

# Storms of service and salvation in hurricane's aftermath



## Highland Views

Chris Highland  
Guest columnist

Following the destructive storm that decimated so much of our region, the emergency response was wonderful to see. Neighbors helping neighbors, first responders arriving in hard hit areas, strangers coming to the aid of strangers, assistance provided by county, state

and federal agencies. With hundreds of fallen trees, we were unable to go anywhere for days until crews arrived with chainsaws and heavy equipment. Losing power, water, cell and internet was challenging, but nothing compared to those who lost their homes, livelihoods or lives. Day after day we saw helicopters flying search and rescue missions or delivering supplies. Those of us who endured Nature's power are deeply grateful to all who reached out to help.

We soon became aware of local congregations collecting and distributing

food, water, diapers and other necessities. We sat in long lines of cars waiting patiently to pass an evangelical church buzzing with activity as people crowded into their parking lot to gather supplies. We sat on benches outside a protestant church, lending a hand now and then, relieved to find cell service. Many other congregations and non-profit agencies were actively responding with practical help. What we saw was humbling and quite moving.

I sensed that an international evangelistic ministry, headquartered nearby,

would be sending their staff and volunteers with relief supplies throughout the disaster zone. I've been aware of this ministry for a long time, especially their missionary outreach to poorer countries and particular interest in proselytizing non-Christian children. Their well-funded work has massive resources to provide water, generators, meals, along with "chaplains" to offer Bibles and prayers. Viewing a number of their Facebook Reels, the practical service

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was evident, as well as the primary motivation: “Sharing the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ.” Their central focus is the salvation of souls, not merely from a natural disaster, but from the disastrous firestorms of hell.

In my former evangelical days, I felt called to be a personal “witness for Christ,” to take every opportunity to share the gospel. Nothing was more important than telling people the “good news,” to see each “soul” converted to my faith. Through serious self-reflection, I came to realize my intentions may have been good, yet not truly out of the goodness of my heart. To me, intent makes a world of difference. And it begins with honest self-education.

One of the first recorded teachings of Master Kung (Confucius) was to take pleasure in learning and then to practice what one has learned (Analects—or Sayings—1:1). Education is critical, but so is putting that education to good use. Only a few short chapters later, the Chinese sage says: “The superior person wants to be slow in word but diligent in action.” This is followed by his famous teaching: “What I do not want others to do to me, I do not want to do to them” (4:24; 5:11). Bear in mind, these words were spoken about 500 years before the time of Jesus. These ancient instructions, so relevant in our time, were the basis for the practice of “humanity” which became a fundamental philosophy of Confucianism. We do good because it’s in our nature, because it is natural (obviously an uncomfortable thought for those who can’t let go of the belief in “original sin”).

Why do good things? There are many motivations for service, not all of them arising from the best of intentions or reasons. In my chaplaincy work, people would sometimes ask: Why are you here? What do you really want? What’s your personal agenda here? Those were reasonable questions, and I was happy to respond, explaining that our interfaith “mission” was simply to be with people in difficult times and assist when requested or when it seemed good and right. No hidden agenda; no secret desire to convert anyone to my beliefs or any beliefs. We connected with each person human to human, practicing the fundamental way of humanism as taught by Master Kung, Jesus of Nazareth and many other wise teachers.

I’m not saying these “Serve to Save” kinds of ministries responding to human suffering are all bad. They are clearly doing many good things. Yet, when someone in crisis tells the evangelists, “It’s a miracle you’ve come to help,” it leads me to wonder whether they say the same thing to first responders, National Guard soldiers or FEMA workers. Maybe they do. When the organization publicly proclaims “We’re here in the Name of Jesus Christ,” and, “We’re all in God’s hands,” it can appear to have muddy motives. It sounds like: “If I do something helpful for this person, maybe they’ll listen to me preach about my faith.”

Hopefully we can learn to help others, because it’s the good and right thing to do. Period.

*Chris Highland was a minister and interfaith chaplain for nearly 30 years. He is a teacher, writer and humanist celebrant. Chris and his wife, the Rev. Carol Hovis, live in Asheville. His books and blogs are presented on “Friendly Freethinker” ([www.chighland.com](http://www.chighland.com)).*