

How Congregations Can Care after a Disaster

The following questions and answers are based on an interview with the Rev. David A. Paap, Program Director of Stephen Ministries St. Louis, following the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center in New York and the Pentagon in Washington, D.C.

Who are Stephen Ministers and what do they do?

Stephen Ministers are lay people who provide high-quality, distinctively Christian one-to-one care to people in crisis or a time of emotional or spiritual difficulty. Stephen Ministers have been wisely selected and carefully trained by their congregations, and they receive regular supervision.

In what kinds of disasters can Stephen Ministers respond with caring ministry?

Trained Stephen Ministers have often been on the front lines when disaster strikes. They have responded quickly and effectively to the spiritual and emotional needs of people in the aftermath of natural disasters (such as tornadoes, hurricanes, floods, and earthquakes) and human-caused disasters (such as the explosions of the space shuttle Challenger and of TWA Flight 800, or acts of terrorism and mass murder such as the bombing of the Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City, the school massacres in Littleton, Colorado, and in other cities around the United States in the 1990s, and, on September 11, 2001, the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center, on the Pentagon, and on the passengers of the four airplanes involved).

When does an event become a disaster?

A disaster is defined as “a severe disruption of personal and community life, involving a significant number of people and causing physical, emotional, social and/or spiritual crises. A disaster is an event which, in a matter of seconds, minutes, hours, days, months, or even years, damages the ability to sustain life without assistance” (Lutheran Disaster Response Guide).

Why is the care that Stephen Ministers bring especially helpful in disaster situations?

Times of disaster increasingly demand a rapid response from trained caregivers. A timely response can save lives, lessen the amount of physical, emotional, and spiritual damage done to survivors, and improve overall prospects for recovery. Many excellent government and civilian agencies can ship food and supplies, but few can provide the quality emotional and spiritual care that a Stephen Minister can.

People who have experienced severe trauma, a threat to their survival, disruption of their lives, or personal loss and grief recover more quickly and completely when they are able to connect with a caring individual who listens to their story with compassion, skill, and sensitivity.

Disasters heighten our sense of vulnerability and raise deep spiritual issues for survivors, rescue workers, and witnesses.



Why did God let this happen? Where is God in the midst of such horrific suffering and catastrophic loss? Stephen Ministers don't offer superficial answers to such profound spiritual questions, but as distinctively Christian caregivers, they embody Christ and bring the loving community of the church to survivors. Stephen Ministers have learned how to be calmly and empathically present in the midst of pain and suffering. They have learned how to pray conversationally and sensitively with people when they are most vulnerable. Stephen Ministers bring hope, because hope in God does not depend on the situation but comes from deep within a person's soul and is anchored in God's ever-present love and care. Stephen Ministers bring distinctively Christian care to people who, because of grief and tragedy, are radically open to God and to profound spiritual issues and struggles.

What can Stephen Leaders and Stephen Ministers do in the immediate aftermath of an intentional disaster?

Safety is paramount. Remember the physician's credo, "First, do no harm." In the immediate aftermath of a disaster, rescue workers, medical personnel, police, FBI, FEMA, FAA, and other professionals need unobstructed access to the victims and survivors at the scene. They don't need well-intentioned people who want to help but only get in the way. Leave rescue and other heroic efforts to experts.

Next, communication and coordination are vital. Coordinate caring efforts. Stephen Leaders—the pastors, church staff, and lay leaders who direct Stephen Ministry in a congregation—can contact their own congregation's Stephen Ministers to find out how many would be

available to help and how much time they could give under these circumstances. If the area has a network of Stephen Series churches, Stephen Leaders also may contact other Stephen Ministry churches to identify and coordinate their caring ministry assets. Then Stephen Leaders can contact the local and national disaster assistance agencies involved and tell them of the availability of their services. Many times these agencies are aware of the value of Stephen Ministers. Joan Lewin of the American Red Cross has said that she contacts Stephen Ministry congregations right away because of the high-quality care that Stephen Ministers provide. Stephen Ministers are usually welcomed as valued partners in relief efforts following disasters.

