

God's Erasers Bring New Opportunities for Change

By C. J. Latham

March 1, 1997 didn't seem to be a memorable day as it began; however, looking back now, I realize it will be a day that I shall never forget, nor will I forget the revelations that were to follow.

Rain began falling on the hills of central Kentucky in late February. On Saturday, March 1, members of my small congregation rushed to our church in Monterey, with hopes of moving the church's possessions as the basement began to flood, an all too common occurrence for the small country community settled near the banks of the Kentucky River.

The rain fell very quickly up river, in some areas reports of upwards of two inches an hour. The ground had absorbed all that it could and run off began swelling the rivers and creeks. By Sunday morning the church had been cut off by rising waters. The only way into or out of Monterey was now by boat. Fifty-five of the sixty-seven families in Monterey had to be evacuated. The bridge going into town was underwater, as was the town's only highway.

Floods Cover Entire Town

The river had risen to a high, unequalled since the flood of 1937—a distant memory for the elderly of Monterey, and a new experience for many of the town's younger residents. It was also a new experience for me: the student pastor of Monterey Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), an experience that has proven to be one that has

stretched me beyond my imagination, and given me new insights into the meaning of ministry.

With the town underwater, and many of the roads closed between Lexington and Monterey, my only communication with those living in and around Monterey was by telephone. As I began calling each church member, a picture was being formed in my mind. News reports were of no use. Monterey seemed too small to catch the media's eye. What was happening there seemed insignificant in comparison to what was happening in the larger cities of Louisville, Frankfort, and Falmouth.

Still for the families living in Monterey, it was a heart-wrenching experience to see their homes fill with polluted flood water as they watched helplessly. Efforts to move belongings to higher ground proved to be a waste of time, as the waters continued to rise and rain continued to fall. Once the river crested, it lay stalled, as the nearby Ohio River, also flooding, blocked the Kentucky River's retreat. The stalled flood water remained in town for nearly a week. It was the following Saturday before I could enter the church to survey the damages, which were extensive.

The water had entered the sanctuary, distorting the carpet as well as damaging the hard wood floors, the pews and other sanctuary furniture. The piano had two feet of water setting inside it. The pew paddings were drenched beyond salvation, and

the hymnals were ruined. There had been two to three feet of water inside the sanctuary. The sight before me was worse than I had imagined.

Hopeless Feelings

As I walked into the church, a feeling of hopelessness began to overwhelm me. The soggy remains of what once had been a beautiful country church was more than I could bear as tears began to fill my eyes. My mind asked God the age old question, "Why?" Even so members of the church had already begun the cleanup process. Help came as fast as the flood waters had—the Air National Guard, the Red Cross, and neighboring church members from Owenton Christian Church were hard at work.

As I rode home that afternoon, I



Lenora Spicer, trustee of Monterey (Ky.) Christian Church, sweeps a heavy layer of silt from the church basement following March floods.

began to understand the meaning of the term “the body of Christ” in a new light. Monterey Christian Church was not alone. “The body of Christ” was coming together and the work of restoring the church had already begun. Other churches were quick to respond with gifts of money to help pay for the restoration that was needed. Some people just came lending a hand and leaving without telling us where they were from, only that they had come to help.

The following weeks became a blur of Church meetings and work-days, many I could not take part in due to health reasons. The telephone was the tool that I was assigned to utilize, calling and receiving calls from volunteers wishing to help in the flood clean up. This too was a revelation as I began to realize that the tools of God come in many forms.

Telephone Becomes Friend

The telephone and I had never established a personal friendship, but now, it had become my best friend. It was keeping me informed, as well as putting me in touch with my congregation. The telephone was my link with those who could help the church, and the community of Monterey. Day after day I spent hours calling and talking to voices without faces; even so, I could tell that these people had caring hearts. I began to understand that just as we are all part of the priesthood of believers, all things can

be tools for God’s re-creation when we remove the limits we have so falsely put on them and let God be God.

