range from fear, panic, hopelessness and even rage. Feelings and emotions will often change depending on how long it has been since the disaster event has transpired.

Validating the person's feelings, and letting them know you understand, will help them "attune" to you and will prepare them to listen to you and build a sense of trust. Disaster survivors need to know that you are "with them" in the midst of their pain and suffering. Eye contact, nodding of the head, compassionate facial expressions, appropriate body language that
mirrors theirs are all good things to keep in mind.

While the survivor is speaking, it is crucial that they feel heard. Scientifically it has been proved that when a disaster survivor has felt like they have been "heard," it actually lessens their chance of being permanently traumatized. This is because the survivor has had the chance to successfully process the painful experience. A survivor often needs to do this again and again to successfully process their grief, loss or trauma. This is especially important to understand when the person is close to you, or you may see them again.

**What to say...**

A good, active listener is paying attention, focused on just listening, and letting the person tell their story and share their feelings. Do not assume anything. It is appropriate to ask questions like, "Where were you when this happened?" Repeat back to them what you hear them saying and say small statements like, "I am so sorry for your loss," or "That makes sense." These are all good responses that build trust and allows the person to feel heard.

**What NOT to say...**

Often when we hear someone talk about trauma, loss, and grief, our own traumas or losses can be triggered or recalled. We tend to want to verbalize them as we think this may be helpful, or serve as a way to identify with the individual. Often, we are actually just processing again our own loss or trauma. This is NOT the time to do this. Vocalizing our own experiences may make the survivor feel like you have not been listening, but rather thinking about yourself. Try to avoid this at all costs at the moment of crisis. It may be appropriate to share at a later time. We also do not want to make sweeping generalizations, (especially spiritual ones) like, "God is in control." Or in the case of loss, "Well, God needed another angel."

Sweeping, fix-all statements can be little what the person is feeling and could trigger anger towards God. This is about them processing what they are feeling and experiencing. Do not try to rush them through this process. Remember, we are not there to "fix" the person, or even make it all go away. We are there to help them process what they have endured and lead them onto the path of healing. It’s a journey. Keep the focus on them and practice being a good listener! ... Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak...(James 1:19).
If you have ever been through a traumatic event or even lost a loved one, then you will know in addition to the range of emotions and thoughts, it is normal to feel a sense of shock or disbelief.

For the disaster survivor, it is imperative for them to know that their personal feelings and thoughts, or even the physical reactions they may be experiencing, are a normal reaction to an abnormal event.

Doing this will help the survivor feel less out of control. The Disaster Response Minister can help educate the survivor on what is a normal and what is not a normal reaction to a crisis.

**Normal reactions to trauma and loss within first 30 days are:**

Grief, sadness, shock, anger, anxiety, denial, guilt, depression, hypervigilance, poor memory, sleeplessness, indulgence, poor hygiene, nightmares, flashbacks, shaking, racing heartbeat, G.I. issues, sense of abandonment, loneliness, loss of joy, hopelessness, apathy towards
righteousness, lack of prayer, a sense of disconnect to God or spiritual things.

These are all common or normal Post Traumatic reactions to stress called PTS. If these symptoms occur longer than 30 days, or there is a physical or psychological impairment, we need to “refer them” (See Step # 6) to a health professional. Remember, we do not diagnose or treat. We are simply the hands and feet of Jesus as Disaster Response Ministers.

Reassuring a disaster survivor that they are experiencing normal reactions to an abnormal event is paramount to them processing their feelings, emotions, and reactions. This will minimize fear and confusion, and help lead them down the road of personal recovery.
Thinking of this as a normal conversation, now it is your time to talk and educate them further. Again, keeping in mind that you’re going to address the physical, emotional and spiritual needs in that order—you can give them the next steps for self-care.

Stress is a strain on the body. Good nutrition is a very important part of the recovery process and should not be overlooked. Encourage the survivor to not self-indulge or self-medicate. Encourage them to stay away from alcohol, narcotics, sugar, and even too much caffeine. Encourage them to take care of themselves by eating well, taking naps and exercise, as these are great ways for their body to recover from stress. It is also good for them to try to return to normal routines and do things they enjoy.

