

ALABAMA NARRATIVE

(07/01/11)

It is now more than a month since I returned from Alabama. The intensity of the experience gradually recedes, but the memories will linger long. After some days in Tuscaloosa, I was asked to prepare to manage our group of chaplains there, which I agreed to do. A model that was new to me was in use there: Integrated Care Teams (ICT), composed of a nurse (who was the lead), a client caseworker, a chaplain and sometimes a mental health worker. These teams tracked down people who had lost family in the storms. ARC was prepared to give them some financial assistance, to help them access other sources of help, to see that they had their medications and that their physical health needs were being met.

The role of chaplains has not always been well understood in Red Cross circles, although Earl Johnson, BCC, did much in his time there to advocate for and represent chaplaincy. But it was interesting to me to observe what took place there with the ICT's. In most cases a pattern developed for relating to these families, once the team had located them and arranged a meeting: The chaplain would often take the lead in reaching out to the family personally, to find out how they were doing, to convey genuine personal interest. Once some trust was established, the teams found it greatly facilitated the handling of paperwork, of health questions and the other matters that were important toward offering practical assistance. It also, in some cases, meant some profound sharing took place. Much of my experience of this came through debriefing sessions with the chaplains. Their stories conveyed to me a consistent picture of experienced chaplains having to call upon their professionalism to help people navigate turbulent waters of emotion and loss. Bringing prayer was often a very meaningful component to the persons. And something that became increasingly clear to me, was that the chaplains also came to play a role within the ICT itself. Many of the other team members were not accustomed to dealing with emotional intensity of that kind, and the chaplains in many instances also helped their other team members get through this, debriefing them afterward, giving basic pastoral care.

There are two aspects of this I would like to lift up: 1) I think the other health care professionals got a "close-up" look at chaplaincy that they had never had, and chaplains were looked upon with increasing respect as time went on. 2) My own feeling was (and is) one of enormous pride in my fellow chaplains for what they were bringing to the situation there. The spiritual sensitivity and attunement to the personal dynamics at play were, I believe, what professional chaplains are uniquely positioned to provide. It is not a given, of course, that just any certified chaplain can so provide. But these chaplains were prepared, particularly through their experience *as chaplains* to bring something to the equation that no one else could, and that something is part of the essence of what draws us to chaplaincy.

Another question, of course, is the care for the chaplains, and for our own self-care once we got home. A story is worth sharing: A chaplain (Miriam Dakin) shared of a visit made to family members of a woman who had been killed, along with her two grandchildren. The woman's mother was still alive and present (this elderly matron soon thereafter died, not storm-related) and the deceased woman's sister, the great-aunt of the two children. This sister said to the chaplain at one point: "Did anyone tell you about the sky before the tornadoes hit?" She said not, and the woman said, "The clouds were moving all around, and then they all of a sudden came together and formed two hands." Miriam asked what she made of this. "I think it was God's hands gettin' ready to catch everybody that was gonna be comin' that way." This image became important to that chaplain as she dealt with so many stories of loss, and to me also. To have lost a sister and the sister's grandkids, and be able to trust that, in spite of the terrible, seeming randomness of the furious storm that had taken them, God's hands had received them – this is not just faith, but Faith.

For myself, it took time being home for some time, living a "normal" life that seemed not so normal, eventually telling stories (I found I did not want to much do that the first few days) and experiencing the support of my church community and my workmates. But for me a very important piece was writing a song based on that story, "Alabama Skies." There really is something so disturbing about tornadoes. Thomas Howard, a Christian writer and Tuscaloosa native, wrote an article in *Commonweal Magazine* – "Clouds of Unknowing" – in which he identifies this. "... (U)nlike hurricanes, which arrive gradually and affect a wide area, tornadoes are localized, sudden, and furious. For that reason, I've often thought they raise questions of theodicy in a particularly acute manner. Why was my house leveled, while my neighbor's stands? Why did the tornado's path come down Fifteenth Street and not Lurleen Wallace Boulevard? Why did the Angel of Death visit here and not there, now and not then?"

As I say in my song: "I don't understand/So much of what I've seen/How it comes out of nowhere/And changes everything/But I will remember/And try to see with Sadie's eyes/How it was before the storms came/Out of Alabama skies."