Can we give a witness?

A project thesis submitted in candidacy for the degree of Doctor of Ministry by Kathleen Elaine Kind Wesley Theological Seminary Washington, D. C. May 2012

Always be ready to make your defense to anyone who demands from you an accounting for the hope that is in you.

1 Peter 3:15b

How the Church can maintain the integrity of its voice in the media spotlight during times of crisis
WESLEY THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

CAN WE GIVE A WITNESS?
HOW THE CHURCH CAN MAINTAIN THE INTEGRITY OF ITS VOICE
IN THE MEDIA SPOTLIGHT DURING TIMES OF CRISIS

A PROJECT THESIS SUBMITTED
IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE OF
DOCTOR OF MINISTRY

BY
KATHLEEN ELAINE KIND

WASHINGTON, DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA
MAY 2012
Dedicated to Lori, Kris, Joanne, Pam, Thomas, and Emily
for your faithfulness in the midst of crisis

And in memory of Pastor Peter, Francis, and Becky
who gave their lives in faithful service to God
Always be ready to make your defense to anyone who demands from you an accounting for the hope that is in you

1 Peter 3:15b
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This project came as a result of the author's experience with the press after a mission team from her church was in a terrorist bombing. As a result, the author proposes a protocol of things that a pastor or church leader can do before, during, and after a crisis in order for the church to be a witness and maintain the integrity of its voice in the media spotlight during times of crisis. The protocol was designed after conversation with persons who respond to the press professionally as well as the author's personal experience, and was tested against other church’s experiences with the press after crises.
INTRODUCTION

On July 11, 2010, six members of a mission team from Christ Community United Methodist Church, Selinsgrove, Pennsylvania, were victims of a terrorist bombing while watching the World Cup in a restaurant in Kampala, Uganda, Africa. Each of our mission team members survived the terrorist attack and are currently continuing with their lives. However, some of the African friends of the team who were sitting at the same table in this restaurant were killed.

When I received the news that there had been a bombing, as pastor of Christ Community UMC I was totally caught off guard. This came without warning and was instantaneous. There were immediate pastoral care concerns and needs and in the midst of responding to this pastoral crisis, quickly there arose a media crisis which demanded my attention. In this whirlwind of need I was very aware that I never had a seminary course on how to respond to these levels of crisis — both in terms of the pastoral needs and the media needs. In this moment I had to automatically and immediately do. I did not have the luxury of time to research or read a book on what to do when your mission team is in a terrorist bombing. I could not research the appropriate way to speak to the press and still maintain the integrity of the church’s voice. As the pastor of the congregation I found myself fielding calls and visits from reporters who wanted to report on this story. Calls came from around the world, across the nation, and from the local community. Additionally, a myriad of reporters and their satellite vans arrived in
our parking lot. I also found that the church needed me as their pastor to provide comfort and hope as well as to talk through this situation theologically.

Without a game plan and certainly without experience in speaking to the press I found myself juggling my responsibilities as a pastor as well as a communicator on behalf of the church. It was my experience then in dealing with the press that led me to the purpose of this doctor of ministry project.

The purpose of this project and the paper that documents it is to consider the experience that I had in speaking with the press after our mission team survived a terrorist bombing, examine and evaluate various authors’ perspectives on communication and leadership during times of crisis, discuss the theological underpinnings of the call of the Christian to always be ready to give witness to the hope that is within us, and to create and share a protocol for pastors to use, helping the church maintain the integrity of its voice when speaking to the press in times of crisis. (It may be worth noting that the focus of this paper is on talking with the press after a crisis and not necessarily after a scandal.)

Chapter One spells out the narrative of the events and names the condition of the paper. The focus is on how the church can maintain the integrity of its voice in the media spotlight during times of crisis.

Chapter Two is based on the firsthand account of the bombing from Lori Ssebulime, the mission team leader, and is used by permission. In order to better understand what took place before, during, and after the bombing Lori’s experiences must be heard.
Chapter Three is the theology that focuses on our call to “always be ready to make your defense to anyone who demands from you an accounting for the hope that is in you.” (1 Peter 3:15b)

Chapter Four explores what an unfaithful witness may look like.

Chapter Five unveils a protocol for churches to use when dealing with the media after a crisis.

Chapter Six is an evaluation of the protocol as well as the media event that I experienced after our crisis. This chapter also tests the protocol against crises in a Minnesotan Roman Catholic Church and a Virginian United Methodist Church.
CHAPTER ONE
THE PHONE CALL THAT CHANGED EVERYTHING

One of the realities of many pastors is that pastors are not trained to speak to the press. We do not know the consequences of making a statement and then hoping it is “off the record.” We do not have experience in talking with reporters and telling our story. The church does have a story to tell. We have a witness to share of the hope that is within us.

So, the question before us is how can the church maintain the integrity of its voice in the media spotlight during times of crisis? The reality is, crises happen and affect the church. Reporters also have a job to do. They must report the news. And, as much as we may grumble about news outlets only telling the bad news or the graphic news or the news that seems sensationalized, another reality is that we are the same people who purchase those papers and watch those news programs.

When the Phone Rang . . .

Since 2004 Christ Community United Methodist Church in Selinsgrove, Pa., has been sending mission teams to Kampala, Uganda. Like many other Sundays after a team returned from their mission experience, some of the mission team members led worship for the congregation on Sunday, July 11, 2010. Only some of the mission team members led worship, because six members of the mission team extended their stay in Uganda to continue the work
the team had begun three weeks earlier. During worship, as I listened to the experiences of those who had returned home I made a mental note that I needed to send an email to Pastor Peter, the pastor of our sister congregation, Bwaise Pentecostal Church in Kampala, Uganda. I was sure that he would appreciate hearing about how these members of our congregation were touched by working alongside and worshiping with his congregation.

Later that evening I was in my office working. When I answered the phone, the voice on the other end was in shock. Betty Davis had called to tell me that there had been a bombing. Betty is Lori Ssebulime’s mother and Lori is the team leader for the mission trips to Uganda. Betty went on to say that as far as she knew Lori, Kris, Pam, Thomas, Emily, and Joanne were alive; however, there were various injuries, but she did not have all of the details at that point. Betty did not know about some of the others who were with our group that night. She also said that this information had been confirmed through news stories online and that it was not a hoax to get money out of Americans.

I sat in my office stunned. I had no idea what to do and no idea what to say. I felt like I myself was in shock. I felt like I was suddenly without words. Since I was sitting at my computer in my office, I did go online to see what information I could find. Indeed, there had been a bombing.

**Time to Respond**

Once I began to get my bearings I called my district superintendent, Tom Salsgiver. Then I called our Annual Conference Director of Communications,
Jerry Wolgemuth. And I called Betty Davis and asked her to call the families again and let them know that we would be at the church to pray.

