



## **Caring After Chaos**

**When Disaster Strikes, Presbyterian Disaster Assistance Responds, Offering Spiritual Care and Support to Local Church Leaders.**

By Mark Ray

*Presbyterians Today*

March 2013

At 7 p.m. last July 20, hundreds of people gathered in an Aurora, Colo., parking lot for an impromptu prayer vigil. Just hours earlier, a gunman had killed or wounded 70 people during a midnight showing of “The Dark Knight Rises” at a theater across the street. Among those in attendance at the Friday vigil were friends of the victims, Aurora residents, pastors and politicians of all stripes, and two volunteers from Presbyterian Disaster Assistance (PDA).

Rev. John Cheek had traveled that day from Tucson, while Dr. Kate Wiebe had come from Santa Barbara – catching a flight just 90 minutes after Rev. John Robinson, PDA’s associate for disaster response in the United States, asked her to make the trip. On Saturday, Cheek and Wiebe would be joined by Rev. Jim Kirk of Naples, Fla., and Elder Lisa Baker of Springfield, Mass. The team’s mission: to provide spiritual care in the wake of the theater shootings.

Disaster spiritual care is a relatively new emphasis for PDA, which has long focused on hosting disaster volunteers, supporting long-term recovery in communities affected by disasters both natural and human-caused, and providing training and disaster preparedness for presbyteries and synods. The intent is not to supplant the care provided by local pastors and church leaders but rather to give those pastors and leaders the tools and support they need to be effective.

In Aurora, the PDA team first met with the pastors of the five PC(USA) churches in the area and attended Sunday worship in their churches. “We worshiped in those congregations and were an incarnational presence of the larger church,” Kirk said. “Then

we facilitated a gathering of faith leaders to talk about what they might anticipate in terms of responses within their churches and what some effective interventions might be.”

### **Caring for the Caregivers**

In many PDA deployments, the first care recipient is the pastor.

“Most pastors absorb more grief and loss in a year than many families feel in a lifetime,” Robinson said. “So one of our calls when we do spiritual care is to help pastors get in touch with the idea that they need spiritual care also.”

Of course, pastors should have their own support networks, but many hesitate to reach out. “Sometimes they can’t go to their own presbyteries because of the dynamics of the presbytery; sometimes there are trust issues within their own clergy group,” Robinson said. “How do you admit to someone in your small group that the tornado or the shooting or the hurricane has shaken your feelings toward God when that person might be on the Committee on Ministry?”

What’s worse, parishioners often neglect to ask their pastors how they’re feeling, as Wiebe rediscovered when she helped lead an interfaith retreat in Tucson two months after a shooting spree there claimed six lives. “Thirty-five clergy members of the Tucson area came, representing Catholic, Jewish, Muslim, Sikh, and Protestant faith groups,” she said. “There were many people in that room who in two months no one had asked them how they were doing.”

PDA volunteers do ask faith leaders how they’re doing and what help they need, but they’re careful not to overstep their bounds. “We really, really try not to take over the pastoral duties,” Cheek said. “What we try to do is to equip the staff to do the work that they need to do.” That might mean helping to design a worship service. It might mean asking, “Is this the right text to preach on today?” It probably would not mean offering to preach in a pastor’s stead.

### **When You’ve Seen One Disaster**

Beyond caring for the caregivers, the work PDA does depends on the local situation. As PDA volunteers like to say, when you’ve seen one disaster, you’ve seen one disaster.

Several factors guided the PDA team’s work in Aurora. None of the PC(USA) congregations in the area had primary victims, although some had secondary victims – a neighbor’s child or a former coworker, for example. At the same time, the shootings rekindled painful memories of the 1999 massacre just 20 miles away at Columbine High School. “Lots of people had unfinished business about the Columbine shooting,” Cheek said. “In our ministry of presence, we were not redirecting people to Aurora but letting them do the work of Columbine.”

Also unique to Aurora was the fact that Presbyterian pastors ran the chaplaincy programs at two local hospitals that had been inundated with victims of the disaster. The PDA team spent much of its time in Aurora working with those pastors. “They just

needed a place where they could talk and process and know that somebody would listen and not judge them,” Kirk said.

That experience was so positive that PDA was invited to return to Aurora in November to lead workshop on compassion fatigue prevention and resilience for chaplains at one of the hospitals. “We’ve done about 12 of those,” Robinson said. “It’s a relatively new program that PDA has.”