The first steps of re-creation had begun as ceiling tiles were pulled down and hauled away. Basement walls and even flooring had to be torn out and removed from the building, tables were carried from the building and placed in the sun with hopes that they would dry out and be salvageable. Church members were at the church every day cleaning something. Dishes were taken from the church and washed, as were the folding chairs. The first six days passed and the church was still a muddy mess. I had never realized that, before the cleaning could be done, so much would have to be torn out and thrown away.

As walls came down I began to realize that for some of the church members we were throwing out the memories of their lives. As I began to hear the stories of how fathers had built a room, stories of days long gone and people who had passed on, the church began to take on a life of memories. As tears fell from mud streaked cheeks, I realized that the church was indeed more than a building; it was a home, a home that housed the family of God.

Lives had been lived in this church building and it had become a living monument for those who had taught others about the God that they loved.

It was a place where fathers brought daughters and mothers their sons, and the family learned about God and worshiped their Creator. It was a place where children had grown up, a place where new families had begun and where families had said goodbye to loved ones. I began to understand the pain in my people’s faces. The church that had held so many of their dreams and so many of their hopes was being changed forever.

Why, God? Why?

I also began to understand just how much I cared for these people, how much I wanted to take their pain away, and then I realized that I was angry, angry at God. Why had this devastating flood come to these people? Why had it been allowed to take so much from them and how would it ever be replaced? What would make the open wounds heal? As I thought about my own questions I realized that I was the one who was also reassuring the congregation that God was with us even in this trial. God would bring us through and we would be stronger as we pulled together, helping each other, and together with God’s people we would never be left alone to deal with our losses. God was still God and we were not alone. I could not help but wonder, “Was I convincing as I told my congregation this, and struggled all the while with my own questions and doubts?”

That Sunday we met in the second story of our building; the sanctuary was still too wet to hold worship. Though it was cold outside and the heat had not been restored, we met to worship. Wearing the warmest clothes we had, the church gathered together. We celebrated the fact that we were all well, that each of us had come through the flood safely. We were tired and grieving the losses, and needed to be reassured that God was still with us and would see us through.

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see sparks return to the tired eyes of the congregation. From the first praise song, strength began to return as each found something that seemed to reassure them. I began to see something happening among my people, quietly at first and then as we sang another song I began to realize what I was seeing was the restoring power of God's spirit moving among the congregation. My heart began to soar as I felt so blessed to see God's spirit working in the lives of my people.

I still don't know what started it that day; perhaps it was just their willingness to believe that God was with them or maybe it was their statement of faith that had brought them from warm homes to the cold church to worship. Maybe it was the fact that they were together.

As I watched the sparks return to their eyes I thought about Jesus' admonishment of not forsaking the gathering together for worship. As we shared the peace of God that morning, I felt the warmth of Christian love in a fresh new way. I knew that this moment in time was special; it was a moment that would never come again in quite the same way. It was a precious gift, brought about in a most unexpected way.

Resurrection in Monterey

It was not until Easter Sunday that we could hold our first services back in the church's sanctuary. We sat on somewhat soggy wooden pews. The piano clanked and clacked as we sang songs about the resurrection of Jesus. But that morning our church seemed to be experiencing its own resurrection. It was not a resurrection brought about by its own power but by the power of God. New life had begun to flow into the church and into the community. It was being re-created.

Each day headway was being made. Debris left by the flood water had been removed, the Air National Guard had moved on, trees were beginning to bud, and flowers began

to bloom. As the church celebrated the resurrection of Jesus Christ, it also celebrated its own resurrection of sorts. A new spirit had settled among our church members, as each came out to help as they could.

A Future Vision Arrives

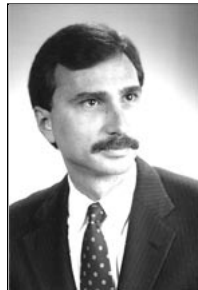
We set about planning the course re-creation would take; which jobs would be done first and by whom. Working in groups, in pairs, and at times alone, the church members began to re-create what had been destroyed by the flood. The pews and the pulpit furniture were loaded onto trucks and taken to Frankfort to be refinished. Electricians pulled out old water-soaked wiring, replacing it with new. New walls were constructed in the basement and running water made its first appearance in the church. Modern indoor plumbing replaced the outdoor facilities that had gone down river with the receding flood waters. The hardwood floors were re-finished and new carpeting was chosen and

laid. The church began to be re-created before our eyes, and I began to realize that God has giant erasers.