What specifically can Stephen Ministers do when they are invited to help in the aftermath of a disaster?

From past experiences in disasters, we've found a number of ways that Stephen Ministers can provide valuable care following a disaster.

- Sometimes churches close to the scene become relief areas for rescue workers or places where victims' family members wait to receive news about loved ones. Stephen Ministers stay with family members, listen to them, support and comfort them.
- Survivors—people who, for some reason, have managed to escape or avoid the disaster—experience profound grief for colleagues and friends who were victims; they need a caring friend to speak with. Because Stephen Ministers are trained to minister to those in grief, they can help survivors deal with their own grief.

- Stephen Ministers have served on death notification teams, providing a ministry of presence and support when victims' loved ones first hear of their loss.
- Many medical and mental health professionals involved in serving survivors in the aftermath are traumatized by their experiences and drained by the circumstances in which they have to serve. Often medical and mental health professionals are trained as Stephen Ministers in their local congregations. When professionals are also Stephen Ministers, they can help debrief and care for nurses, physicians, firemen, police, and other rescue personnel who are deeply affected by their efforts on the scene.
- Frequently, grief support groups are formed for survivors. Stephen Ministers participate in those and can offer one-to-one care to individuals who need additional care and support between group meetings.
- In areas directly affected by a disaster, Stephen Ministers have phoned all the members of their congregation to see how they were doing and have offered the care of a Stephen Minister to those who needed to talk about their experiences or feelings.
- Stephen Ministers can be assigned to care for people long after the rescue workers have departed and relief efforts have ended. Some survivors appear relatively unaffected by events in the immediate aftermath. Functioning on autopilot, they seem to have put the incident behind them. Yet weeks and even months later, they experience sights, sounds, or events, like a funeral, that suddenly drive home the reality of the disaster and they begin to fall apart. After Hurricane Andrew in 1992, one woman didn't shed a tear for seven weeks because she'd been so busy picking up the pieces of her life. Only then did she understand the extent of her loss and realize, "It's all gone, all gone." When people begin to feel the painful effects of disaster—whether on the first day or a year later—they can really benefit from a one-to-one caring relationship with a Stephen Minister.
- Stephen Ministers can begin ongoing, long-term caring relationships with survivors who have suffered incredible loss and profound grief and who may not experience recovery for many, many months.
- One congregation's team of Stephen Ministers traveled every Saturday for more than a year to a disaster site 45 to 90 miles away. They spent all day talking with people and providing practical help whenever they could. After that first year, they continued to keep in touch by phone.
- Stephen Ministers are trained to recognize when a person's emotional needs require the care of a mental health professional rather than a Stephen Minister. Stephen Ministers aren't counselors or therapists; they are Christian friends who are gifted and specially trained to provide spiritual and emotional support and care. They know what they can do and what they need to leave to professionals. This partnership with mental health professionals makes them especially valuable in a disaster

situation where people exhibit a wide range of reactions from mild to severe.

- Survivors are often faced with confusing paperwork and detailed administrative requirements for receiving aid or relief funds. Stephen Ministers have gone door-to-door, helping people complete their paperwork and providing spiritual and emotional care in the process.
- Following a disaster, a lot of people will start coming to church or return to church if they've been inactive. The vulnerability and suffering they've seen in others often can reopen unresolved wounds or losses in their own lives. They are hurting, and they turn to the church. What an opportunity! Ask Stephen Ministers to be alert to people at worship who sit alone, who appear upset, or who are crying. Stephen Ministers can sensitively approach these people and begin a caring conversation after the worship service.

Pastors can announce that Stephen Ministers will be available to listen and pray with people in designated areas of the church following a worship service. Identify private places where Stephen Ministers can lead someone who is especially upset, so that their pain and grief can be ministered to quietly and confidentially.

