

# Faith in Times of Crisis

## In this issue:

People in crisis not only need but appreciate our help and care

Statistics

Countries in crisis

How can the church provide helpful ministry in the community – and in the lives of individuals – in times of crisis?

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## People in crisis not only need but appreciate our help and care

That faith can do its best work in times of crisis is a reality that hit home for me this time last year in Haiti. While many North Americans were asking how God could allow such tragedy, so many of the Haitians I spoke with were resolute. Again and again, they told me, “The only thing we have to hang onto is God, and God’s great love for us!”

It’s been my experience that people who are in the worst of situations often seem to find that God is closest to them there.

I remember Alvire. She was managing the humanitarian emergency assistance program for World Vision Haiti when the earthquake struck. When I arrived in that devastated nation, Alvire’s 12-year-old daughter was missing. It wasn’t until a few days after the earthquake that Alvire received word while at work that her daughter’s body had been found under the rubble of a collapsed school.

Devastated, Alvire immediately left work to properly deal with the little girl’s body and arrange a funeral service for that afternoon. But the very next day, Alvire was back in the office. In spite of our concerns, she refused to stay home, determined to continue the relief work she knew her country desperately needed. Heaven alone can measure the impact of Alvire’s self-sacrifice and faithful witness to God’s sustaining grace.

We won’t all have to live through terrible earthquakes or the loss of a child, but none of us is immune to crisis. It’s not a question of “if” we will endure a crisis in life but “when.” And as Christian leaders, it’s good to remember that people in crisis not only need but appreciate our help and care.

Scripture records that it was often crises that led to the Gospel being shared and the Church expanded. Imagine the circumstances of Christians during the early years of intense persecution after the communists took power. It would have been difficult to believe that Chinese Christians would now number in the many millions. So it’s good to be prepared for crisis, ready to make helpful, hope-filled connections with those who are struggling. Difficult times are also fertile times, forcing us to rely on one another and stripping away what normally separates and divides us.



God bless you,



Dave Toycen  
President, World Vision Canada

“Now faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see.”

-Hebrews 11:1 (NIV)

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Global resources

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### Statistics

1. Poverty—and the material and social deprivation associated with it—is a primary cause of poor mental and physical health among Canadians.
2. Food bank use in Canada increased by 18 per cent between 2008 and 2009, the highest recorded year-over-year increase.
3. In October 2009, during the recent recession, only 51 per cent of unemployed Canadians qualified for Employment Insurance.
4. Mental illness is increasingly recognized as a serious and growing problem. It indirectly affects all Canadians at some time through a family member, friend or colleague.

“The Lord is good, a strong hold in the day of trouble; and he knoweth them that trust in Him.”

–Nahum 1:7 (KJV)

5. 20 per cent of Canadians will personally experience a mental illness in their lifetime.
6. Suicide is a major cause of death among Canadian young people. Among individuals between 15 and 24 years old, nearly one quarter (23.8 per cent) of all deaths in 1998 were due to suicide. Among all 25 to 44-year-olds, the proportion of deaths due to suicide was 15.9 per cent.
7. 40 per cent of Canadians have a low degree of religiosity, 31 per cent are moderately religious and 29 per cent are highly religious. 16 per cent of Canadians report that they have “no religion.”

#### Sources :

- 1, 4, 5: Canadian Mental Health Association,
- 2, 3: Citizens for Public Justice,
- 6: Public Health Agency of Canada,
- 7: Statistics Canada.

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### Countries in crisis

#### Afghanistan

Average life expectancy at birth: 44.65 years

Religion: Sunni Muslim 80 per cent, Shia Muslim 19 per cent, Other 1 per cent

#### Angola

Average life expectancy at birth: 38.48 years

Religion: Indigenous beliefs 47 per cent, Christian 53 per cent

#### Haiti

Average life expectancy at birth: 29.93 years

Religion: Christian\* 96 per cent, Other/none 4 per cent

\*Note: roughly half of the population practices voodoo

#### Swaziland

Average life expectancy at birth: 47.97 years

Religion: Zionist 40 per cent (a blend of Christianity and indigenous ancestral worship), Roman Catholic 20 per cent, Muslim 10 per cent, Other 30 per cent

#### Uganda

Average life expectancy at birth: 52.98 years

Religion: Christian 83.9 per cent, Muslim 12.1 per cent, Other 3.1 per cent, None 0.9 per cent

Source: CIA World Factbook

“We must nurture our faith with the full biblical portrait of a God who is sovereign over both evil and good, so that when either one comes our confidence in him will not be shaken.”

