



Issue: "Boy Scout dilemma," May 18, 2013 [worldmag.com/issue/2013/05/18/]

Posted: May 3, 2013 at 1:00 AM

by Amy McCullough

After the explosion

DISASTER RELIEF | Among relief groups in West, Texas, was one that offered something more than material aid

WEST, Texas—Just after pastor Boniface Onjefu arrived home at about 8 p.m. on April 17, he felt what he thought was an earthquake. His electricity flickered. He ran outside and saw a giant pillar of black smoke, with people “crying and running. There was fear in everyone’s eyes.” Some saw his clerical collar and stopped to grab his hands as he prayed.

Members of the West Church of Christ were at the last song in their monthly church sing when the building shook and the lights went out. Elder Tom Kissinger thought a truck had hit the church. They finished singing in the dark. Then the West Fertilizer Company’s owner, Donald Adair, got a call and left.

The fertilizer plant had caught fire and exploded with a blast that registered 2.1 on the Richter scale. It killed 14 people and destroyed dozens of homes. The cause is unknown.

National news media arrived to broadcast the devastation while stunned residents in the town of 2,800 began grieving for the dead they knew. Victims blocked from the blast zone wondered if they would still have homes when authorities allowed them to return. Most had family members to take them in, so shelter wasn’t a problem. People needed supplies: food, drinks, clothing, diapers, formula, medical supplies, blankets, toiletries, towels, air mattresses, pet food, toys, cleaning items.

Days later churches were receiving donations from all over the country and as far away as Australia. A Nashville church sent a semi-truck full of items. The Salvation Army had multiple canteen sites. The Czech Stop and Bakery, famous for its fruit-filled German pastries, displayed a “Disaster Relief Available” sign that pointed customers to the VFW, Community Center, First Assembly of God, Westfest Fairgrounds, and West Auction Barn.

President Obama declared West a disaster site and sent FEMA. The city of West website advertised the Joint Assistance Center, a conglomeration of the Red Cross, Department of Veterans Affairs, a Buddhist group, and the nonprofit Austin Disaster Relief Network (ADRN).

Among the advertisements of groups offering aid, the ADRN signs stuck out. Instead of addressing physical needs, they said “Emotional Support.” On April 20 ADRN volunteers Barbara Bucklin and Chuck Bridge sat



Associated Press/Photo by LM Otero
DEVASTATION: A firefighter surveys the remain the fertilizer plant.

with West residents Annette and Zack Meador and spoke with them about plans for their home. Bucklin and Bridge offered advice—don't give your whole insurance check to the bank—and prayed with the Meadors. "My faith will be so much more now because of everything that has happened," Annette Meador said.

ADRN is a group of 112 Texas churches with members trained in nationally recognized trauma counseling and emergency response programs. Director Daniel Geraci created the group after Hurricane Katrina—"If churches don't care about people, who will?"—and in 2011 sent hundreds of volunteers to Bastrop, Texas, after fires destroyed more than 1,600 homes. ADRN matched almost 500 families with local churches.

West Church of Christ elder Kissinger told me, "We haven't been very well organized. ... Tell people: Any church needs a disaster plan." Advertising "grief crisis" on its outdoor sign, the church gave over its fellowship hall and classrooms to secular grief counselors from the state of Texas, since the church doesn't have a mechanism in place to offer organized Christian counseling.

Christian counselors look at grief differently. Like their secular counterparts, ADRN members "debrief" those experiencing trauma, helping them begin to think through practical steps they need to take to rebuild their lives. But ADRN also emphasizes getting local churches to adopt specific families and walk alongside them during long-term recovery.

On the Sunday morning after the blast, West Church of Christ pastor Ernie Albrecht told a teary-eyed congregation that true comfort only comes from Christ. Albrecht, a father of four who owned a home within the blast site, said, "There's no reason why I should be alive. There's no reason God should love me." He and his family survived because they were at church during the monthly singing time, according to Church of Christ News. Albrecht concluded, "God is good all the time. It is so hard sometimes for us to understand."

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