

Earthquakes and the Churches Response



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The recent earthquakes in Christchurch have had, and are still having, a devastating impact on local communities. The Revd Bob Henderson, Assistant Minister at St Ambrose Anglican Church located in the eastern suburb of Aranui, has been coordinating a church based initiative — Christchurch Community Response — to provide relief for those worst affected. The Revd Andy Carley talks to Bob about this ministry.

The Revd Bob Henderson

Bob, you have been coordinating a church response to the recent earthquakes, how did this come about?

This was no “before it happens” pre-planned quake response. We were just there; right in the middle of the badly affected residential area on 22 February. Around us homes had no water, electricity, sewerage and worst of all no safe passageway through their buildings. The homes that each of us needed as a place to refuel and rest — to review and rebuild — were no longer in a secure state. This is the scene — we had to make some sort of response. Many people outside Christchurch looked on with horror at what the earthquake had done and yet were simultaneously shaken into active response to what they saw. A group from Church of the Saviour in Blockhouse Bay, Auckland, was one of those moved to action. They made contact with their sister church, St Christophers, in Avonhead, who then organised billets and some introductions for the group to come and see where their tradespeople would be best used to help with rebuild and recovery. St Ambrose in Aranui became the working base and administrative centre for these and the many volunteers who followed. This was the start of a very fluid and constructive partnership between the churches sending the volunteers and a collection of churches in East Christchurch. I was asked to coordinate the volunteers’ responses out of St Ambrose into our community.

Clearly the most important and immediate needs were initially practical ones, what type of help have you been able to offer people?

We called our collective volunteer group Christchurch Community Response (CCR). CCR has been filled with carpenters, electricians, plumbers, handymen/women, students, social workers and other volunteers wanting to partner with residents in our eastern suburbs in the rebuild. We have aimed to use our trade skills free of charge to make sure homes are safe and secure. And so we have repaired electrical faults, done plumbing jobs, opened jammed

doors and completed other building repairs. Often these minor repairs prove to be very important in helping homes have that sense of routine — and so the mechanics of the home can be trusted to actually work! Many others in our volunteer team will spend their time visiting each and every home making the offer for our trade work a personal one. We’ve found that the face to face interaction we have with these home visits will often bring up needs that otherwise would remain unsaid. We’ll then end up offering repair solutions perhaps through referrals on their behalf — to Fletchers and other agencies. Our house calling program also offers the opportunity to share with the community any activities and events that are planned ahead. Our Kidzone children’s program was an example of that.

How many people are involved in the door knocking program?

We have approximately 60 volunteers who have been and are a part of our door knocking and visiting program. The majority come from the St Christophers congregation but we have representation from St Mary’s Merivale, St Saviours Sydenham, Christchurch Cathedral, students from Tauranga, individuals from Opawa, Linwood, Hamilton, Warkworth, Wellington, Dunedin and from as far away as Vancouver. As at mid-September we had covered about 181 of the 550 streets which we have mapped to walk. Some streets we have revisited since the government announcement regarding red, orange and green zones. We have asked some of these volunteers to help us with the follow up calls needed that come as a response to the door knocking.

How have you found the response from those you’ve met?

Surprising! Most residents show amazing resilience. Many comments are “I’m fine, there are lots more people worse than me!” Even so there is a great appreciation of the visits — so many responses will include a big “thank you” for

the visit. Volunteers have regularly shared how their experiences of door knocking have been really surprising and yet they have found such a blessing in this work. Not many volunteers initially see that visiting like this could be such a blessing. We've had many messages left on our answer phone expressing thankfulness at what the church is doing, some saying thank you for just leaving the note in their letterbox. It's interesting how resilience shows itself — even just asking for help can be a sign of resilience, because it shows pro-action. Some of the constant phone calls to us, enquiring for help, I've got to answer. In those I've heard men telling me how embarrassed they feel to even think of ringing to ask for help. Resilience does not mean doing it all alone! Others have rung in to ask what they can do to help with our work. We sure do want to see residents calling in to ask how they may participate in the work, and see it a work as much theirs as it is ours,

Moving beyond practical help, what are the main pastoral concerns that you come across?

The tradespeople follow jobs on a daily list from which they bring in a report of how things have gone — not only in terms of the practical stuff done but in terms of what it is that we can keep doing to build our community together. Many share stories they've been told of life lived under earthquake restriction. We have been aiming (together with our other community groups) to make sure there are no people "slipping through the cracks", people with needs yet unidentified, stories not yet told. Our concern is for community security, what we call community learning/working toward the build up of each other. So we work to give everyone confidence, that they feel free to contribute, free to choose what happens in their place. So we want all CCRers to be intentional in their association with residents; for them it's not to be just about the 'fix it' work. With many residents moving out of the area the many that are left will often talk about a feeling of loneliness. Loneliness is a real concern; we call upon many who have need of regular contacts to support them. Along with the need for support is the desire to be considered care-worthy; many seem able to remain strong when shown how others care for them — how they love them.

What opportunities have there been to share your faith with those you meet?

We brief and debrief daily, sharing before we start our jobs and again at the end of the day. This has been a great help for all to keep focussed with our intention. I believe that this download opportunity for volunteers to share what they find and what they feel in these down to earth visits has been the greatest place where our faith has shown itself visible. Each visit gives us a chance to practice our faith and as we review our responses in the visits we are mutually encouraged with one another's faith. Many residents have said that they really do want the church to keep visiting; they say it reassures them that God is real and He cares. Many have asked volunteers to pray for them. Questions come up from the visits that are very helpful faith learning exercises. There have been a few times when residents wanted to discuss where God is in the earthquake but these did not seem to lead on to fruitful faith sharing. One person was concerned about how much longer they would be alive; they wanted to know more about baptism. Most opportunities we have found require consistent follow up before a mutual understanding of faith is clear.

For those who live outside of Christchurch, what can they do to help? *

A continuing interest in the development of our work is important for us. If we are confident of having co workers around New Zealand we have strength. Sometimes we, on the ground in our suburbs, struggle to have our voice heard; sometimes we struggle to give a united voice. This rebuild has quite a distance to go yet. When we get tired communication with friends is energising. We want our friends around the country to hear what we are saying and to show themselves standing with us. We want our friends to see how much they have done to help us to be where we are and also to understand how long the journey is still to go. Pray that in trusting God to rebuild our community we will show our neighbours what that confident trust looks like.

Thank you, Bob, and may we all continue to pray for you and your colleagues during these difficult times.

The Revd Andy Carley

* Further information on the work being done by Bob and the CCR team can be received by calling Bob on 03 388 6699 or 021 900805. If you are able to offer help, either practical or financial, then call 0508 STCHRIS [0508 782 474].