

The tsunami hits, the church responds! A brief case study from South India

Introduction

On 26 December 2004, a tidal wave, known as a tsunami, hit the coastlines of twelve countries causing immense damage and claiming the lives of an estimated 300,000 people. The fishing communities living on the southern tip of the Indian subcontinent were at mass when the first of three successive waves hit their shores. Within minutes, a peaceful Sunday morning turned into a scene of devastation. The Catholic Church played a central role in the communities' response to the disaster during the next five days. Working with the Salvation Army, they provided a comprehensive response to the spiritual, emotional and practical needs of a traumatised people.



Aims

The Catholic Church/ Salvation Army response aimed to meet people's immediate needs in the wake of the tsunami: for rescue and medical help, for burial and counselling services, and for the provision of food and shelter. This case study focuses on their response to two fishing villages in particular.

Steps in the process

26 December 2004, Day 1. Rescue, comfort

Around 9am, the first tidal wave hit the coast. Amid the confusion, the parish priests, along with others, began search and rescue operations. Salvation Army officers arrived: they began to take bodies to hospital in their ambulance and to treat the wounded. Later, people were organised through the parish council to move to higher ground. By evening, the Salvation Army was feeding 3,000 people.

27 December, Day 2. Food distribution, burials

Mass was said at 6.15am and the parish priest began burying the dead. The Salvation Army continued its medical care and feeding programme. They also distributed clothes and blankets, alongside the government. The parish councils organised transport to the river for people to bathe. Volunteers began to arrive and offer help.

28 December, Day 3. Clothes distributed and political leaders called

The Bishop called a meeting of local politicians. In one community, 3,000 people protested against the government's poor response. A senior civil servant was then dismissed.

29 December, Day 4. Meeting for NGOs called

The Bishop called a meeting of all NGOs and co-ordinated their response. The Salvation Army carried out a survey in two communities at the request of parish priests. Fifteen counsellors from the Salvation Army's HIV/AIDS programme began working with the survivors.

30 December, Day 5. Religious leaders called

The Bishop summoned all religious leaders. They made generous offers of support. The Salvation Army was allocated Kanyakumari and Kadipattanam villages to work in.

Impact of the Catholic Church/Salvation Army response

- Many people's lives were saved and the physical suffering of many more was alleviated. People received emotional and spiritual support during a time of immense personal and communal tragedy.
- The parish council showed it was body through which a relief effort could be organised.
- The Salvation Army's reputation was strengthened by its fair and efficient practical response. It learnt much about its capacity to respond to a sudden-onset disaster.
- In comparison confidence in the Government was lost at first, as a result of its own poor initial response to the tsunami.

Lessons learnt

- While the tsunami directly affected some in the community but not others, the parish system assumes that the Catholic Church takes responsibility for everyone. It is therefore crucial to work out how to use a fair system of distribution that meets the needs of the people worst affected, without alienating those from the same community who are not affected.
- Priests in all parishes needed to follow a common and unbiased decision-making process when distributing relief. They needed the full support of their superiors and colleagues on the parish council when making difficult decisions.
- The credibility of different church groups and good relationships between them – in this case the Catholics and the Salvation Army – help a great deal. These relationships, which existed before the disaster at both an organisational and individual level, are an advantage when it comes to making quick decisions about a response.
- The strengths of the two churches complemented each other well: the Catholics providing the authority structure and the Salvation Army providing services.
- The churches' presence in the locality provided immediate access to a wide range of provisions: from buildings, vehicles, expertise, finance and networks, to emotional and spiritual support.
- Front-line workers must be entrusted with the authority to make decisions about resource commitments in the initial hours of the disaster.

Conclusion

Branches of the local church can use their distinctive skills and resources to meet the needs of traumatised communities in the immediate aftermath of a sudden-onset disaster.

Potential for replication

The approach outlined in this case study can best be replicated in contexts where:

- there is a strong parish structure and a predominantly Christian community
- the service provider is trusted by the parish authorities
- the service provider has access to facilities, expertise and resources to match the need.

[Click here for a more detailed version of this case study.](#)

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