

EDITORIAL Compassion fatigue threatens response

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When I was younger-much younger-track was my sport of choice. Oh, I loved football more. But a kid who's only 5'8" and 129 lbs. has to be realistic.

For several years, I ran the 440-one lap, a quarter-mile. No matter how hard I ran in practice, the physiology of the race remained the same. When we finished running the second curve, with 330 yards behind us and 110 still to go, we "picked up the piano," as Coach Byerly liked to say. Training, rest and preparation helped, of course, but at the 330-mark, fatigue began to clobber stamina. And running that last 110 yards always felt like carrying a piano down the track toward the finish line.

As I got older, true sprinters started running the quarter. I was not a true sprinter. So, my coaches suggested I switch to the half-mile. Speed isn't such a factor in the half, they told me. What they didn't tell me was that the piano still waited for me at the 330-mark. But in this race, I had to carry it another 550 yards. And in this race, fatigue sat at the keyboard, playing a beast of a tune.



Maybe this metaphor is a bit, um, pedestrian. But imagine that we're running a race to respond to all the human needs swirling around us. Instead of a half-mile race, call it an ultra-marathon. We've already "picked up the piano." We've got a long, long way to go. And if we quit running, lives will be damaged beyond repair, communities will be ruined forever, and needs will persist into infinity.

Right now, we're susceptible to compassion fatigue. It's the sense of being overwhelmed by need on an epic scale. It begins with an impulse to reach out and help folks who suffered life's harshest blows. Unfortunately, when it sets in, it morphs into denial, blame, aversion and, ultimately, apathy. We weep and sympathize and give until we can weep and sympathize and give no more. And then we just want to get on with our lives, not looking to the right or left to see the pain and agony that persists among our neighbors.

First Katrina and now Rita have yanked our hearts out and drowned them in a sea of misery. We're more susceptible to compassion fatigue than we have been in quite awhile, probably since 9/11, which was a different kind of trauma on a completely different scale.

From the looks of things, compassion fatigue afflicted some Baptists in less than a week. I've been watching the offering totals at my own church and hearing reports from other congregations. The first Sunday after Katrina, these churches gathered great sums of cash to alleviate the suffering of evacuees from New Orleans. But by the second Sunday, those churches' budget receipts fell markedly. Apparently, people took the money they normally would give to their church, donated it to hurricane relief and considered they'd "sacrificed" enough. They shouldn't expect to see this replayed as one of their shining moments when they get to heaven. God is mysterious, but I'm pretty sure God isn't proud of us if we give our tithes to charity and pat ourselves on the back. Our congregations carry the burden

of supporting ongoing ministries, no matter what other needs arise. Tithing is the cornerstone of faithfulness to God. Begin with your tithe, then follow your heart to other vital concerns:

✘ The demand for disaster relief will extend far into the future. Many wonderful charities are at work. If you support Texas Baptist Men Disaster Relief, you will help feed displaced evacuees, as well as rescue and relief workers, in the wakes of Katrina and Rita. Texas Baptist Men will help rebuild communities in the name of Jesus for months and months to come. You can mark your check for “disaster response” and send it to Texas Baptist Men, the Texas Baptist Missions Foundation or the BGCT Controller's Office, all at 333 N. Washington, Dallas 75246-1798.

✘ Don't forget the Mary Hill Davis Offering for Texas Missions. This \$5 million offering is Texas Baptists' primary means of supporting a vast range of ministries that won't be funded if the goal is not met. Unfortunately, the offering kicked off in-between Katrina and Rita. Please don't overlook the Mary Hill Davis Offering; it is our lifeline to Texans who desperately need Christ's presence in their lives. You can give through your church or send your check marked “Mary Hill Davis Offering” to Texas Woman's Missionary Union, 333 N. Washington, Dallas 75246-1798.

✘ And save up for the Texas Baptist World Hunger Offering, which will be collected in the weeks leading up to Thanksgiving. People are starving. They need our help.

In these days, remember the Apostle Paul's exhortation: “But as for you, brethren, do not grow weary of doing good” (2 Thessalonians 3:13).

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in the BGCT, the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) and around the world.