In the meantime, I wanted to get any information I could from the State Department. Again I found their number online, and when my call was taken I asked to speak with someone who could give me information regarding the American victims in the Uganda bombings. I explained that I am a pastor and that I had a mission team that was in one of the explosions. My call was routed to the person who was overseeing this incident. Because I was the pastor and not family, he could not tell me anything. He asked me how I got his phone number and sounded like this was suspect. And I explained that I looked up the State Department online and needed to call, because I am the pastor of a mission group that was just in a bombing in another country on another continent. He could not or would not answer any of my questions, and tried to get me off the phone. But before hanging up, I pleaded that I needed to know something, anything that would be of comfort for the families that would be coming to the church for prayer. The man on the other end of the phone at the United States State Department said that they were aware of our group, there were people at the hospital to advocate about their care, and that the hospitals in Kampala are the better places to receive medical care, and that the quality of the hospitals is good for Uganda. So the word of comfort that I had to share with our team was that our team members would be receiving the care they needed in that moment, and the State Department was aware of the reality that I had six mission team members who had just been in a bombing in Uganda.
The following hours and days felt like a whirlwind. All of a sudden I felt like I had no answers, and yet I really needed to be the pastor. I needed to be with the families of the victims. I felt the pressure to find answers to questions that loomed over us. As families started to arrive at the church, we met in the sanctuary and we prayed. Yet there was so much we did not know. We lacked important details, like our status with medevac insurance.

In the midst of family members arriving at the church, I received a call from the family of our mission team member who was from out of state. On the other end of the phone, this family member said that the hospital in Kampala had called her to seek permission to amputate her 16-year-old daughter’s leg. So I knew that one of the mission team members was in desperate need of being medevacced to another hospital. However, I did not know any of the details that the team had made regarding their travel. I did place a call to the travel company. Since it was a Sunday night, I needed to call the emergency number. Truth was, that experience about pushed me over the edge. I felt like I had been maintaining calm as well as I could externally while on the inside I was a vortex of chaos and confusion. When I called the emergency number, I had to leave a message for an agent to return my call. So I continued to pray in the sanctuary with family members and church members until a travel agent would call. Finally, when I did hear from the travel agency they would not speak to me until I paid a $50 surcharge for speaking with an agent during off hours. And ultimately what I learned was that the mission team did not have insurance through the travel agency. And it was upon learning this that one of the family members looked me
in the eyes, pointed her finger at me, and said that the church had better then have insurance. In the midst of still not knowing details, with family members still gathering for prayer and support, while I still struggled to get my own bearings as pastor in the midst of this crisis, I began to think about a potential law suit against the church.

**From the Sanctuary to the Office**

At some point on this evening the time of prayer in the sanctuary turned into a quest for information in the church office. Initially, when we first received the news of the bombing, we went to the internet to confirm the story. Now we were back online to look for details. Various people from the church were in the office that evening looking for any news articles or pictures from the bombing that would give us information on our team members. We all breathed a collective sigh of relief when we saw a photo of one of our team members. On a stretcher, with his leg in the air, being lifted into an ambulance was a clear picture of one of our young adults. What I saw in that picture was hope and a sign of life.

While others continued to look online for information, Tom Salsgiver, my district superintendent, and I went into my office to call anyone and everyone we could think of. We called the Volunteers in Mission coordinator for the Annual Conference. We called the Volunteers in Mission coordinator for the Northeast Jurisdiction. We called the General Board of Global Ministries in New York City to talk with the person who oversaw the Africa Desk for GBGM.
The First of Many Interviews

In the midst of this, a call came to the church office for me. It was the conference director of communications, Jerry Wogelmuth. He was calling to tell me that Don Lemmon from CNN would be calling me in a few minutes to do a live interview with me over the phone for the news that night. Quickly, Jerry coached me on what to say and what not to say. He told me it was OK to say that I did not know information. He told me to only say what I was comfortable saying, and that the facts we knew were that our mission team members were awaiting medical attention. A few weeks after the dust settled from this awful night, I found this initial interview with Don Lemmon on the CNN website. As I listened to my voice, I could hear the fear and uncertainty as my voice quivered. I also learned a little later that this was the first time the news broke for some of our church members. Some of our folks had not otherwise heard about the bombing, and then they saw my name and Kampala, Uganda, on their television screens, and heard my voice tell them of our mission team in this terrorist bombing.

I don’t remember how late it was when I finally returned to my home that night. However, I knew it would be awhile until I would be able to sleep. What I did not expect were all of the phone calls that I received at my house from journalists who were calling to get a quote. I was hesitant to talk with anyone as I was still operating under the training that we do not speak to the press and we do not say “no comment.” Instead, I knew to direct reporters to our director of communications for the annual conference. It was after midnight when the calls ended. I also received a message on Facebook from a contact at the Today
Show who wanted to speak with a family member of one of the victims. That person, too, I referred to the director of communications.

After a couple hours of restless sleep, my phone rang around 5 a.m. on the morning of the twelfth, the day after the bombing. Lori, the team leader from our mission team, was calling from Uganda needing some travel details. It did my heart good to hear her voice. And that was then the beginning of what became known to me as Media Mayhem Monday.

**Media Mayhem Monday**

By 7 a.m. the church parking lot started to fill with news trucks. I knew that one of the local news stations had prearranged with Jerry Wolgemuth, the Director of Communications for the Susquehanna Annual Conference of the United Methodist Church, to meet us at 7:30 a.m. for an interview. This media outlet arrived at the church before Jerry arrived. I had them wait until Jerry arrived before I would sit with them for an interview. At this point, I had no idea that this was just the beginning of what was to come for the rest of the day and week. I had no idea that this was a significant news story, and that once this early morning interview would be completed, that there would be a line of reporters waiting for me to give them a quote or some details on film that could go into the next broadcast of their news programs.

Before long, all of the phone lines into the church office were ringing. My cell phone rang with calls from CNN, family members of the victims, church members, the representative from the Africa desk at the General Board of Global
Ministries, a representative from the U.S. Embassy who was trying to keep track of our mission team members, and my own family who heard the breaking news before I could call them. And the church parking lot filled with news trucks and many other reporters.

One of the moments that made me chuckle in hindsight was my experience with the reporters from CNN. Because I had given an interview via my cell phone on Sunday night, they continued to contact me at that number. At one point, CNN in Atlanta had called to arrange another live phone interview while I was speaking with a CNN reporter out of New York. Instead of trying to mediate between these two reporters, the one on the phone and the one standing in my office doorway, I passed my phone to the New York reporter. After that, CNN from Atlanta called a few times to do an interview for a blog, to arrange the details with live interviews. They called often enough that I stopped answering the calls that had an Atlanta area code, and would just pass my phone over to the reporter from CNN New York and would tell him that it was his people calling. At one point, he handed my cell phone back to me and told me that it was my people calling. Someone from an Atlanta office of the United Methodist Church in the Southeast Jurisdiction called to check in with me. They also had some mission team members in Uganda during the bombing; however, they were not at the restaurants where the explosions happened and were all safe and on planes to come back home.

That day is still a whirlwind to me. I do not remember many details of with whom I spoke or even the details of the things that I said. I do remember having
the microphone on me for one news outlet while another interviewed me. I also remember CNN sending me to freshen up before their late day live interview with me. I remember some of the reporters really focusing on the ministry of the persons on this mission trip. And I remember some of the reporters reacting to the ministry aspect of this news with body language that indicated they either did not care or did not believe what I was saying about faith, God, and discipleship.

