

“Instead of seeing disasters as ‘acts of God,’ Dr. Gary Harbaugh shows that when disasters occur, God in fact is active: active in and through our questions, confusion, and doubts; active in and through our responses and actions; active in and through the community; and active in and through people of faith.”

— Gilbert B. Furst

Director, Lutheran Disaster Response

Foreword

“Can atheists get insurance for acts of God?” As I read this “imponderable” recently in a newspaper’s religion page, I was reminded there has been a lot of confusion over the years because of that little phrase, “act of God.” Even Merriam-Webster’s dictionary indicates the phrase was used as early as 1859 to describe “an extraordinary interruption by a natural cause (as a flood or earthquake) of the usual course of events that experience, prescience, or care cannot reasonably foresee or prevent.”

There is a sharp contradiction between belief in a loving, benevolent God and a God who would willingly inflict destruction and death on the very people God created and redeemed. Disasters as “acts of God” confuse people affected by a disaster as well as those responding to help.

The church has always responded in times of disasters. From the very beginning, God’s people have been responding in times of famines and floods, earthquakes and windstorms, fires and droughts. Why the church responds became clear as I was serving my second congregation. “Pastor, you couldn’t pay me to do what I’ve done today,” a council member, told me as we ended a day of shoveling smelly river water and mud from a basement in Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania. It was 1972, and Hurricane Agnes had caused massive flooding in the area. As I pondered his comment, I found a reason why the church is committed to disaster response ministry in the third chapter of St. Matthew: “Then Jesus came from Galilee to John at the Jordan, to be baptized. . . . when Jesus had been baptized, just as he came up from the water, suddenly the heavens were opened to him and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. And a voice from heaven said, ‘This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.’” (Matt. 3:13-17). Jesus’ baptism and the gift of the Spirit identify his mission to do God’s work. It means the same for us. In our baptism we are also identified as God’s beloved children, and we become part of the church family God creates by the Holy Spirit. Baptism gives us a mission to continue Jesus’ ministry. We are Jesus’ presence in today’s world. How do we express our baptismal faith? To be spirit-filled, baptized Christians is to have a deep, loving concern for the lives of others in trouble and in misery. Each year those include the thousands whose lives are affected by the crises of disasters.

Whether the church is responding locally to a member whose house has burned—or is sending a team of volunteers to help in a nationally coordinated response to an impacted community in another part of the country—the confusion about a disaster as an “act of God” remains for both the helper and the survivor.

In *Act of God / Active God*, Dr. Gary Harbaugh provides insights and understandings to help persons of faith struggle with that seeming contradiction. Following examples of people who have experienced a variety of disasters, he confronts the faith issues from a profound theological perspective. Instead of seeing disasters as “acts of God,” he shows that when disasters occur, God in fact is active: active in and through our questions, confusion, and doubts; active in and through our responses and actions; active in and through the community; and active in and through people of faith. He offers seven ways people of faith can transform disasters into times of blessings, and he provides helpful spiritual and biblical resources to strengthen Christians in times of disaster.

Gary Harbaugh has provided blessings to many over the course of his ministry, as a pastor, seminary professor, and writer. In times of disasters he serves as a Lutheran Disaster Response resource. Over the years he has offered Care for the Caregiver ministry to pastors, counselors, and staff impacted by disasters and involved in the church’s response to disasters. He is a valued colleague and a trusted friend. His thoughtful and caring ministry has blessed many people. I trust this book will be a blessing for you and for all who, in times of disasters, are people of an “active God.”

—Gilbert B. Furst
Director, Lutheran Disaster Response