



Disaster Response – In Their Words

In Their Words: Self-Care for Church Leaders After a Disaster

In October 2012, Hurricane Sandy made landfall, causing extensive damage along the northeastern seaboard. Many Episcopal Church leaders across the region were deeply involved with helping people in their communities recover.

Even though many of these leaders had highly developed spiritual and self-care practices, the trauma of the storm and the subsequent increased workload took its toll on caregivers. Many found it was nearly impossible to balance the demands of responding to a disaster and serving a congregation simultaneously. Several clergy in the Diocese of New Jersey were hospitalized for symptoms associated with acute fatigue and stress.

Their experiences aren't unique. After disasters, clergy face secondary trauma, physical exhaustion and other challenges. These stressors contribute to an average clergy turnover rate of 75-100% after major disasters.¹ One of the most powerful yet challenging tools for reducing and treating the symptoms of burnout are self-care practices.

In this resource, Canon John Thompson-Quarley candidly reflects on his experience and lessons learned with self-care while serving as Rector of St. Mary's by-the-Sea Episcopal Church following Hurricane Sandy.

CLERGY SELF-CARE

Self-care has been a recurring focal point during my career in ordained ministry. When I was a young priest associate, a mentor pulled me aside and insisted that I set aside time for myself so that I didn't suffer from exhaustion and completely burn out. He noticed that I had been struggling to balance caring for a congregation and my health. His warning landed, and I began to implement self-care rituals that I continued through my career. When I accepted a call to serve as Rector at St. Mary's in Point Pleasant Beach in 2005, I practiced morning centering prayer at least five times a week. This self-care routine helped fuel my first few years at St. Mary's, during which the congregation and I focused on building outreach programs to complement our worship services.

ST. MARY'S RESPONSE TO THE DISASTER

Hurricane Sandy radically interrupted my ministry and daily life. The community plunged into disarray. Everyone who lived on the east side of the train tracks lost their homes, including seven parishioners. All community members were feeling incredibly wounded and overwhelmed.



Biography

The Rev. Canon John Thompson-Quarley is Canon for Ministry Development in the Diocese of Atlanta. He was Rector at St. Mary's Episcopal Church, Point Pleasant Beach during Hurricane Sandy.



Fast Facts

CONGREGATION:
St. Mary's Episcopal Church

LOCATION:
Point Pleasant Beach, New Jersey

POPULATION:
4,642

DISASTER:
Hurricane Sandy

DISASTER RESPONSE:
Self-care following a disaster



The day after the storm, I walked around the church building to assess damages. St. Mary's was lucky; our church building was spared. We had a food pantry that operated out of our building, so I called the directors, and they gave permission to empty our refrigerators and bring all the perishable foods to the local high school where a temporary pantry had been set up to feed families who had lost their homes. That night, members of our feeding ministry, Mary's Table, started preparing meals in our kitchen to feed the volunteers as well as those in our town who had suffered storm damage. We maintained this expanded feeding schedule for the next forty-five days.

Because of our well-established reputation for outreach ministries, St. Mary's became the community hub for disaster response in Point Pleasant Beach. We made a commitment as a congregation that we would find a way to accept help from all those who were offering assistance. The local FEMA branch and Red Cross set up workstations in the church. Truckloads of donations poured in from the mid-Atlantic region. Donations included water, cleaning supplies, food, toiletries, blankets, cots and many items we could not have dreamed to request. St. Mary's parishioners even shared worship space with another Episcopal congregation whose building was destroyed during the storm.

I remain deeply proud of the recovery work done by St. Mary's parishioners.

SELF-CARE AFTER THE STORM

From the moment I woke until eight or nine in the evening, I was constantly working to connect people with necessary recovery services and spiritual support, or to thank them for contributing to relief efforts. Conservatively, I would meet with about 150 different people per day, and each interaction was emotionally intense in its own way. Hours of preparing meals and hauling, sorting and distributing donations physically wore me down. On top of urgent recovery work, St. Mary's still held regular Sunday services, which I had to plan and lead. I am not sure how I managed to write sermons; those reflections were simply the product of grace.

I felt a persistent and overwhelming sense of obligation for the people in Point Pleasant Beach. I thought, "How can I go to sleep when there are people who don't have homes?" It felt like I didn't have the right to rest, so I didn't. I did not take any Sabbath time in the immediate aftermath of the hurricane.

About a week after the storm, I started experiencing elevated blood pressure and arm pain. A parishioner recommended that I go to the emergency room. Instead, I went home where my wife, who is a nurse, also insisted that I go to the doctor. The emergency room doctor said that he didn't know how I had made it to the hospital without having a heart attack. I was admitted to the hospital for four days in order to regulate my blood pressure.

After I was discharged, my inclination was to pick up right where I left off with recovery work, but my family, friends and parishioners reminded me to slow down and take care of my heart.