We call these erasers: tornadoes, hurricanes, earthquakes, and floods. They bring destruction and pain. They leave scars that only time can heal but they also bring hidden opportunities for change. Times when we can take what is old, tired, and worn and make it bright and new. By the middle of May this newness had become visible in the sanctuary.

New plans have begun to be created by the members of the church; plans for a new fellowship hall and Sunday school rooms that would be above the flood plain and out of harm's way in future floods. A place where the congregation will be able to meet for fellowship. A place where the youth of our church will learn about God. A place where new families will celebrate their weddings and grieving families will be comforted. A place where the congregation can create a lifetime of memories.

A note from the editor



I first met C.J. Latham while conducting an informational meeting about BCE's ministry at Lexington Theological Seminary. She and I talked

briefly about her congregation's ministry space needs and our conversation eventually resulted in a consultation with church leaders. A few months later we were together again as the entire area was dealing with one of the worst floods in recent memory.

This article, originally written by C.J. Latham as an assignment for a course taught by Harold R. Watkins at Lexington Seminary, is a story of how a small membership congregation dealt with adversity and how it

was reminded of a larger church that sprung to its assistance. But it is much more than that. This is an account of a caring pastor and her growing insights into ministry.

By now you probably know that this is my last issue as editor of *Cutting Edge*. I have really enjoyed trying to bring you helpful articles and information each quarter. I am deeply indebted to all of those writers who graciously offered their work to the church.

In January I join the staff of Christian Church Foundation. Instead of capital projects, I will now serve the whole church through planned giving and permanent funds management. Thank you for the opportunity to serve. I look forward to our continued partnership in ministry.

—Gary W. Kidwell

Be Prepared When Disaster Strikes

Have you ever inspected your facilities and activities to determine how your church would be affected if disaster would suddenly strike? Would your church be prepared?

Although you cannot prevent such disasters, you can safeguard yourself in the event they do occur.

Protect Important Documents

Original documents such as real estate titles and mortgages, lease agreements, vehicle titles, and insurance policies should be kept in a fireproof safe or bank safe-deposit box. Any other items that may be difficult or even impossible to replace if destroyed should also be protected. Your corporation's minutes, bylaws, and resolutions should be well protected in case they are ever needed to justify certain activities.

All records and computerized documents should be backed up or duplicated. If your records are destroyed, the IRS may reconstruct your income from bank statements or other available documents. This can result in accounting records that are less accurate as well as less favorable

than the originals.

To help substantiate insurance claims, consider storing copies of building plans and architectural drawings at another location. Photographs or videotapes of the interior and exterior of your premises should also be stored.

Emergency Preparation

Devise a plan to contact employees in case of disaster. Provide supervisors with a list of employees' home phone numbers and establish a system so each worker has someone to check in with during an emergency. Also, maintain a list of key lay leaders and assign staffers to call them in the event your operations are disrupted.

Identify potential back-up facilities where some or all of your operations can be established on short notice. Having reciprocal arrangements with another church in your community is often a good idea. For instance if one church is hit by fire, the other will provide the needed work space. This can even work among competitors, and is quite common among large corporations.

Have a list available describing appropriate actions you must take when there is advance warning of a disaster. Such a list might include: boarding up windows, closing security gates, shutting off utilities, securing vehicles, and obtaining cash from the bank to cover purchases of supplies or services.

Check Your Insurance

Most insurance carriers offer businesses basic policies that cover property damage and liability. Unfortunately, many businesses do not take advantage of them.

We would all like to think disasters won't happen to us, and it is often difficult to justify taking time to prepare for something that might never happen. But if disaster ever does strike your church, you'll be glad you were prepared.

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