During Media Mayhem Monday, Jerry and I had to separate to give interviews. Jerry took care of many of the phone calls and some of the newspapers, and sent me to be in front of the camera. Some of those interviews were taped and some were live. Some were so brief and to the point, and others had enough time that the reporters would conclude their interview by asking me if I had anything else to add that they had not yet asked me.

I was so caught off guard by all of this. And I was not alone in that. My office staff was overwhelmed with answering the phones. Jerry later shared with me that he had not expected this kind of response from the various news outlets. And I had no idea of what to expect, especially the whirlwind that that Monday was.

As I gave more interviews I became more confident. Slowly, I realized that this was an opportunity for the church. This was our opportunity as a faith community to talk about God and to talk about this particular ministry of the church. I needed to address some issues of theodicy and I wanted to talk about discipleship. When we are disciples of Jesus we are sometimes called outside of our comfort zones, but when Jesus calls us, the disciple’s response is to be “here
I am.” This also became an opportunity to talk about the existence of evil in our world and God’s role in that. For me, in the midst of the whirlwind, in the midst of Media Mayhem Monday, this was an opportunity for the church to bear witness to the hope we have in God, especially God who is with us in the midst of tragedy, fear, anger, and acts of evil.

At some point as this day wore on I had another “aha” moment. I knew that the reporters who were taping me would have ample opportunity to edit anything I said to fit their story, their time, or even their agenda. And I knew that when I was giving a live interview that I could say whatever I wanted without being edited. For me, when I reflect back on this day and the days that followed, I can clearly see God at work. God guided my thoughts and the words of my mouth so that this could be a witness. God provided opportunities for me and others to share our faith and point to the hope that we have in Christ. This was not my doing. This was God at work despite me or the director of communications, or even the reporters.

One of the interviews that most stands out in my memory regarding the difference between a taped interview and a live interview was one I did with CNN on Monday late day. I do not remember who was interviewing me from the Atlanta office; however, I do remember the reporter asking me questions about my reaction to the terrorist group claiming responsibility for the bombing. Truth was, that was breaking news to me. I did not know who was taking responsibility. So I instead focused on what I wanted to say, on this message of witness. After this live interview a couple of church members came over to the church to tell me
that they had just watched that interview and saw that my interviewer was trying to derail me from my intended agenda. They went on to say that they thought that the interviewer was growing impatient with my focus on the role and presence of God in this. At that moment, I knew I was live and that I could not be edited. This was an opportunity that I did not want to miss.

Throughout the day, in addition to the craziness of the reporters and the ringing phones, we still lacked some information. We did not know the exact extent of the injuries of the wounded and hospitalized team members. We did not know the status of the three unaccounted African members of the Bwaise Pentecostal Church who had been having dinner with our team members at the time of the bombing. It was important that we only give factual information to the reporters, yet the facts were so sketchy. At one point one of our staff members had learned through a message on Facebook that the pastor of the Bwaise Pentecostal Church had died in the bombing. This was a detail that we had not been able to verify (even though it turned out to be true) and I did not want to have it overheard by reporters who were standing around the church waiting for news.

**Family Members Speak**

As the day wore on the reporters began to ask to have access through us to family members of the victims as well as to some of the mission team members who had already come home and not been there during the bombing. I was so reluctant to consent to that. I was feeling very protective of the privacy of
our members, especially the family members of the bombing victims. In a moment of downtime, Jerry and I sat in my office to discuss the option of inviting some other people to the church to speak with the press. We knew that in doing so we would lose control of the story. We were concerned about how the message of the story could shift from one of witness to condemnation, fear, or hatred. Very easily anyone else could have said to the press that we were angry and were going to retaliate against those who did this. Very easily someone could speak to the press and say that this was God’s doing as a judgment on the people of Uganda or even the mission team. So there was that concern. But having one of the mission team members or family members of a victim speak could also put a new face on this story and give a new witness. Jerry and I agreed that we needed to have others speak. So I began to make phone calls to team members who came home a few days earlier. I also called one of the families of one of the bombing victims. To each of these persons I said that they did not have to do this. They did not have to do or say anything that they did not want to do or say. I told them they could say no to me and stay home. Or they could come and decide to not follow through with any of the reporters. And I told them that if they wanted to come and share, this was an opportunity for us to continue to witness to our faith in the midst of this tragedy.

The arrival of team members and family members gave Jerry and me a break from giving interviews. From a safe distance I watched and listened to the first few interviews and was pleased with the tone that had already been established with these reporters. They continued to interview from the standpoint
of witness. And the team members and family members put words to their deep faith in God despite the fear, concern, worry, and uncertainty that they had.

One of the concerns that I had later in the day on Media Mayhem Monday was that the church members and staff who were in the church building convey a consistent message with what we had been saying to the reporters all day. We were speaking of a God of love, who is bigger than evil. We were talking about a life of discipleship and following Jesus. We needed to live that same message in the office and church building. This became a challenge when family members went into the main church office to look at online photos from the bombing, as there were pictures of their family members. There were also news articles from reporters on the scene in Uganda who had interviewed our mission team members. For family members this was the only specific news or information that they had on their beloved. So to read these interviews stirred incredible emotion for the family members. This was the first time they were hearing the "voice" of their beloved. The photographs were graphic, as they showed the bloodied wounds of the victims. To say the least, it was difficult for the families to see these photos, which were the first images they had of their loved ones after the bombing. As family members and friends would crowd around the images on the computer in the office, my staff at the church tried to keep the press out of the office, hoping to give the families some much needed privacy. This became challenging as our staff members both gently and forcefully requested that the reporters stay out of the office and provide privacy for these families. A few times this became tense as the reporters would try to do their job and capture this part
of the story on film and my staff felt forced to stand firm and force the reporters out of the office.

**The Prayer Service**

By the evening of Media Mayhem Monday we arranged for there to be a prayer service (see Appendix 1) at the church. Jerry and I talked about the need for my church members to be able to come to pray and not feel inhibited by the presence of the press. I knew that even though in other parts of the state, in other communities, it is very appropriate to allow the press in the sanctuary during a service like [the one] ours would be, but I was uncomfortable with that leniency, as it made my church members uneasy to have the press around. So the press was not permitted to be present in the sanctuary or the narthex of the church as people gathered. Jerry notified all of the present members of the press that they would need to wait in our multi-purpose room just off the sanctuary and the narthex, and that if there were people interested in speaking with them, we would direct those persons to the press directly.

The decision that I made to still allow the press to be present in the building that night continued to cause an atmosphere of unease. So I had another church member call some of the “big men” of the church to help escort people into the sanctuary and help to ease the nerves of our church members. Bottom line for that service, we needed to have some bouncers to get our folks into the church.
One of the things that we did that night was not have the sound system on in the multi-purpose room during the prayer service. In hindsight, I really regret that. It would have been good to have the reporters hear some of what was being said. That night, both our District Superintendent Tom Salsgiver and our bishop, Jane Allen Middleton, were present with me as we sang hymns of faith, read Scripture reminding us of God's presence and help for us in this time of great challenge. We prayed for all of the victims of the bombing, we prayed for the loved ones of those who lost their lives (at this time it was confirmed that there were three African friends at the table with our mission team who were killed in the bombing), and we prayed for comfort and strength. Both Tom and the bishop shared their faith in God who would see us through this in such a way that I had wished that each of the reporters sitting on the other side of the wall to the sanctuary could also hear this witness to their faith and hope in Christ.

