

Protagonist Corner

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“Many waters cannot quench love; neither can flood drown it” (Song of Sol.8:7).

This is the stewardship theme for First Presbyterian Church of Fargo, six months after the spring flooding of the Red River destroyed more than 100 homes in Fargo and Moorhead, and ravaged the towns of Grand Forks and East Grand Forks. The flood displaced more than 75,000 residents of the Red River Valley, sending them from their homes into hotels and shelters or to bunk with relatives for up to six weeks. The flood decimated whole neighborhoods, and changed the face and the future of Greater Grand Forks forever.

Last week I watched as the grand old Belmont School in downtown Grand Forks, flooded in April and empty now, received the continual deadly blows of the leveling ball. I wasn't the only observer, but being a relative newcomer to this area, I was probably the observer with the least amount of emotional history attached to this event. Standing on the sidewalk on a cold November day stood several elderly people, remembering the school of their childhood, the oldest school in the area. As the outer walls were knocked away, one could see school children's art still hanging on inner walls. The building was never entered after the flood except to turn off utilities. The floodwaters that decimated the cities of Grand Forks and East Grand Forks contained filthy sewer water, and everything in town that got wet had to be destroyed. For months after the flood, the streets and sidewalks of the city were piled high with people's treasured belongings, now grey and damp and stinking, headed for the dump.

Six months later, in the aftermath of a disaster, new disasters continue to emerge. Every resident of Greater Grand Forks knows the federal disaster phone numbers; everyone knows by heart the numbers that indicate dangerous flood stage. The first snowfall of the winter season, usually a celebration, has a tired and ominous feel to it. The northern end of the Red River Valley has lost ten percent of its population. In a disaster that boasted no deaths, several recent deaths of elderly people are attributed to the stress and trauma of the spring.

No one ever expects to suffer a disaster of this magnitude; no one's career provides for this kind of training. Yet into rural, independent, Northern Minnesota/North Dakota last spring, into a part of the country that ironically prides itself on being far removed from the rest of the world, came trained disaster experts to help us cope. They were welcome, they were here, and they were good. As a local pastor and executive presbyter-elect, I watched, and listened, as disaster expert after disaster expert not only told us what to expect, but helped us organize to help each other. They told us how to organize to receive work groups, what kinds of funds accounts to set up; which social organizations would offer what (the Red Cross provided lunch-serving trucks that drove the streets of Greater Grand Forks all summer; the Salvation Army located warehouses for donated goods; United Methodist Committee on Relief built warehouses for storing building supplies, World Vision sent volunteers who stayed all summer to help organize volunteers and neighborhoods). Presbyterian Disaster

Assistance (One Great Hour of Sharing) sent trained volunteers who arrived on Monday after the flood. Within three days they knew the local phone numbers and names of officials for every disaster organization that had moved quickly into the region, and they stayed to help us set up ecumenical groups that will work to get help where it is most needed.

That was my first learning in this disaster: the disaster network is there, it is trained, and it is good.

My second learning is this: it is hard to move from being the one who helps to being the one in need of aid. North Dakota (and its adjacent area, the Red River Valley in Minnesota) is proud to be the third most churched state in the union (after Utah and Rhode Island). Most of those church people are proud independent mainliners: Lutherans, Catholics, Methodists, Presbyterians, Episcopalians, and members of The United Church of Christ: good Christian folk who like to be of help to others. We GIVE to One Great Hour of Sharing; now we are the grateful, but reluctant, recipients. Even in the face of obvious need, the primary response to suggestions of assistance is, "No, there must be someone who needs it more." Only reluctantly, slowly, and somewhat unwillingly, do flood survivors recognize that the aid coming into the area is meant for them. Relief workers are still finding families who have not requested help because they do not think their need is great enough.

My third learning is this: my local banker, who watches these things, says the gifts from Presbyterians that have flooded our churches and our presbytery, are larger than any other denomination. More than 1,000 Presbyterian volunteers worked in the area this summer, and already calls are coming from groups who want to come next summer. But we are not alone. In a church culture normally characterized by conflict and animosity between mainline and charismatic, between liberal and conservative, *a disaster equalizes everybody*. Presbyterians tend to send short-term intensive volunteer work groups. Some of the more evangelical churches send volunteers who stay for a year and set up offices. But there are more than enough victims to go around. The Salvation Army, World Vision, Seventh Day Adventists, the Christian Reformed churches, Lutheran Social Services, and Catholic Relief were all publicly evident and visibly supportive of anyone in need.

Both kinds of aid, short-term and long-term, are needed. Both are valuable. In the face of great need, ecumenicity wears a pleasing face: the face of a God who cares.