## **An Expanded Reach**

As hospital workshops and interfaith retreats demonstrate, PDA’s work extends beyond local Presbyterian congregations. When asked by a partner agency like the American Red Cross, PDA pitches in wherever there’s a need.

That was the case in April 2011, when tornadoes devastated Tuscaloosa, Ala. “We went out as part of teams of a social worker, a Red Cross disaster person, and one of our people to meet with families of those who had been killed in the disaster,” Robinson said. “That was an exception to our not being in direct contact with survivors.”

Such situations call for special sensitivity. “When you do spiritual care in disaster, you need to be careful not to get into evangelization,” Robinson said. “People are at their most vulnerable after a disaster. What they need is reconnection with their own resilience, their own resources, and their own connection to God – not the presentation of an alternative. That just makes it that much worse.”

PDA’s sensitivity to people of other faiths or no faith has allowed it to offer compassion-fatigue training in settings far beyond the church. After one disaster, a county EMS director asked Robinson if he could offer compassion-fatigue training to his whole department but “take the God stuff out.”

“I had to laugh,” Robinson said. “Can we make it nonsectarian? Yes. Can we do it without talking about spirituality or God? I’m not really sure.” When he explained the distinction, the EMS director signed on, the training occurred, and the response was overwhelmingly positive.

## **Needs Both Great and Small**

Ultimately, though, PDA’s first responsibility is to the local pastors and church leaders on whom so many people rely. Kate Wiebe was one of those people before she became a PDA volunteer. In 2009, she was serving as director of congregational care at a church in Willamette, Ill., where a murder-suicide occurred. Within 48 hours, a PDA team was on site to meet with the church staff and session members.

What Wiebe particularly remembers is that the PDA volunteers repeatedly asked, “What do you need right now?” When an elder and a pastoral assistant had to walk through the crime scene to handle some facilities issue, that meant personal debriefings as soon as they emerged.

But other needs were simpler. Wiebe had just returned from maternity leave and at one point simply needed someone to hold her three-month-old son. A PDA volunteer quickly stepped forward.

“I’d always appreciated being a Presbyterian.” She said. “I was deeply moved by the expression of the body of Christ through Presbyterian Disaster Assistance.”

### **Wounded Healers (sidebar)**

In *The Wounded Healer*, Henri Nouwen celebrates the minister who “can make his own wounds available as a source of healing.” Many of the members of PDA’s National Response Team do just that. Their service, to paraphrase Nouwen, comes from a heart wounded by the suffering about which they speak.

Rev. John Cheek, who is an associate pastor at Northminster Presbyterian Church in Tucson, is a good example. He lives just two miles from the shopping center where Rep. Gabby Giffords and 18 other people were shot on Jan. 8, 2011. One of those killed that day was a member of his congregation, Phyllis Schneck, as were two of the injured, Ken and Carol Dorushka. Another fatality, Judge John Roll, worshiped at a different church but had been Cheek’s friend for 30 years.

“PDA was really, really helpful for us in terms of saying, ‘You have to acknowledge this grief. You have to create space for yourselves, for your staff, for your whole congregation to be able to experience this,’” Cheek said.

The PDA team remained in Tucson for 11 days. “Before they left, I was asking if there might be some role for me serving in PDA,” Cheek said.

Another wounded healer was preparing to serve.

### **Answering the Call (sidebar)**

PDA only acts at the invitation of a local presbytery, but that doesn’t mean John Robinson waits for a call from a presbytery executive. If he hears of a disaster in the news, he’ll reach out to leaders in the affected area. “Unfortunately, I’m getting to know a lot of presbytery execs,” Robinson said. “One of them said he always knows that when I call it’s an offer of help, but he also knows that something’s gone wrong.”

Once an invitation comes, Robinson works with Rick Turner, associate for PDA’s hospitality program, to decide which members of the National Response Team to send. “We start making up the list based on a mix of personalities, experiences, skills, and previous contact with that presbytery,” Robinson said. “We try to tailor-make each team to what’s going to be the best fit for the leadership and the needs of the presbytery at that time.”

Team members might stay for a few days or a few weeks. They typically buy one-way plane tickets because they don’t know how long they’ll be needed. Follow-up visits can occur months or even years later, depending on local needs.

In 2012, National Response Team members deployed 28 times to 24 states.