Many people came to participate in that prayer service. The sanctuary was full, and was later described to the mission team members who were healing in African hospitals that the sanctuary was like Christmas Eve that night. There were no empty seats. Present with us that evening were church members, family members of victims, former mission team members to Uganda, other clergy colleagues, community members who wanted to join us in prayer, and perhaps the most notable person was a leader from the local Muslim community. Later I had learned that she had called the church office and sought permission to join us in prayer. Before the service began she made a point of introducing herself to me before she entered the sanctuary. So I knew she was there. And I knew that
her motivation was to join her heart with ours as we prayed. And she wanted to represent a different kind of Islam faith, as at this point we knew that an Islamic terror group had taken responsibility for the bombings.

It was not until a day or so later that I learned that the presence of this Islamic woman caused fear for some of our church members, including the parents of the team leader for the mission team who were sitting immediately behind this woman. As a pastor, I was so sorry that her presence caused more discomfort for persons who were so desperately in need of comfort. However, as a person of the faith community, I was so appreciative of this woman of her faith experience to join us in prayer. What a witness to the world that one who is religiously linked to the group responsible for causing this destruction would join us in prayer, knowing that not all persons of the Muslim faith share in the desire to take the lives of another or to perpetuate terrorist bombings.

When this prayer service came to an end I still needed to be the pastor of this gathered body. I needed to shake hands, hug, and offer personal words of hope and comfort. I really felt this huge, desperate need to be pastor. While I was greeting people as they exited the sanctuary, one of the reporters managed to leave the multi-purpose room. While I was doing what I needed to do as pastor, this reporter for the local newspaper came up behind me and started to ask me questions with his notepad in hand. Again, I wanted to be as helpful as I could to the reporters. I knew they had a job to do, and I wanted to make sure that their story contained a witness to the hope that we have within us because of our relationship with Christ. So I turned to this reporter who was behind me asking
me interview questions and expressed my concern for my congregation in that moment, asking him to allow me to be their pastor and that I also wanted to give him my full attention and answer any questions that he might have. I do not think that this satisfied him, as he grumbled that he was a local reporter for the local paper and would still be there to continue the story in the days and weeks ahead when everyone else moved on to another story. That was true. I needed to have a good relationship with the local press, which I did not have. But more important in that moment was my relationship with the members of the congregation.

**Seeing Myself on TV**

I had been at the church since around 5 a.m. that morning. After the prayer service, my district superintendent walked me out of the church just before 10 p.m. so that we could have dinner and refocus. In one of the only open restaurants at that time of night we were able to sit by a television and catch the local news. The interview was with a woman whose strong body language I had remembered. The reporter’s body cringed as I spoke about God. Her eyes were vacant as I spoke about faith. And her interview as it aired on the nightly news was focused on the facts of the tragedy, which she shared as she spoke over my taped interview. None of what I had to say about faith was ever aired on that particular news program.

It was also during the moment of respite that I began to think about the next day and the coming days. I knew that I needed to begin to arrange for
counseling for the team members for the moment they returned. I also would need to prepare for the continued inquiries from media outlets.

That night I returned to my home ready to collapse into bed despite my inability to sleep, and saw that the church parking lot was still full with satellite vans. Live shots from outside of the church were ready for the 11 p.m. news.

**Live from the MSNBC Affiliate**

One of the calls that had come on Monday was from MSNBC who wanted to schedule a live interview for Tuesday morning. They arranged to send a car to pick me up and carry me to one of their local affiliates in order to do an interview with one of their reporters. There were a couple of things that stood out from that particular interview experience. One is that the news is always changing and the prioritizing varies depending on what has happened. I was scheduled to interview at the top of the hour. The technicians in the studio wired my microphone and gave me the necessary ear piece so that I could hear the interviewer on the other end of the camera. And as I listened to the news and waited for my turn, I learned that George Steinbrenner had just passed away. The news of his death bumped my day-old news of a terrorist attack in Africa to the end of the hour.

The other thing that stood out from that experience I did not learn about until a few days later. On Wednesday MSNBC had arranged an interview with one of the sets of parents of one of the bombing victims. While they were at the affiliate studio, the technician who cared for their microphones and earpieces was the same one who had taken care of me. He shared with them that he
appreciated the opportunity to talk about this bombing with me while I was in the studio and that that had been a helpful conversation for him. The ripple of witness was growing as this story was being told and retold.

When Will the Phone Calls Ever End?

For the rest of the week my phone continued to regularly ring. Reporters were calling back for updates on their stories. New reporters were calling to get a new angle on the story. Reporters were calling and I did not want to return the calls anymore. I still had my regular church work to do. I still had to prepare to preach on Sunday. And I felt the weight of what I might say from the pulpit one week after the terrorist bomb exploded, taking the lives of three African friends and injuring the six members of our mission team.

It got to a point when I stopped returning many calls. I was sure this was not the best course of action, but I was feeling so overwhelmed with the demand that never seemed to end. And the church had a website that the mission team had used while on the mission trip so that they could update us on the work they were doing, and so that we could send words of greeting and encouragement to the mission team members. On the night of the bombing this had become a tool for posting prayer concerns, information that we knew, and updates. This was a website that we shared with all of the reporters and news outlets, and I trusted that they would get their information from there. However, there were a few persistent reporters who got my attention. One was a reporter from the wider local area. By that I mean he was not local to our community, but he did cover
the larger geographical area where the church is located. As it turned out, I knew his father from some other meetings in the annual conference, and he called leaving me messages telling me of that connection, and would I please call him back. That worked for me. I did call him. And I tried every day to make some time to return calls and speak with reporters.

**And Then Comes Sunday**

Before the end of the week, when I was at a point of having to plan Sunday worship, I had received a call from a reporter out of Harrisburg, about an hour’s drive away from the church. This reporter told me about her own experiences on mission trips. She told me that she had been a nurse. And she told me that she really wanted to attend worship with us on Sunday for an article that she wanted to write. I had already set a precedent that the reporters were not to be present in our worship services due to the negative impact on our church members. Yet this reporter was persistent. I told her that I did not want for folks to be distracted from worship by her presence; therefore, she would not be permitted to record the service, take photos during the service, or obviously jot down quotes in her reporter’s notebook. And I wanted to see the article before it went to press to give my approval. This reporter hesitated. She told me that she would respect worship, after all, she, too, is a Christian. She told me that she would do her best to blend in. But she also told me that she is not permitted to let me preview her article. That was something that her editor would not allow. I continued to hesitate to give my consent. Meanwhile, I thought about the regret I
had that the reporters did not hear the content of the prayer service on Monday night. I also thought about how I really could not refuse admission to worship to this would-be visitor. While I continued to hesitate, she agreed to my provisions, including my preapproval of the article.

That Sunday I preached a sermon called God Will (see Appendix 2). My focus was on a God who will see us through this, who will give us the strength we would need for the coming days and weeks, a God who will give us the courage to not retaliate and instead return evil with love. Later that afternoon I received an email with the text of the proposed newspaper article. In that article, which was well written and continued the message of witness that we were sharing, the title of the sermon was listed as God’s Will. When I read that I nearly fell out of my chair. That little apostrophe made it sound like I preached a sermon proclaiming the bombing as God’s Will. Immediately I emailed this reporter and asked that she fix that minute detail with huge consequence. I do not think that I could have been any more relieved that I had negotiated that I be given the opportunity to review that article before it went to press. That tiny apostrophe would have communicated a message that I did not want to convey.

