



No 'burnout' in charity for disasters

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By GREGOR McGAVIN / The Press-Enterprise

A quarter-mile from the now-dry wash where floodwaters swept a pregnant woman to her death in Highland last week stands a white-stucco complex where people often come for answers.

In the weeks since a disaster of biblical proportions struck on the other side of the world and weather-related sorrows struck Southern California, the pleas for someone or something to make sense of it all have spiked.

"I have seen a lot of people asking for answer-type books - why does God allow this to happen?" said Mike Foscolos, who manages the bookstore at Immanuel Baptist Church.

Despite a ceaseless stream of news reports since a tsunami killed more than 150,000 in Asia and Africa, experts say it took local disaster - on a far smaller scale - to put the suffering in perspective for many Southern Californians.

"It certainly matters for people when calamity happens closer to home," Lee Clarke, a Rutgers University sociology professor, said, referring to fatal landslides in Los Angeles and in Ventura County's La Conchita community. "First, we're more likely to judge something a worst case if the people who have suffered are like us. Second, we look around to verify if the kind of thing that has just happened to someone else is relevant to our own lifestyles - 'If that happened in Ventura, can it happen to me?' "

Experts say another reaction some have feared - that of so-called "information overload" or simply too much bad news - has not happened. Instead of tuning out the bad news, people have shown their concern - they're going to church or giving to charity.

At some places, they're seeking spiritual comfort and a chance to give. Harvest Christian Fellowship in Riverside has raised \$120,000 for tsunami relief, church officials said.

"I think this is the American way," said Sandy Lowry of the American Red Cross' Inland Empire chapter. "We can't just sit back and watch. We've got to do something."

Lowry, an 11-year veteran of the Red Cross, said donations from the public often drop off at a certain point, even in ongoing disasters.

But that point has not arrived - not yet, anyway.

Moved to Give

The American Red Cross has pledged more than \$179 million so far to aid tsunami-relief efforts, even though it has not actively solicited donations, according to spokeswoman Devorah Goldberg.

Donations from Riverside and San Bernardino counties for tsunami victims so far total more than a half-million dollars.

According to the Chronicle of Philanthropy, U.S. relief groups have raised more than \$400 million for tsunami victims.

And people have given to help victims of the floods and mudslides that killed dozens in California even though the Red Cross has not asked for donations. Volunteers have also helped Southern California's landslide and flooding victims with food, shelter and other needs.

"One woman came in to make a donation of \$50 for the Ventura mudslide," Lowry said. "She was just really moved by the television coverage."

Trying to Relate

Media experts say there is, however, a danger of becoming overwhelmed by news of disaster.

People "can't relate to it because it's so far away, and most people in San Bernardino County, I'm sure, have never been to Asia," said Murray Fromson, of the Annenberg School for Communication at USC and who reported from Indonesia and the surrounding region for more than two decades.

"But that's what news is all about; we're supposed to bring this stuff to people so they can understand it."

Nancy Bohl, of the San Bernardino-based The Counseling Team International, said people relate to disaster victims only if they can put themselves in other people's shoes.

"I think it's extremely difficult for people to relate, and I don't know that that's a bad thing. If we tried to relate to every bad thing that happened in the world, we'd be a wreck," said Bohl, whose organization provides psychological counseling to disaster responders worldwide. "It's not forgotten, but it's not something we dwell on every day."

Seeking Answers

At the Harvest Christian Fellowship, recent sermons have sought to answer one question on the minds of many church members: Why would God cause such disasters or allow them to happen?

There is no easy answer, religious leaders say.

"Any time you have large-scale disasters there are questions on people's minds," said John Collins, an associate pastor.

"We can't always say what God's purposes are for it, but nevertheless we know that he is in control."

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