- The depression people feel at the loss of their personal possessions can stall or prevent their recovery. Sometimes they need caring people who will lend a hand with repairs or rebuilding. Although it's not what they're trained to do, sometimes Stephen Ministers themselves will pitch in or mobilize others to help in practical

ways that get people unstuck and back on track toward recovery.

Stephen Ministers care for and help survivors as they deal with the initial shock, as they ride the roller coaster of feelings generated by the reality and enormity of their loss, and finally as they begin putting their lives back together, recovering and adjusting to a new way of life with loss.

What can congregations do that don't have Stephen Ministers?

The best way to help is to enroll in the Stephen Series so you can train and send Stephen Ministers out to care! Congregations can't invest in a more needed ministry than this—a ministry of care and compassion to people who are hurting. Caring ministry doesn't happen automatically or naturally; it has to be intentional. Caregivers who are not carefully selected or well trained or who are unsupervised can end up doing more harm than good.

The Stephen Series provides a complete system of ministry that pastors, church staff, and lay leaders learn about at a Stephen Series Leader's Training Course. They implement this ministry system in their own congregation, so they can train more and more Stephen Ministers each year. Some congregations have trained hundreds of lay Stephen Ministers over the years. Should a disaster strike, these lay caregivers are like money in the bank—an investment in ministry that pays dividends exactly when it's needed. It's too late to begin planning or training when you're in the throes of a crisis. Begin training lay people as caregivers now; then they'll be ready to make a real difference should a disaster occur.

The terrorist attack on the WTC and Pentagon are unique in our nation's experience of tragedy. How can Stephen Ministers provide care in congregations that are not located near affected areas?

Victims are those who have died in the disaster. Survivors are people who have lived through the disaster but are personally affected by it. Survivors typically include those who incurred injuries, those who could have been seriously hurt or killed but somehow escaped injury, grieving family members, rescue workers, and so forth. Part of what makes the events of September 11th unique is that all of us are survivors of these terrorist attacks. Every American who was capable of understanding and responding to these events is not just an observer but also a survivor.

We experienced intense exposure to death and destruction of ordinary citizens. We continue to face the threat of more terrorist acts, the possibility of war, and even more loss of life. The effects on our financial system and economy affect our own investments and pocketbooks. Our airline industry has been crippled. We've come to realize that a terrorist is not someone who lives in a distant country but someone who could live in our neighborhood, shop in our stores, and go to our schools. We have been asked to make sacrifices, to be patient, to be

watchful and alert. We have been cautioned that the war to rid the world of terrorism will be ongoing, long, and hard—and will involve more losses. We have been changed by these events, and we will have to reorient ourselves. We have to figure out how to make sense of our world with this piece—the possibility of terrorism within our borders—now an everyday part of it.

All of us—not simply those immediately involved in the attacks—have been traumatized. When people experience trauma, our fight-or-flight mechanism kicks into gear. Either we brace to fight the threat or we use our strength to run away from it. When this fight-or-flight mechanism engages, we run on auto-pilot. Our thinking and feeling processes stop working together: Thinking disengages so we can react quickly and survive.

As our nation heals from this trauma, we all need help to reintegrate our thinking and feeling—and to understand which is which. An important way to do this is to help people express their feelings. Expressing feelings is like releasing pressure from a covered pot of boiling liquid: It releases emotional energy so that people can engage their rational thought processes once more.

The next two pages describe “Eight Ways Congregations Can Respond with Care after a Disaster.”

Eight Ways Congregations Can Respond with Care after a Disaster

Since 1975 Stephen Ministries St. Louis has been helping congregations equip lay persons to provide one-to-one Christian care to those who are experiencing a crisis or going through a difficult time. Over the years Stephen Ministry congregations may train scores or even a hundred or more members as Stephen Ministers. Congregations affected by a variety of disasters have told us these trained caregivers are like “money in the bank”—an investment that pays dividends exactly when they’re needed.

Following are eight ways we encourage Stephen Series congregations to provide hope and healing to those whose lives have been abruptly and forever changed by a natural or human-caused disaster.