**Coming Home**

When it was time for the first group of those who were hospitalized after the bombing to come home, the family of one of the team members asked if I would be able to join them at the airport. It was important that they knew in
advance if I would be there because I had to be cleared by the FBI to be present with the family while this first group came home from Africa.

Arriving at the airport was like a scene out of a movie. I did not have the exact details of where I needed to be. I knew to be in the parking garage at a particular area and from there I would receive more information. When I arrived at the parking garage, I realized that due to construction I could not drive to the area where I was to be. So one of the family members of one of the mission team members gave me the phone number for a contact with the FBI. I was instructed to go to a particular gray door in the parking garage where I would be met. I did not have to use a secret knock on this gray door (however, that would have seemed appropriate considering the circumstances of the day). On the other side of the door I was met by a few FBI agents, and they totally looked the part. They were tall men, dressed in dark suits, short, precise haircuts, with earpieces in their ears. The female who works victim advocacy on behalf of the FBI was there in a gray dress and wearing a pearl necklace. I had a young adult from the church travel with me to the airport, and at this point we were ushered into a meeting room near to the customs and homeland security area of the airport. We had been instructed to bring a photo ID and no purses, bags, or liquids with us. One of the other experiences I had that day with the FBI that felt like a scene out of a movie was when I left the conference room where we were all meeting to use the restroom. I was followed by one of the FBI agents to the bathroom. He stood outside of the door and followed me back to the conference room.
In time, all of the family members arrived who were meeting to welcome home these three mission team members. While we waited, the FBI briefed us on what to expect and what their plan was. And word had leaked out that these three mission team members were on this flight home, which caused the FBI and family members significant concern. One of the things that the FBI did not want to have to deal with on this day was the media. So the FBI showed me where the reporters would be if they indeed did come to get their story. And the FBI planned that I would be the decoy for the media. I would make myself available to give an update and report while the FBI moved these bombing victims and their families to the awaiting vehicles that would take them to local hospitals. In the end, even though the details of the return of these three persons from the mission team had leaked out, no reporters arrived at the airport for a story.

At this point, the FBI was trying to get control of the situation with the terrorist bombing as well as take care of the victims from the United States. The website that we were using to update information became problematic. Everyone, including the press, had access to the information. And on it were posted prayer concerns, updates on the status of the team member’s health, and travel information. The FBI had asked me to do what I could to limit the information that was being shared on this website. After a few phone calls I expressed the concern of the FBI to the folks who had access to updating the information, and we were able to better control what was being shared with the wider public.
Social Media Saves the Day

In addition to the website, Facebook became a place where information was being shared. Much like a website posting information, this could be a blessing and a challenge. Information was posted for the public to see that the FBI or family members did not want shared. This was how Facebook became a challenge. However, it was also a blessing.

One day, shortly after the bombing but before the mission team members began to return home, I received a call from Betty, Lori’s mom. She told me that the FBI had just contacted her and they could not find Lori. Lori was the only one of our team members who was not hospitalized. So I did not have access to her. The others were hospitalized and I had phone numbers to contact them, and they were in regular contact with their families who updated me first thing every morning. However, Lori was still in Kampala. She was staying with an African friend from the church. And I had no way to be in contact with her. But on this night, hours after I received Betty’s call that the FBI could not find Lori, she was on Facebook and I was able to chat with her. Hearing from her in real time, hearing that she was OK, hearing that she would connect with the FBI made me feel like the elephant that was sitting on my chest was finally gone.

Eventually, after what seemed like an eternity, all six members of the mission team were home, or at least back on U.S. soil. For the most part, they were hospitalized for more surgeries and treatments or were at home receiving medical care, but they were home. And their return caused a return of the
reporters. Now the media was calling the mission team members and visiting them in their homes to get the rest of the story.
CHAPTER 2
LORI’S STORY

On July 13 and 14, 2010, Lori Ssebulime, the mission team leader, wrote an account of what took place before, during, and after the bombing. Much of what she wrote is very graphic; however, it paints a clear picture of what happened to our mission team members and it worth sharing for that reason. Lori wrote and posted this account on the mission trip website within days of the explosion of the bomb, which then became information that the press wanted to include and reference in their reporting. Lori granted permission for the press to use her account and me to reference it here as well.

Sunday July 11 began as it normally would for a mission team. The six members of the mission team, Lori, Kris, Emily, Pam, Thomas, and Joanne went to the Bwaise Pentecostal Church, the sister church of Christ Community United Methodist Church in Selinsgrove, Pennsylvania. Lori’s desire for the team was to just sit in the pews with everyone else and “be normal people and not have to talk in front of the church.”¹ However, Pastor Peter, the pastor of the Bwaise Pentecostal Church asked that Lori and the rest of the team sit in the seats that had been set aside for them. During worship, the team received gifts to bring back with them to Christ Community. The church leaders expressed their appreciation for the relationship and support between our congregations. And Lori felt compelled to thank the Ugandans for their love and hospitality. Lori reflected in her account of the day that

¹ From Lori Ssebulime’s firsthand account July 13 and 14, 2010.
The outpouring of love from the children and the church members is such an amazing thing, and I know the team members expressed that if we could take one thing home from this trip in terms of lessons learned, it might be about hospitality and just loving each other.²

The mission team, after participating in worship and listening to Pastor Peter’s sermon on miracles in relation to Christ’s death and resurrection, decided that they wanted to spend some time relaxing and went in search of a reasonably priced swimming pool. In the process of this, their plans evolved and changed. Lori wrote that she grudgingly met with Pastor Peter to discuss the child sponsorship program, finances of the trip, and future goals of this shared ministry. Pastor Peter had also spent some time begging Lori to return with a team again next year, as every two years was not often enough. During this down time some of the others swam and had massages and other spa treatments.

It was after this meeting that the group decided they would go to the Ethiopian Village, a local restaurant, to have dinner and watch the World Cup match. They had thought that it would be fun to watch this match with others who were excited about the game.

In Lori’s account of the events of that night at the Ethiopian Village, Lori had this to say:

We got to the Ethiopian Village and ordered our food. We had a great meal, and when the food came out, Emily and Francis traded seats so that Francis and I could share our meal. There were very few people at the restaurant then, so we asked the waitress to arrange tables in front of the screen for 11 of us. Mrs. K. had invited our friend Becky to join us, and her cousin Ivan came along. The boys spent much time with him during

² Ibid.
our stay. Sara's Francis was the last to join us and he and Peter shared a plate. I am telling you this in such detail because I have replayed so much of this in my mind for the last few days and I am still trying to digest it all. Francis decided Emily was his date for the evening, and Emily said, "I am going to cry so hard tomorrow when we have to leave, I want to spend the rest of the summer here." We talked about how cool it would be to be in South Africa for the last match, and Francis talked about Nelson Mandela and how his life has been so full, and this was one huge last event for him and the fulfillment he should have as an old man. It was really cool when the pregame stuff was on the screen and it was all "African" themed. Everyone was in high spirits, and when the game was ready to start, we turned around and the place was packed. I commented to Francis that we were really lucky to get there when we did, because we had great seats right in the front and we would never have been together had we come later because there were so many people.

