

# Responding to emergencies with practical compassion



## Highland Views

Chris Highland  
Guest columnist

What would you do if you lost your home? A terrible thought, but many people, for many reasons, have lost their homes. The way some people lose their home is particularly tragic when they are already homeless.

During my years as a chaplain I was grateful for supporters in religious and secular communities. Understanding our practical needs, they not only helped pay the salaries of our small staff, they provided funds for the purchase of food vouchers, bus tickets, sleeping bags and various emergency supplies. Some congre-

gations and individuals contributed to a "Chaplain's Discretionary Fund" that became a life-line for our work assisting people in daily distress on the streets.

James shuffled up beside me on a street corner as I waited for the light to change. Crossing the street with me he said he was depressed. "I lost everything. What am I going to do?" As we walked along the busy sidewalk James told me his camper truck was towed the night before while he was "dumpster diving" behind a local Wendy's (getting food from the garbage).

I had visited James at his camper, parked on the street in an industrial part of town. It was packed with everything he owned. When I was moving to a small room after losing my own apartment, I gave James a mattress to replace the disintegrated one he was using. Now, it was all gone. He couldn't pay the tickets he received for overnight parking, so the city sent a police

officer to supervise a tow truck hauling his camper away.

I drove James to the tow yard and spoke with the manager. He barely looked at James as he told us the amount required to release the truck. It was too much for James and more than our emergency fund could handle. There was no negotiating the amount. I tried to reason with the manager. "That camper contains everything James owns in the world." He gruffly responded, "You have 20 minutes to take anything out of the truck. Twenty minutes."

We stared at the man, then looked at each other. We hurried over to the camper. James went in as I waited outside. Minutes went by and I spoke encouraging words as I heard James rummaging. "Just pick the

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most important things," I said in a calm voice. He started handing me suitcases, photos, clothing, a sleeping bag and things I wouldn't think were essential. "Do you really need some of these?," I asked. He was sweating, frustrated, on the verge of tears. I was too. "Yes! I do!," he stammered.

I checked my watch. "Sorry, James. We have to leave." He didn't answer. He emerged with another pile of clothing in his hands. "James, you can get more clothes from Ritter House (a local nonprofit)." Throwing the clothes back in he slammed the door and we quickly walked away carrying all his worldly possessions in our arms. We wrestled them into the chaplaincy van and drove off. James glanced back at the tow yard, silently shaking his head.

James asked me to take him to a secluded street behind a local park where we unloaded his things. The last I saw him he was hiding each item carefully behind some bushes.

Not every story had such a sad ending. Our emergency fund helped others pay parking tickets, put gas in the tank or cover necessary repairs. After all, these vehicles were homes, and we hated to see another man or woman or family lose them.

Chaplains are often emergency responders, particularly when that response has virtually nothing to do with a person's "spiritual needs," only their necessities of survival.

An elderly woman who lived in her car needed a safe place to park. We connected her with a local congregation which allowed her to park on their property.

A Rotary Club president spent a few hours walking the streets with me one day. I introduced her to a young woman named Tricia who asked if I could help with her dog. He needed shots and a license or animal con-

trol would take him. The Rotary president offered to cover the cost, and also set up a fund for homeless animals! I hired Tricia to work in our office and she helped manage the "Puppy Fund."

Visiting a man who lived in his car behind an abandoned church, he told me his car needed repairs but he was more concerned about getting his dog's ashes from the animal shelter. The dog was his only companion. When I told him we would pay to get the ashes, he hugged me with tears flowing.

There are daily emergencies all around. Large or small, they are still emergencies. How do we respond?

*Chris Highland served as a Protestant minister and interfaith chaplain for many years. He is a teacher, writer, freethinker and humanist celebrant. Chris and his wife Carol, a Presbyterian minister, live in Asheville. Learn more at [chighland.com](http://chighland.com). Chris' new book, "Broken Bridges: Building Community in a World Divided by Beliefs," is now available on Amazon.*