-John Piper

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Countries in crisis

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Global resources

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Christian Leaders

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**How can the church provide helpful ministry in the community – and in the lives of individuals – in times of crisis? This month's experts offer their insights.**

**For more than 30 years, Sister Sue Mosteller has lived and worked with people with disabilities at the L'Arche Daybreak Community in Richmond Hill, Ontario. With Father Henri Nouwen, she opened "Dayspring," a small center for spiritual growth that offers retreats and workshops focusing on spiritual life.**

**WW: You live and work with men and women who live in what many people would consider to be an almost permanent state of crisis.**

**SSM:** We don't see our people as being in crisis, but as people who have suffered. Their suffering is not so much that they're handicapped, but that they have experienced being marginalized and rejected. That kind of suffering – the cry to be loved, accepted and welcomed – is the one we try to address.

**WW: Does that kind of work take a spiritual toll?**

**SSM:** The wonderful thing about a community is that we can spell each other off if things are difficult. So when the going gets tough, somebody else can stand in while the tired ones can get a break.

**WW: What sort of advice would you offer for getting through the terrible times?**

**SSM:** We aren't generally in terrible times, but when we are, we try to focus not on the crisis or the problem, but on the person. We ask, "What might help this person get through this? What are we able to offer or not offer?" If we can do something, we put our plan in action.

There are times, though, when we have to say, "We aren't able to respond in this situation because we need different skills than ours." Thus, we have to admit we're not the saviours of the world!

In those situations where we are in front of very difficult things, we try to stand together to listen and work to find a solution. We pray, and we ask help when we need it. Those are our tools.

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Countries in crisis

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### **WW:** What have you concluded about God and human suffering?

**SSM:** My first answer to that is: I don't know, except my faith teaches me that God is present everywhere and so God must be in the suffering. I don't think we deserve suffering. I believe it's a mystery – a mystery in becoming more and more human – that's not to be solved, but is to be lived.

Jesus is our primary example. He didn't like suffering or want it any more than we do. He did not deserve it. He asked his Father to take it away.

We all want to hear good news. Why? Because we're suffering. Because we're crying inside. If we didn't have suffering, we wouldn't be crying for good news. And the good news is that God is present and is close to the brokenhearted.

My job in the midst of my suffering is to try to find God, and to allow God to transform me into a much more loving, gentle and compassionate person.

### **WW:** How might we all help someone else in the midst of their suffering?

**SSM:** First, each of us is responsible to make peace with our own personal suffering, so as not to be afraid of other people's suffering. Those in front of a lot of suffering and crises need to have a balanced life. We need to make sure we take care of ourselves. Jesus said, "Love your neighbour as yourself." We don't always get that second part. So we have to make peace with that.

When we are in front of people who are suffering – the primary thing is to bring peace. That means concentrating on the person and caring. We may not be able to cure or fix the situation, but we can be there. We can listen. We can be compassionate in their fragility. We can weep with them. And we can bring to them the fact that God is close to the brokenhearted, and is also present.

**Rod Wilson has served as President of Regent College since 2000, where he is also Professor, Counselling and Psychology. He is the author of Counseling and Community and How Do I Help a Hurting Friend?—both award-winning books—and the co-author of Exploring Your Anger and Helping Angry People. He has been involved in the academy and pastorate as well as the worlds of counselling and consulting.**

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**WW:** There are many different kinds of crisis, but ultimately every human being will experience crisis at some point or another. What are some of the most typical ways people respond in the midst of crisis?

**RW:** It is important to understand what a crisis is, before we reflect on how we typically respond. The physiological term, homeostasis, describes a healthy balance between what is happening in the environment, our emotional experiences and our cognitive appraisal. So when I drive to work in the morning, there is usually homeostasis because the traffic is predictable with the result that my emotions are stable and my appraisal of what is happening is positive. When someone cuts me off, I see an accident or I get rear-ended, a crisis occurs because homeostasis has been disrupted.

When the crisis hits, my feeling brain, referred to as the amygdala, kicks in and I begin to experience emotions. Almost simultaneously the neocortex, or thinking brain, boots up and I bring meaning and interpretation to what occurred. But because we are all unique and have individual experiences, we all respond to crises in different ways. For some, being rear-ended creates anger and a threat to personal worth. For others, it is an inconvenience that generates very mild frustration. One victim will fight and confront the perpetrator of the accident, while another will engage in flight, be reticent and almost apologetic.

It would be fair to say that there is no typical response to crisis. Depending on our genetics, environment, history, choices and personality, both the amygdala and neocortex will fire in a unique way.

**WW:** Are people of faith better equipped to weather a crisis?

**RW:** Faith does bring perspective to crises because it provides us with a “back to the future” grid for all of life. While the social sciences have helped us frame the present in light of the past, many expressions of faith invite us to think about our current situation in light of the future.

