

# Helping Congregants After a Disaster

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**P**an Am 103 plummeted over the unknown Scottish village of Lockerbie. Since that shocking incident, the dead have been eulogized and buried, but for the many living family members the battle to come to grips with reality still goes on. They still have not totally readjusted.

A key person caught in the psychological struggle is the local clergyman. He is expected to come up with correct answers, even under the most trying circumstances. In the immediate period after the tragedy, Pan Am assigned a psychological caseworker to each bereaved family. That professional helper has now gone, although many of the problems still remain. In many cases, only the family's pastor or priest is left.

The clergyman has a role in helping, but it goes well beyond the standard function of providing words of religious comfort to a shocked parishioner. Before he can assist his congregant, he must come to a firm and perceptive understanding of the real problems.

Sudden and unexpected death of a close relative is not an easy experience, as every clergyman knows. There are always the standard questions of "Why?" When the circumstances of death, however, are part of a major disaster, such as the air crash in Lockerbie, an entirely new situation is created.



Several weeks before the Pan Am crash, a high-intensity earthquake struck part of Soviet Armenia. As international television crews recorded in vivid detail, rescue teams from all over the world inundated the stricken area. One of the most moving sights recorded was the somber demeanor of one parent standing motionless as an extrication team retrieved the lifeless body of his small daughter. Without a visible tear or emotion, the father walked off, holding the body of his child. Had this man lost all sense of love and human compassion? No!

A true understanding of the tragic situation was that the man had become psychologically numbed by the vast scope of death and destruction he had witnessed. In technical terms, he was suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), a formal name given to the entire gamut of *normal* reactions to mass catastrophe.

Those families who traveled to the scene of death in Lockerbie were not the only ones affected by the awesome tragedy. Modern television brought vivid pictures of blood and destruction into many households. At the same time, television did not provide viewers with the social services trained to help people cope with the scenes they were being shown in their own homes. For the general public it was difficult enough. For the family who had lost a member, the situation was catastrophic.

Not all persons affected by Lockerbie expressed themselves in stony silence. Others expressed an opposite PTSD reaction—a violent explosion, whether by incidents of physical violence or by legal actions, even against family members.

The clergyman summoned to a be-

reaved family must be acquainted with the phenomenon of PTSD after a disaster. He must realize that if a scene is unpleasant, it is perfectly normal for people to react. People must be reassured. People must realize that their reactions, whether expressed in fears, sleepless nights, or psychological numbness, are not unique to them alone. Although we have a culture where reactions are supposed to be internalized under most circumstances, those vivid reactions *are* quite normal.

For almost every ailment there is a cure. What is the cure for PTSD? Let the person talk out his feelings. The clergyman should let his parishioner talk while he must *listen* to the grief the parishioner expresses. Consoling the parishioner with predetermined and well-polished lines or favorite biblical verses provide the clergyman with an easy script, but this approach does not always solve the problems of catastrophic bereavement.

There are steps a clergyman can take to assist his congregants when disaster strikes their families:

1. Avoid having the family view the body. Looking at a lifeless victim can be very disturbing, particularly if there has been physical damage to the body. Save the family that agony if possible. Try to have identification done by other methods.

2. Help the family identify the body if there is a problem. Sit with the family and obtain a full description of the victim and his clothing. Get his dental records from his dentist and his medical charts from his physician. Determine if he ever had been fingerprinted, perhaps in conjunction with government employment; if not, a local police technician can check personal effects for

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