Storm recovery was hard on all of the religious leaders in the Point Pleasant Beach area. My ecumenical clergy group continued to have monthly meetings after the storm to pray, to check in and to share recovery information. I remember vividly that several weeks after the storm hit, a Methodist pastor noted that statistically, most

Helpful Practices

- **Listen to your body:** Sleep as much as you can. Eat nourishing and comforting foods. Stay hydrated.
- **Therapy and spiritual direction:** If these services are available to you, utilize them. If not, seek out this support. Some providers will do sessions over the phone. Connect with your bishop or clergy you trust if you need support (time or financial) to utilize these forms of assistance.
- **Attend to your personal needs:** Take time to focus on your family's recovery.
- **Carve out moments of Sabbath:** It will probably not be possible to take a full day or even a full afternoon for rest and reflection right after a disaster. Rest when you can, even just a few minutes away from your office/phone.
- **External accountability:** Enlist the help of peers, parishioners, friends, and diocesan staff to help support you in your self-care efforts. I'm an extrovert by nature, so this strategy plays to my strengths.
- **Express your feelings:** Write, make art, or have conversations with trusted friends.
- **Morning prayer:** Set aside a few moments for silence and centering prayer. The rest of the day may feel completely chaotic, but I could still find time in the mornings for stillness. If mornings feel frenzied for you, try meditating a couple minutes right before you go to sleep.
- **Exercise:** Even though the beach was destroyed and gyms were closed, there were small ways that I could have incorporated physical activity into my days. I could have climbed the stairs or had pastoral conversations while walking. Exercise truly does help relieve symptoms of acute stress.
- **Delegate when possible and appropriate:** If there is someone who can take over some of your tasks, ask them to help out. Many people are actively searching for concrete ways to help after a disaster; let them.
- **Try something else:** Everyone has different physical and emotional needs. If one of these techniques doesn't work for you, try a different practice. Identify what works best for you, and do it!



of the group's members would not remain in ordained ministry due to burnout. Still, I wasn't prepared when the following month he announced that he was leaving his church and ministry entirely.

FINDING THE NEW NORMAL

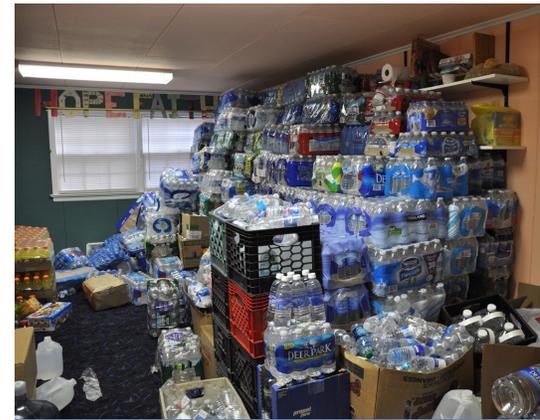
Because St. Mary's was a relief center for Red Cross and FEMA, we remained very busy long after TV cameras and reporters had moved on. Gradually, though, my life and the lives of the people in Point Pleasant Beach began to stabilize and find a new normal. In October 2013, about 11 months after Hurricane Sandy, the Episcopal congregation that we had hosted since the storm moved into their newly rebuilt worship space. The stream of donations began to slow, and we were able to use our Sunday School classrooms for lessons instead of storage. About a year after the storm, I found that I was able to focus more on congregational life and started taking an afternoon off and then a full-day sabbath.

In July 2014, I became the Canon for Ministry in The Diocese of Atlanta. I'm no longer in parish ministry, so my self-care practices are a bit different now. I have hired a personal trainer and work out three times per week, and I continue to do centering prayer at the beginning of each day. Only now do I feel like I have the mental and physical space to process the events following Hurricane Sandy.

THINGS TO KNOW ABOUT SELF-CARE DURING A DISASTER

- Your normal self-care practices may not be possible or realistic after a disaster. That is okay, but continue to try carving out time to rest and recharge.
- People have a wide range of physical and emotional reactions to acute stress. Intense symptoms such as night terrors, hypervigilance, hair loss and depressive signs may not be uncommon. However, long-term exposure to acute stress wears on the body and can lead to physical and mental illness. Seek professional assistance if you or your confidants are concerned by your symptoms.
- Clergy notoriously have a high tolerance for discomfort and put other people's needs before their own. This places church leaders at high risk for burnout.
- Secondary trauma and compassion fatigue are common among clergy. Even if you were not directly impacted by a disaster, you may begin to internalize others' trauma after repeatedly hearing their disaster stories. These symptoms may appear suddenly.
- If you or others are concerned about your use of substances, including alcohol or prescription medications, seek help immediately. SAMHSA (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, www.samhsa.gov) and many insurers have free and confidential hotlines that will refer you to service providers.
- Rates of divorce, mental illness and substance abuse all increase after disasters. Be mindful that congregational and interpersonal conflict may intensify. Tending to your physical and emotional needs may help preserve your relationships with friends and family members.
- Physical and emotional recovery from a major disaster is a long, often multi-year process. Recovery is a marathon and not a sprint.

¹Bill Livingston, *Tips & Lessons: Self-Care After a Disaster*, www.episcopalrelief.org



A St. Mary's Sunday School classroom filled with donated supplies.

Additional Resources



References:

- Bratt Carle, Jessica. May 4, 2016. "Compassion Fatigue and the Wounds of Caregiving." *Institute for Congregational Trauma and Growth*. <http://www.ictg.org/blog/compassion-fatigue-and-the-wounds-of-caregiving>
- Roberts, Rabbi Stephen B. and Rev. Willard W. C. Ashley Sr. *Disaster Spiritual Care: Practical Clergy Responses to Community, Regional and National Tragedy*. (Woodstock, Vermont: Skylight Paths Publishing, 2008)
- Wicks, Robert J. *The Resilient Clinician*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008)

See also:

- [Tips & Lessons: Clergy Self-Care](#)
- [How to: Adapting Liturgy and Ritual After a Disaster](#)
- [Tips & Lessons: Post Disaster Advice for Clergy](#)
- [SAMHSA's Tips for Coping with Traumatic Events](#)
- [Emotional First Aid Handouts](#)

See more disaster response stories and tips to help a community in need at www.episcopalrelief.org.