I have been really encouraged by the Apostle Paul in this regard. Having been through hardships and crises of many kinds, including imprisonment, riots and beatings, his perspective is summarized in a paradoxical way in II Corinthians 4:17: “For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all.”

Clearly, this mindset did not make all the crises that Paul went through easy and pain-free, nor does it suggest that this thinking is simple to appropriate, but he is able to experience the crises of life with a full recognition of the “other side.”

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Statistics

Countries in crisis

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**WW:** What sort of help can Christians offer in times of community or individual crises that others may not be able to offer?

**RW:** When you have a perspective on where this life is headed, a belief that a sovereign God is in control, direct access to him through Jesus the mediator, accessibility to the varied gifts resident in the body of Christ, stories of faith and hope in Scripture and access to prayer through the work of the Holy Spirit, you have resources and a mindset that can produce humble and effective service when others are in crisis.

**WW:** How can Christian leaders equip themselves and their congregations to be able to minister effectively in crisis, when the time comes?

**RW:** We learn how to respond to a crisis by the tone and tenor of our responses to others when they are not in crisis. Living well today is not just preparation for eternity but schooling for what is to come on this earth. In other words, if you are an angry-fixer most of the week, you will respond the same way when someone is in a crisis. If you live life under God, with discernment, wisdom and attentiveness to his work in the world, you will be better equipped to deal with future crises. Today is always preparation for tomorrow.

**Dr. Tim Dearborn is Partnership Leader for Christian Commitments World Vision International, overseeing a staff of 220 people working in 95 countries and responsible for the integration of World Vision's Christian Commitments in all national offices and programs.**

**WW:** World Vision staff are frequently called upon to minister to their fellow human beings in the worst of circumstances, in the wake of devastating natural and man-made disasters. What's that like for them?

**TD:** In a sense, that's why we exist, to address the worst of human experience, whether its AIDS orphans, the earthquake in Haiti, the flood in Pakistan or a child that's been trafficked. The challenge becomes how to equip staff with the spiritual resilience and the emotional, programmatic and pastoral support to continue living in places like that.

Of course, there are staff who struggle with faith, because often they can see more evidence of the absence of goodness than of the presence of goodness. But on the other hand, they are continually confronted with the resilience of the human spirit, with extraordinary expressions of human kindness and by clear encounters with the presence of God. In the communities where they serve, they often meet people with resilient faith and the capacity to dance, to sing and to trust.

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In the west, we tend to have the notion that the purpose of God and of faith is to make our lives more pleasant or more comfortable or easier. But in much of the rest of the world, people believe that the purpose of faith is because it's true. And so they don't necessarily expect God to solve their problems, but to sustain them and to give them the capacity to trust.

**WW:** How do you embolden World Vision staff to continue to minister when faced with one crisis after another?

**TD:** Our staff are profoundly driven by this sense that God has called us to demonstrate God's love in tangible ways in the midst of the worst that people can experience. There's a pretty strong sense of passion behind that. It's why we need to spend time together every day in prayer and Bible study. It's why we worship together. There has to be a continual sense that we're not relying merely on human professional skills, financial resources and technological expertise, but on the presence and the Spirit of God.

**WW:** How can we better prepare ourselves for those inevitable times when crisis will arise?

**TD:** We need to help each another develop a theology of suffering. It is easy for us to perceive suffering as the absence or failure of God, leaving us spiritually unequipped for response. Our prayer life is often particularly focused on prayers of protection ("protect me from this") or solution ("remove this"), rather than prayers of, "Lord, help me find you and your purpose in the midst of this. And if you are indeed the one who causes all things to work together for good – not the one who causes all things, but the one who can cause good to come from all things – Lord, help me to see what that might be."

Of course, there are also the normal psycho-social care issues. We try to help our staff have appropriate boundaries, help them disconnect, ensure they have good Skype connections with family and enable them to get good R&R. In other words, you've got to learn to pace yourself.

**WW:** What steps can Canadian Christian leaders take to orient themselves to God's will and ways in the midst of crises, in order that they might be used by God to care for others during such times?

**TD:** They can prepare their own parishioners and communities to cultivate the kind of depth and vibrancy of faith to be able to respond and understand theologically. Crises often expose the most aberrant forms of theology: that it's God's judgment or God's impotence or it's because you're not Christian – all sorts of aberrant theological expressions. So the more we can help people have a spirituality that prepares them for suffering, and a theology that helps them understand it, the better we'll be as a global Christian movement.