Self-care may be difficult for them to focus on while others in their community may still be suffering or things seems so chaotic. Let them know that they need to help themselves if they are going to help others. As the disaster response minister, look them in the eyes and let them know it is okay to do so. Encourage them to give themselves permission and having them say out loud, "I give myself permission to..." is often helpful.
Ask them what type of emotional support structure they have around them. Questions like, "Do you have a church, pastor, mentor or confident that you can speak with?"

You may never see this person again, and it is ideal that they have a support structure in place. If possible, try to help them set one up.

Let them know that spiritual issues will likely arise. Issues such as a sudden awareness of the frailty of life, eternity, or how they may have lived in the past are likely to come up. They may ask questions like, "Why would God allow this to happen to me?" Assure them that these questions are normal and that God will be with them. Let them know that they have complete access to God through the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross—when they call on His name, nothing can separate them from the love of God. This is important to emphasize, as disaster survivors often feel distance from God.

“For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.” Romans 8:39

This can be followed up with a question like, "Where are you at with this?" or "Do you remember a time where you committed your life to Jesus and made Him Lord of your life?" We must not shrink back from this step as most people who are in the midst of a major crisis are truly searching for answers. Now is the time! Give them the opportunity at this point to accept Christ into their life and to make Jesus Lord.
At this point, depending on what the needs are, you may want to refer them to additional resources. This could include medical care for any physical issues they are experiencing and psychiatric care if they are seriously impaired or are having suicidal thoughts.

Refer them to governmental resources regarding grants for disaster victims or to disaster relief organizations that may have relief supplies or services they might need. You also want to refer them to a local church, chaplain or ministry that can provide follow up and ongoing emotional and spiritual care.

Find discipleship resources or groups if they are a new believer. If they have struggled with drugs or alcohol in the past, it would be good to help them get connected to a recovery group. Relapse and addiction are common after a disaster, as people are looking for ways to cope and gain comfort.

It is always good when possible to follow up with them and commit to pray for them in your personal prayer life. At this stage, it is just the beginning of their healing process, and in the wake of a disaster, there are usually many big obstacles to overcome.
As you come to the end of your ministry time with the disaster survivor, you want to offer them prayer. You want to ask questions like, "Can I pray for you?" and "Is it alright for me to lay my hand on you?" Make sure to use down to earth, non-Christianese language that they can understand. This may be all new to them and their mind may not be processing foreign or complex information well.

This prayer time may be a time of just blessing or an actual more in-depth ministry time. Make sure to pray with your eyes open. As you pray, watch for their reactions or more importantly what the Lord is doing.

Be compassionate with your words. Pray through the issues the person has told you about and ask the Lord to meet that individual in the places of pain, loss or trauma. If the person has referenced physical injuries or psychological issues, you can pray for the healing of those issues as well.
2 Timothy 4:2 says, *Preach the word; be prepared in season and out of season; correct, rebuke and encourage—with great patience and careful instruction.*

We do not get to pick and choose when or where disaster may strike. So it is important to be ready if you really want to help those who have been through a disaster.

If you have the heart to be a volunteer disaster response minister, we recommend getting more training now in these areas. Once disaster strikes, it is usually too late.

If you have received more training, it is ideal not to go it alone. We suggest working with your local church, a recognized disaster relief ministry, or chaplain organization that can help provide access to ministry opportunities and a support structure.

The frequency and severity of disasters are on the rise, and the unseen damage is often overlooked. Disaster Response Ministry presents an amazing way to share God’s love in the midst of pain and suffering, and ultimately may lead the survivor into a vibrant relationship with our heavenly Father.

For more in-depth training regarding Disaster Response Ministry, Healing Prayer Model, Chaplaincy Training, PTSD Healing Prayer Model or how to become a certified Disaster Response Volunteer, visit CRI Online Academy.