## Story of a Youthworker: Ministering in the Midst of a Natural Disaster

By Lisa Holmlund

I am the pastor of Student Ministries at Montecito Covenant Church in Santa Barbara, CA. 2.5 years ago, a huge fire came through our area and burned 200 homes down to the ground. 24 families from our church were directly affected by this fire. Here are a few insights I have learned from walking through this devastation.

- 1. God needs to be the first place you turn. Ask for protection, peace, provision, and for His Holy Spirit to lead. If you do not sense you cannot stay calm, let someone else take care of others and you care for yourself.
- 2. Assess the crisis. Take care of first aid needs, do not put yourself in danger... that is why we have firemen, and help find shelter... even with the Red Cross.
- 3. As a church staff, we gathered within the first 24 hours and we prayed, we made a database of individuals and families affected by the fire, where they currently were located, contact information for them, and what immediate needs we knew they needed.
- 4. Since we had 24 families affected, we assigned 6 of us staff members to care for 4 different families. We would be their church contact, help with the immediate needs we could, and let them know we were their contacts.
- 5. We realized that our church wanted to be together... and our church was located in a mandatory evacuation zone. We ended up using a ballroom of a hotel in town for worship. We let the service be a place of lots of comfort... more prayer than usual, more scriptures where needed, and our pastor decided to open up to let families share how they felt God was with them in the midst of the trauma. We gave an update to our church of what we did know... how many families from our church lost homes, etc. We gathered around each family and prayed over them.
- 6. We started a separate Fire Fund through our church. We already have a compassion fund, but we knew that we needed to have a fund that would be longer term. We advertised this to all families.
- 7. Our staff made a decision to give each family that had lost their homes a check for \$500 to use for whatever they needed.... Clothes, toiletries, or even a massage if that would be most encouraging to them. We didn't want to put limits on our gift to them.
- 8. For being a youth pastor, I had the other youth from our group bring clothes, shoes, new underwear and socks, and school supplies to my house. I then brought each kid in crisis to my house to go through clothes and help them find a few outfits that would get them through the next few days.
- 9. I spent a lot of money on meals. I thought it was the best use of my budget money... to have time to debrief with students in groups, individually, and with their families. I helped ask questions, assured them of God being with them, Prayed with them, asked practical questions... (like, "what do you need for school tomorrow? Lunch money? A notebook? Pens?")
- 10. We made sure to take care of ourselves... that we got rest, that we were eating healthy, that we were spending time with God. If we weren't able to be healthy, we can't do a great job of helping others become healthy.
- 11. Brought it back to God. Helped students do this in youth group settings. For his goodness, his provisions, for our requests, for being God.