

Where is God in disasters?

By Viki Rife

I don't know about you, but September felt like the wrath of God was descending on my reasonably quiet life. I held my breath helplessly as close family members waited for Hurricanes Harvey and Irma to hit their respective areas. Another family member was fighting wildfires in the west. While we watched Hurricane Maria hurtle toward our friends in Puerto Rico, an earthquake struck Mexico City. The series of natural disasters felt overwhelming. What was God up to?



The day after the Mexico earthquake I received a message from Barb Wooler, director of Crisis Response with Encompass World Partners. She asked if I would like to be part of a team to help our churches in Mexico City. The team would not only help people suffering with emotional trauma from the earthquake, but would also train church leaders on how to minister to people in trauma.

Within two weeks, our team met up in Guadalajara. I met my first teammate as we waited to board our flight in Atlanta. By the next morning, October 5, the team was busy developing a training manual in Spanish. We only had one day to complete it and prepare what each of us would present!

Besides myself, our team consisted of our host in Guadalajara, Pastor Mariano Azcarate, who is originally from Peru; the team leader, Martin Guereña, missions pastor at Northwest Chapel in Ohio; Pastor Juan Saez from Chile, Tatiana Munguia, a child psychologist from Argentina; Jen Hindley, former MK from Argentina who now lives in Atlanta; Pepe Farias, a psychologist and pastor from the nearby state of Michoacan, and Philip Scoles from Ohio, who is currently studying in Guadalajara.

Our first priority was to encourage people to talk about their experiences and how they were doing. Many said that just talking about it was a relief. Having experienced my first deadly earthquake at age 5, I was especially concerned for the children, and for the struggles of the parents to reassure their children while dealing with their own fears.

I ached over the little boys who were told that men don't cry, but whose efforts at bravado were not always successful. I could only hug the little girl who told me she was on the third floor of her school when the earthquake struck, and because she has a problem with her legs was not allowed to escape with the other children. I admired the brave teacher who volunteered to stay with her while the others left.

We heard from a doctor who helped get patients out of a hospital before it collapsed, not knowing whether his own family was safe. We spent time with a family whose home had split and was deemed unsafe. Each story increased my awareness of how frail humans are.

In the midst of it all God reminded me of the many times in the Old Testament when he told his people that he was going to bring disaster on them to turn them back to Him. And I experienced how God uses disaster to do exactly that.

For example, we made contact with leaders of community efforts in a badly-hit neighborhood. When we arrived we saw destroyed stores where the owners had rescued whatever they could from the rubble and set up shop on the sidewalk. People were lined up with buckets at tanker trucks to receive a ration of safe drinking water. Further up, another line waited for a ration of food.

Our new friends led us, along with believers from the church who had come for hands-on training, to the only wing of the town's Catholic church that was deemed safe. There we set up for a seminar and spread out to invite people to come for a talk on healing of emotions after the earthquake. Rich conversations followed the seminar. The hunger for answers, for GOD, was palpable.

One of the leaders shared that she had downloaded a Bible app she was secretly reading. It was obvious the disaster had awakened in her a hunger for God. After spending the day with us, these leaders who had been rather hesitant at the beginning were hugging us like we were family.

We were overjoyed that the believers who were with us decided to "adopt" the neighborhood, planning to return using their training in trauma care to follow through in helping the people there. We know the work has not ended just because we left.

I came away with the confidence that God allows disasters because He is love. He does not willingly bring disaster, but his love is too great to leave us wandering through life on our own. He wants to show our hearts how much they need him.

More than ever before, I'm convinced that God wants his people to be ready to respond when he makes people right for the harvest. We need to bring His compassion and love to people when they are hurting most. How can we fail to hold out the hope and security we have found?

Our goal at Women of Grace USA is to prepare women to demonstrate Christ through their lives and actions. To represent Him well, we must be growing and strengthening ourselves in him. We must know His Word. We must understand His ways and allow Him to develop His heart in us. We must let Him comfort us so we can offer the same comfort to others.

I have to say that every investment of time and money I've made to prepare myself (albeit unknowingly) for such a ministry has been worth it. As we look at our world, let's evaluate

where we are putting our energies and resources. Let's be ready to respond when opportunities knock. It's too late then to start preparing ourselves! The time to prepare is now.

If you want to know more about Not Alone Crisis Reservists, contact Barb Wooler at bwooler@encompassworld.org.