As this first half of the game continued some phone calls were made to the mission team members as well as Pastor Peter. And all around the mission team this restaurant was full with people eating and watching the game. Then, the atmosphere and scene at the Ethiopian Village drastically changed. Lori wrote:

> It was almost halftime but they added those two extra minutes to the half. It was right then that things became chaos. I remember a bright flash and everything went grey and it felt like rain. The projector that I was sitting right beside made a loud pop. I saw my hand touch Francis's shirt twice and it felt like a huge wind surge hit me and I flew backward onto the ground. I was so confused, and people were falling on me as I fought to stand back up. I could feel broken plastic all around me and I heard screaming from every direction. I could taste blood in my mouth and felt burning sensations. I could see nothing but grey and shadows. It seemed as if everything was swirling around me, and then I heard Emily screaming and I went to her. Still totally confused as to what was happening, I could hear nothing but wind in my ears. It was total mass confusion. There was debris everywhere, and when I got to Emily I looked down and could see her in a pool of blood, screaming hysterically and thrashing her body around. Mrs. K. came over and was screaming, "Get up, get up." Mrs. K. had blood running down her

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3 Ibid.
face and she said she was going to fall over. She disappeared then, and I tried and tried to pick Emily up, but then I saw her leg and I could see her bones and flesh everywhere. I think I started to scream then, too. I started pulling her toward the entrance of the restaurant. Francis appeared out of the smoke and chaos and picked Emily up off the ground and carried her to the van. I saw bodies lying on the ground all around me, and somehow I saw Emily’s bag, so I picked it up and my own too. My shoes were missing, and as I moved through the shambles I saw one of them and many others that didn’t belong to me. I saw a body of man right in front of me, and the side of his body was ripped open. [Only the shoulders of his shirt remained intact.] He was obviously dead, and stuff was lying on top of him. I remember turning in a circle and seeing bodies everywhere I looked. I touched my own face and head because I could taste blood and felt warm liquid which I assumed was blood. I still had no idea what had happened, but as people were screaming and moaning, I know the thought [of bombs] flashed through my head, but all this happened in a matter of a second. As I have processed this all I have realized it was literally, literally a snap of the finger, blink of an eye, just an instant and everything was chaos. When Francis lifted Emily and I saw the flesh fall off of her leg and the remaining burnt flesh dangling, I was terrified and I don’t remember how I got to the van. I know someone was leading me by the arm and I was stepping on sharp debris on the ground. People scattered about. I think I saw Kris, but everything was swirling around me. I next remember being at the van and Francis pushing me in. Emily was screaming at the top of her lungs and just over and over again. Somehow Mrs. K. was in the van with her head against the seat in front of her. Several other people were in the van screaming too. Francis grabbed a man and asked him to hold Emily’s legs. I was in the front seat on my knees holding Emily’s hands through the bars on the van. I don’t know how Francis got the van backed out, but he laid on the horn and drove. Emily was screaming, “I’m blind, I’m blind.” I held both of her hands, because when I left go she touched her arms and legs and the skin was lying open and she screamed more. She kept saying it burned. I was terrified. When she would stop screaming I would yell her name because I was truly afraid she was dead. I kept promising her I would not leave her and we would be at the hospital soon. It was the worst state of confusion I have ever felt. I can hear her screams and the horn blaring as Francis sped toward the hospital. I kept yelling for Mrs. K. to put her hand up to touch Emily, but she didn’t move and I thought she was dead too. Her entire face was black from blood and ash. I heard the man in the back screaming. I have no idea how I was able to hold both of Emily’s hands while Francis navigated the pot hole, speed bump filled Ugandan roads without falling off the seat. I kept trying to get her to close her eyes because I could see her eyes wide open and panic
in them as she was screaming I’m blind. The image of Emily’s leg dangling with the burnt flesh hanging down is burned into my head. I could see both of her leg bones. In fact, I could see right between them. 4

Somehow Francis and Lori made their way to the local hospital. They arrived with Emily and Joanne (Mrs. K.). While at the hospital Lori said she kept walking around and going back and forth between Emily and Joanne. She had lost her shoes in the explosion and she said that she “kept finding big chunks of human flesh on my shirt and in my hair.” 5 Lori was in a haze as these next moments unfolded before her. She was unable to sit still and the hospital hallways were covered in pools of blood from all of the bodies that were arriving at the hospital. In a moment of clarity, Lori knew that she should not be walking around the hospital barefoot, but had no other option. She goes on to say that she “saw the man who was in our van lying dead and I could hear people wailing in pain and mourning because people were dying all around the hallways, waiting room, and in our van.” 6

In the midst of the blood and death around Lori and Francis there was work to be done. Lori wanted to call back to home and let her family know what had happened. Francis continued to check on Joanne and Emily. At some point, he also left that hospital to go to another hospital to find Pam, Thomas, Pastor Peter, Francis (Sara’s son) and Becky. In the meantime Kris arrived at the hospital in the back of a police truck. According to Lori’s reflection, “They carried him in and put him on the floor of another room that was filled with bloody

4 Ibid.
5 Ibid.
6 Ibid.
people."

The scene at this hospital was one of chaos and death. Lori said, “There was a constant stream of people going in and out and puddles of blood everywhere.” People from the church began to arrive to offer their support and to look for their loved ones. As vehicles would arrive on the scene people would crowd around the vehicles to see if they contained their loved ones. Lori wrote that “the reality of the situation really was sinking in and I was numb.”

Francis returned from his search to find the others at another hospital. He had found Pam and Thomas at another hospital. He has also learned that the doctors wanted to amputate Emily’s leg; however her parents refused to give their permission. Francis had also called the American Embassy. Meanwhile, reporters had also started to arrive at the hospital. Lori reflected of herself that, “she was hearing everything, but not really comprehending it all.”

In the midst of this chaos Lori wrote that she remembered:

Francis chasing a reporter who had taken a picture of me and making him delete the pictures. People were asking all kinds of questions, but I could hardly hear anything. I kept asking those around me where the music was coming from, because I could hear music, but they kept telling me there was no music. The lady from the embassy came back and told me to go and sleep a bit. It was coming to 3 a.m. at this point. We still were missing Pastor Peter, Becky, and Francis. Those inside were sedated and sleeping. When Francis returned after finding Thomas and Pam he started working on preparations to move the three from the hospital we were at to the hospital where the other two were at.

