

# A ministry team responds to disasters

by [Tim Townsend](#) in the [February 22, 2011](#) issue

Three years after a gunman opened fire and killed six people at a City Council meeting in Kirkwood, Missouri, pastor David A. Holyan found himself in Tucson, Arizona, within days after the January 8 shootings that killed six and injured 13, including Congresswoman Gabrielle Giffords.

Holyan, 46, pastor of First Presbyterian Church of Kirkwood, had become an accidental expert in what the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) calls "human-caused disaster" response. More precisely, he is a member of the three-person Presbyterian Disaster Assistance's National Response Team.

Holyan's expertise comes from the victim side. His church became a spiritual hub for the community in the wake of the shooting rampage on February 7, 2008, that claimed the lives of six people—including two of Holyan's parishioners and the gunman.

In the hours after the 2008 shooting, Holyan was at the hospital with staff member Cathy Yost, whose husband, Kenneth, the city's public works director, had been killed. "My instinct is to step into the hard places and be calm, but nothing prepares you for this," Holyan said. "You can't prepare for human-caused disaster. It rattles you to the core of your being."

As he took in the scene of the shootings, his cell phone rang. It was Paul Reiter, the regional leader for the PCUSA. "He asked what I needed, and I said I didn't know what I needed," Holyan said. "He told me the PDA would show up soon. I said OK and hung up the phone. I had no idea how that would help."

By the next day, a team from Presbyterian Disaster Assistance had flown in to help Holyan help his flock. That weekend, as dazed parishioners looked to him for context and meaning, Holyan had to give a sermon that would attempt to make sense of the senseless.

The next day, he preached at Ken Yost's funeral service. Kirkwood mayor Mike Swoboda, who was shot and died of complications seven months later, was also a member of First Presbyterian.

Holyan said those days were the hardest of his career, and they prepared him for his current role in PDA—able to provide perspective from the point of view of someone who has experienced horror firsthand.

When eight people were killed in a massive gas pipeline explosion in northern California in September, Holyan was part of the team called in to help. "It's very redemptive for me," said Holyan. "The horror of what happened in Kirkwood was transformed to become wisdom for others going through a similar situation."

Holyan flew to Tucson three days after the attack on Giffords and others, "showing up in the midst of mass confusion, bewilderment and shock," he said.

The Missouri pastor was joined at the scene by Laurie Kraus, pastor of Riviera Presbyterian Church in Miami. Kraus has served on the PDA response team since its inception in 1996, according to Presbyterian News Service. The third member of the all-volunteer team in Tucson is retired businessman Rick Turner, a member of John Knox Presbyterian Church in Greenville, South Carolina.

One of the pastoral goals of Presbyterian Disaster Assistance is the "stabilization of the ministry, not individuals," Holyan said. Ultimately, the wider community is served by concentrating on religious leaders' mental and physical health.

"You need those who are being pastoral to also be healthy," he said. "They're going to be the last ones aware of how affected they are. A pastor's immediate instinct is to care for others first, then the bigger system, then finally themselves, when they figure out, 'Wait a second, I have no energy left.'"

Invited

to a meeting with Tucson clergy, the trio of Presbyterian responders encouraged them to allow people "space" before pushing toward healing. The pastor and his team were asked to attend the funeral of nine-year-old victim Christina Greene. They also visited Northminster Presbyterian Church where the oldest Tucson victim, Phyllis Schneck, 79, worshiped.

Holyan plans to return to Tucson in March and again in May to make sure religious leaders are healthy.

Return

visits months and sometimes years later are typical for the PDA team and mental health professionals with special training, John Robinson, PDA associate for U.S. disaster response, told Presbyterian News Service.

In a letter to Linda Valentine, executive director of the PCUSA's General Assembly Mission Council, Kraus described her reaction to the sermons by clergy colleagues in Tucson right after the tragedy and on the Martin Luther King weekend: "I was struck, as I always am, by the integrity, authenticity and vulnerability of faith leaders who step into the pain and chaos of a human-caused disaster with words of honesty and calls for the church's meaningful participation in the healing of the community." —RNS and Presbyterian News Service