1 Be intentional

Healing rarely happens without planning and effort. Think about what you personally can do, what your congregation can do, what your Stephen Ministers and other caregivers can do. Encourage people to do what they can, to care in ways they have been trained or gifted to help.

2 Gather in community

Jesus promises, “Where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them” (Matthew 18:20 NIV). God works healing through Christian community. Encourage existing communities—church choir, Sunday school classes, youth groups, Bible study or fellowship groups—to take time to share with one another their thoughts and feelings about what has happened. Help those who

aren’t part of any group connect with others for mutual care and support. Whenever people gather, provide a calm, reassuring, nonjudgmental atmosphere in which they can speak honestly and be heard. Be aware of those who are hurting very badly, and consider offering them more focused, one-to-one Christian care, such as that of a Stephen Minister.

3 Pray

Provide special opportunities for people to experience two-way communication with God. Help them become aware of God’s loving, caring presence in their lives and in the world. Have Stephen Ministers or other trained caregivers available after worship services to pray one-on-one with people who need to connect with God individually. Offer Stephen Ministers as listening, praying partners for those who find the pain of the crisis too much to bear alone.

4 Read Scripture

Point people to God’s Word for strength and comfort. The Gospels and many Old Testament stories provide examples of people we can easily relate to who were threatened and in danger and who found courage and strength, hope and help in God. The Psalms can put words to the anguish we feel as we cry out to God for help. The roll call of God’s faithful people in the past (Hebrews 11) encourages and inspires us today. Offer Stephen Ministers to “bear one another’s burdens, and in this way . . . fulfill the law of Christ” (Galatians 6:2 NRSV).

5 Listen, listen, listen

Listening is a healing act. Give people the opportunity—and permission—to express the intense feelings they may be experiencing. The Stephen Ministry training module “Ministering to Those Experiencing Grief” describes the Shock, Recoil, and Recovery stages of grief and how to care for people in each stage. Victims or survivors of disasters typically pass through these same stages as individuals who are grieving losses not necessarily tied to disasters do. Stephen Ministers know that a key to caring is to be present with people, listen to what they have to say, encourage them to express their feelings, and accept them with the unconditional love that God extends to us.

6 Don't let people remain isolated

Many times people are isolated or isolate themselves following a disaster. Seek out a neighbor, especially one who is homebound or chronically ill, and spend some time letting that person express his or her feelings. While you don't want to force yourself upon them, you want to be sure they know you are available to listen, care, and be with them. Offer to provide regular care and support, such as Stephen Ministry, to those outside your congregation who may have no one to care for them.

7 Hold special services

Gather for special worship services of healing and remembrance. Let people come in touch with their suffering and offer it to God. Invite people to look to God for help and hope—in the worshiping community, in word and sacrament, and in symbol and music. Have Stephen Ministers or other trained caregivers available to listen to or pray with people individually during or

following the services. Many times these contacts may point to the need for a longer-term caring relationship with a Stephen Minister.

8 Care for caregivers

Pastors, counselors, Stephen Ministers, and others give a lot of themselves to those who need help in the aftermath of disaster. Caregivers who share others' pain may experience a weariness that is the result of not only how many hours they've served, but also the very difficult and personal nature of caring.

Pastors, Stephen Leaders, Stephen Ministers, and other caregivers need to lay down their own burdens for a time so that they can return to their ministry refreshed. Stephen Ministers find this support in their twice-monthly supervision groups. Stephen Leaders extend care and support to one another and to their pastors. Find ways for your congregation to recognize and affirm the efforts of your pastors and other caregivers and provide care and support for them as they minister to others.

As time passes and the immediacy of the initial events recedes, people need to normalize their lives. Give people permission to move back into their routines. Tell them that they don't have to be in mourning forever and that it's all right and even important for them to be happy together, relax, recreate, and have fun. Plan some fun events around food, so people can enjoy eating and being in one another's company. Find ways to help people pick up the pieces and go on, changed, yet trusting ultimately that God will never abandon us, but is with us always—to the end of the age.



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