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Recommended reads

Global resources

### Prepare your church to help in times of crisis

- Build relationships with your community now. People may be more willing to reach out for help in times of crisis if they perceive you as a friend.
- Help your church develop a vibrant, robust, social vision of the role of the Church in society, in dealing with poverty and justice, and in responding to oppression.
- Stay current. Become informed about potential risks and possible responses. When crisis hits, you'll be ready to act.
- Pray. Remember that intercessory prayer is a form of vicariously carrying other people's burdens. In intercession, we are asking God to help us to carry the weight that others are carrying.
- In times of crisis, ease burdens by providing help for ongoing physical needs, such as meals or rides to medical appointments. Offer to tend to young children, walk the dog or provide housekeeping help.

“There wasn't a moment when I felt forsaken. I knew the Lord was working.”

*-José Samuel Henríquez,  
spiritual leader of the thirty-three trapped Chilean miners,  
during their confinement*

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Global resources

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**Living Below The Line:** More than one million Canadian children today live in unsafe housing, face hunger or poor health and have limited opportunities. Poverty impedes a significant number of Canadian children from fulfilling their God-given potential. This report will help you understand more about poverty in Canada and its root causes.  
<http://www.worldvision.ca/Programs-and-Projects/Canadian-Programs/Documents/Living%20Below%20the%20Line.pdf>

**Partners to End Child Poverty** is a program in which World Vision partners with community faith-based organizations across Canada to address the needs of children.  
<http://www.worldvision.ca/Programs-and-Projects/Canadian-Programs/Pages/Partners-to-End-Child-Poverty.aspx>

**Planet Prepare:** A new series of research factsheets commissioned by World Vision warns of the vulnerability of developing communities in the face of climate change.  
<http://wvasiapacific.org/latest/the-world-is-changing-planet-prepare.html>

**The Hard Facts...** on hunger, water, education, children affected by conflict and HIV and AIDS. This provides key statistics about these issues that contribute to the cycle of poverty and crisis in developing countries.  
<http://www.worldvision.ca/Education-and-Justice/advocacy-in-action/Pages/the-hard-facts.aspx>

**The Gospel Quest:** A Six-week campaign that will engage your church in the “Whole” Gospel – a Gospel of compassion and mercy that can transform the world. Based on the book *The Hole in Our Gospel* by Rich Stearns, President of World Vision U.S.  
<http://www.worldvision.ca/GetInvolved/Responding-Churches/Pages/worship-series-and-church-campaigns.aspx>

**Faith In Action:** A four-week, church-wide campaign that creates an outward focus and a heart to serve in your congregation. Culminates in a Sunday where regular services are cancelled and the entire congregation engages in service projects in and with the community.  
<http://www.putyourfaithinaction.org/>

**Start > Becoming a Good Samaritan Curriculum** A Teaching tool to help inform, train and inspire you, your small group and your church as you learn how to put your faith into action. Six dynamic sessions feature some of the most prominent Christian leaders and thinkers of today.  
<http://www.juststart.org/home.aspx>

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Statistics

Countries in crisis

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World Vision resources

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Global resources

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*An Interrupted Life*

by Etty Hillesum. Owl Books, 1996.

*Beyond Duty: A Passion for Christ, a Heart for Mission*

by Tim Dearborn. Marc, 1998.

*Come Be My Light: The Private Writings of the Saint of Calcutta*

by Mother Teresa. Doubleday Religion, 2007.

*Simple Spirituality: Learning to See God in a Broken World*

by Christopher L. Heuertz. IVP Books, 2008.

*The Face of Friendship: A True Story of Hope and Transformation*

by Bill Clarke and Jean Vanier. Novalis Press, 2004.

*The Inner Voice of Love*

by Henri J. M. Nouwen. DoubleDay, 1996.

*Where Is God When It Hurts?*

By Philip Yancey. Zondervan, 2002.

“If we have no peace, it is because we have forgotten that we belong to each other.”

-Mother Teresa

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Statistics

Countries in crisis

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World Vision resources

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**ReliefWeb** serves the information needs of the humanitarian relief community. Includes information on training, resources, disaster watch and maps.  
<http://www.reliefweb.int/rw/dbc.nsf/doc100?OpenForm>

**AlertNet** provides breaking news related to global emergencies. Maps, facts, briefings and blogs written by and for humanitarians.  
<http://www.trust.org/alertnet/>

**Trends in Natural Disasters** The number of disasters is on the increase. Here's a graph from the United Nations Environment Programme, showing the dramatic details:  
<http://maps.grida.no/go/graphic/trends-in-natural-disasters>

“Do not let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God; trust also in me (Jesus).”

*-John 14:1 (TNIV)*

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