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7 Ibid.
8 Ibid.
9 Ibid.
10 Ibid.
11 Ibid.
Lori went on to say:

We were there for a very long time and more and more people were wailing as they received word that their people were dead. I don’t know what I can tell you about those hours, as they were just very long and confusing and scary. It was just a matter of trying to comprehend what had happened, hoping and praying the others would show, but the pit in the stomach was growing as the vehicles came less frequently. The police kept arriving with the blue lights flashing and they would pull up to the door and pull people out by the arms and legs, depositing them on the sidewalk at the door, and then they sped off again.12

This long day which began with worship and a sermon on miracles in relation to Christ's death and resurrection had ended in an explosion and chaos surrounded with blood and death at the local Kampala hospital. Francis and Lori eventually left and went back to Francis’s house so that they could wash up and rest. Of this Lori said:

Our clothes were bloody and still flesh was clinging to us. I was almost gagging as I washed my hair because it was so full of bloody bits of flesh and splinters of wood and plastic from the chairs. My legs are so cut up that I couldn’t figure out if I was clean or it was the burns and cuts from the bomb. I pulled my mattress over to Francis’ room and slept on his floor, because I was really scared to be alone in the dark room. As we were lying in the beds I could hear the roosters beginning to crow outside. We slept for about one hour and then we were up to go back to the hospital. The van was completely covered with burnt flesh. It was incredible, because the van was in the parking lot at the very back of the rest. There were big chunks of flesh in the van and the seats were blood soaked. Before we left the house we received the call that they had found Becky in the mortuary. We stopped at the mortuary on the way to the hospital to see if we could find the others, but they had locked the doors and not let anyone in, because they were overwhelmed with dead bodies.13

12 Ibid.
13 Ibid.
The next day, Pam, Thomas, Emily, Joanne, and Kris were all receiving care at the International Hospital, which had been arranged by Francis and the American Embassy. This hospital was one thousand times better than the hospital where Kris, Joanne, and Emily originally were according to Lori. Lori did report on her experience of seeing everyone at this hospital saying:

I first saw Pam and Thomas and I pretty much melted in Pam's arms as she lay in a bed with cuts all over her face and stitches in her cheek and brow. Her leg was bandaged as she told me she was fine. [She had] compound fractures in both leg bones. Thomas's face looked worse than Pam's, but they were together in the same room. She said Thomas had surgery but had to go back for another operation, because they didn't get all the stuff out of his leg. Then I saw Kris, and he was talking and smiling and fine. The biggest relief for me was seeing Emily. As soon as I got to her she smiled and told me she kept her leg. I cried more out of relief than anything when I saw her. She was able to see again and asked for her glasses, which I had grabbed as we were leaving Francis's house. She said her contact lens had fallen out. I was also relieved to hear that, because I was so scared they had melted in her eyes. ¹⁴

After this emotional reunion with the mission team members, others began to reach out and offer their help and support to Lori. Persons from the Watoto Church had heard that Lori was in the news and covered with blood, so they went to check on Lori. Beverly, a missionary from Christ Community and living in Uganda, had been in Kampala for something and she had found out about the bombing and was able to connect with the members of our mission team. Meanwhile, Francis and Lori worked at collecting passports, vaccination records, and bags for the five hospitalized team members as the Embassy was working on medevacing them to other hospitals. It was a priority to move Emily to a hospital in South Africa. She and Joanne were being moved to a hospital in

¹⁴ Ibid.
Johannesburg and Kris, Thomas, and Pam were being moved to a hospital in Nairobi, Kenya. In the midst of making these arrangements the mortuary released a list of the deceased. Pastor Peter was on that list and confirmed among the dead.

As the Embassy and hospitals were caring for the medical needs of the others and arrangements were being made to bury the dead, Francis and Lori had time to process all that they had just experienced. Lori wrote:

As horrible as the 24 hours had been there were so many things that we saw God at work in. One of the things Francis and I have discussed countless times yesterday and today is how this all happened that people all around were dead and seriously injured, but he and I were able to walk out. If our theory is right, the bomb exploded right at the end of our table. There was a man who put his chair right at the end of the table right in front of Peter and Sara’s and Francis’ chairs. If Francis and I were unable to get Emily to the hospital, what would have happened to her, and how in all that chaos was Francis able to find the keys and get the van out of the parking lot, which should have been blocked in due to us being there first? It was only by the grace of God that all six of the mission team members are alive when we were all seated together at the tables. Today when I saw Becky’s body, it shocked me to think Mrs. K. was seated next to her and survived.\textsuperscript{15}

Lori and Francis continued to look for signs of God’s presence and hand in the midst of this terrible situation. Before the mission team even leaves from home, the mission team members gather in the front of the sanctuary at Christ Community and the church lays hands on them and prays over them. When Lori had communicated back home that this terrible thing had happened, the church continued to gather to pray. And Lori was able to see the power of prayer at work. Regarding this, Lori wrote:

\textsuperscript{15} Ibid.
The bomb exploded right in front of us, and people behind [us] were dead, and on the sides and in front. There is only one explanation I have, and that is that the prayers that are upholding us here have been answered. We keep discussing all the details of the evening. How quickly it all happened, why we chose to go to that restaurant when we had talked of going to another place down town, but I was worried about the security of the vehicle for parking there. The other place we had initially planned to go before changing to the Ethiopian Village was hit by two bombs and had significantly more deaths than where we were. So many many things. I keep wondering about those who are in their hospital beds if they are able to process this whole situation, because Francis and I have been processing it nonstop.16

Later Lori learned that Sara’s Francis was dead. His body had been found at the mortuary that morning. Her account of the information said that “his limbs were missing and his sides were ripped open . . . and his father was prepared to identify him by his feet.”17

On July 14 Lori wrote that the Embassy had thought that she had already gone home. At this point, Lori is working on coming home. She stayed in Kampala long enough to be present during the funeral services, and now she and Francis are cleaning the blood-soaked van, packing all of the other stuff that the team members left behind, and trying to retrieve some of their personal belongings that were among the debris at the restaurant.

While Lori worked on these final details so that she could finally come home she also reflected on some of her own injuries as well as those of Francis. Lori also wrote about some of the damage to their personal affects saying:

I didn't get to the doctor today but it is on my list for tomorrow. I am a bit concerned about infection in some of my leg wounds and my left eye is still sore and red. I am thinking that I must have bumped my head on something, because I feel pain when

16 Ibid.
17 Ibid.
I touch my eye [and my] forehead. Francis also is feeling sore now. It is strange now that things are quieting down. We are starting to find bruises and sore spots that we didn't notice yesterday. When we saw a picture of the scene this morning on the internet, we were sitting right where the fence is lying. I had picked up Emily's bag when we were being taken out that night, and it is blood soaked. When I carried it out to the porch we found a piece of wood sticking out of the side like a spear. Again and again Francis and I have wondered how and why we have been able to walk out alive. It was a heavy canvas bag and the wood was all the way through the bag. I also went through Kris's backpack, which was in shreds, but the same wood that was in Emily's bag was also inside of Kris's backpack, as well as a broken glass. Francis went downstairs this morning to take some pictures of the blood-soaked seats in his van that we were going to post on the site, but he came back in tears as he also found more human flesh on the floor. I wanted to post some of the pictures we took right before . . . . It made me feel a bit at ease to see everyone smiling and enjoying the evening. Peter, Becky, and Francis went to be with the Lord in a split second, and they were happy, smiling, and enjoying themselves. I am so anxious to hear about the investigation at the Ethiopian village, because I really believe we know where it came from, and if we are correct, Francis blocked the guy's way at one point, but after other waiters and waitresses needed to pass through, Francis moved his chair back and gave up on blocking his way.18

Even though this was a horrific event that no one anticipated, Lori's writing reflected a deep relationship with God. She was able to name things for which she was thankful as well as name some of her pressing prayer concerns. The conclusion of Lori's account of the bombing ends this way:

I was able to talk to my parents briefly today, but we lost connection. They told me how everyone is praying for us at home, and it is such a comfort to know that so many are thinking of us. I am anxious to get home and see everyone, but I am thankful that I was here for the funerals yesterday. Please pray for the Bwaise Pentecostal Church! Peter has done tremendous work there and was truly transforming a very difficult place to be. I don't understand why God called him home at this time but, there is a reason! I know I mentioned it last night, but as horrible as this whole situation has been, we are in awe of how God's been

18 Ibid.
working through it all. I would appreciate it if you would pray that I can be home by Sunday.

Francis and I are supposed to do some kind of TV interview tomorrow, he tells me. I have no more clean clothes to wear. I threw the clothes I had on Sunday away, as they were covered with blood and rotting flesh, and somehow the other pants I had in a bag in the van were thrown away too. The shirt that was in the bag with those pants had blood all over it, too, but I soaked it today and was able to get it out, so I have one pair of capris and a pair of shorts and one pair of flip flops. That wouldn't be a problem, but I can't keep the flies off my wounds. I thought I was going to go crazy, literally, today trying to keep them off my legs. OK, I thought this was going to be short and I just keep rambling, so I will say goodnight now. I can't keep my eyes open much longer anyway! Thanks for the prayers, concern, and all the messages that I have been receiving. God is good!\(^\text{19}\)

\(^{19}\) Ibid.
CHAPTER THREE
THE CALL TO WITNESS

The purpose of this chapter is to explore the call of all Christians to be witnesses of the good news of Jesus Christ to a world so desperate for good news, as well as to be ready to share the hope that is within us, especially in response to times of crisis. Crisis, scandal, drama, fear, conflict are so often sensationalized and perpetuated in the media. The reality is, this is what sells. However, people of faith have a different story to tell, a message of hope to proclaim. At the Ascension in Acts 1 just before Jesus ascended into heaven, Jesus said to his disciples, “...and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” (Acts 1:8) Followers of Jesus are to be witnesses of Jesus to the ends of the earth. And in 1 Peter Christians are instructed to “always be ready to make your defense to anyone who demands from you an accounting for the hope that is in you.” (1 Peter 3:15b)

Help Us, O God

The night that I received that call that our mission team members had been involved in a terrorist bombing I did not know what to do. However, I did have the wherewithal to see that the team’s family members knew that we would be at the church to pray. In Traveling Mercies, Anne Lamott says that the two best prayers she knows are, “help me, help me, help me” and “thank you, thank

20 Scripture references will be from the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible unless otherwise noted.
you, thank you.”21 Truth is, we were in need of prayer and both of these prayers were applicable. We could pray “thank you” to God, because we knew our team members were alive. And we needed to pray “help me,” because we did not know what was going to happen next. We did not know the status of our injured mission team members. We did not know the location or status of the Africans who were at dinner with our mission team. There were too many uncertainties. There were too many details and facts that we did not know. There were too many fears and concerns that weighed heavy on our shoulders. There were too many questions and not enough answers.

That night we came face to face with the reality that bad things really do happen to good people. We had prayed over this mission team as they prepared to leave for this short-term mission experience. We continued to pray every day they were in Africa. We prayed for their health and safety. We prayed that God would transform their lives through this experience. We prayed for the church with whom they would be working as well as the church’s pastor and members. And still our mission team was in a terrorist bombing. Now we needed to pray even more.

When something like this happens there are many ways in which we can respond and many ways in which this could affect us. Our impulse could be to retaliate, to respond with anger and hatred. We could question God asking why God allowed this to happen. We could lose our faith or be angry with God. We could await the return home of our mission team members and never look back,

never returning to the scene of this violent act. Or this could be an opportunity to witness to the good news of Jesus Christ. This could be an opportunity to give an account of the hope that is within us.

**Talk the Talk or Walk the Walk?**

One of the challenges to Christianity is how Christianity is perceived. On their Jesus Freak album DC Talk opens one of their songs by saying “the greatest single cause of atheism in the world today is Christians who acknowledge Jesus with their lips and then walk out the door and deny him by their lifestyles. That is what an unbelieving world simply finds unbelievable. “In other words, how Christians live their lives matters. The secular world is watching for and paying attention to hypocrisy and inconsistencies in how people of faith live their lives. Modern clichés suggest that “we may be the only Jesus people ever see” and “we may be the only Bible people ever read.” How we live our lives matters, especially in our increasingly secular society. So when tragedy happens, the church and people of faith must seize upon the opportunity to be a witness to attest to the hope that is within us.

**Suffering Happens**

People of faith have not been granted immunity from suffering. Throughout the Scriptures bad things happened to faithful people. A classic example of this is the book of Job in which the title character loses his livestock, servants, children, and his health and yet the text says that he is “blameless and
upright, one who feared God and turned away from evil.” (Job 1:1) So despite his being a good person, bad things happened to him. He still suffered.

And not only in Scripture, but also in our own lives we have been a witness to or have personally experienced bad and difficult things. Scripture speaks to this too. Romans 5:1-5 says:

“Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand; and we boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God. And not only that, but we also boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.

Boasting in our sufferings seems impossible, yet this Scripture passage persuades us to do so, because ultimately the suffering leads us to hope.

Because bad things do happen to good and faithful people, hope is a necessity. And for people of faith, our hope is rooted in our relationship with God. When bad things happen to good people issues of theodicy and the question of evil are raised. It is natural to wonder where God is in the midst of tragedy. It is normal to question why God did not intervene so that there would have been a different outcome. For Job, when he demanded to face God and question why this was happening, he did not receive an answer from God as to why he was suffering. Instead, God directs God’s response to Job regarding “cosmology, meteorology, and zoology, rather than the specific issues of justice
Job had raised.\textsuperscript{22} We do not always know why bad things happen. But we do know through experience and through Scripture that bad things do happen to good people.

**Can I Get a Witness?**

So the question then becomes for people of faith, what action will we take when bad things happen, when we are in the midst of a crisis? What kind of witness will we be? What will the voice of the church and the community of faith say to a listening public?

Again, 1 Peter speaks to this. In the Message, 1 Peter 3:15 says, “Be ready to speak up and tell anyone who asks why you’re living the way you are.” Christians must always be ready to share, to speak up as to why we live the way we do.

The book of 1 Peter is an interesting epistle to consider. First Peter is one of the general epistles, meaning it is “not attributed to Paul” and it is “addressed not to a particular church but to a group of churches.”\textsuperscript{23} The New Interpreter’s Bible goes on to say that 1 Peter:

speaks to the condition of the churches across the traditional lines of time and place. A letter written for churches that are alienated from the surrounding society and for Christians who are slandered for their faith, it has proved comfort for believers in troubled times from the end of the first century to the beginning of the third millennium.\textsuperscript{24}

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\textsuperscript{24} Ibid., 229.
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When considering the significance of the call to always be ready to speak to the hope that is within us, it may be helpful to consider the purpose of 1 Peter. “Its stated intent was to give witness to the sustaining beauty and power of the Christian faith and thereby to encourage the recipients who were suffering harassment and verbal abuse from the dominant non-Christian culture.”25 And Lewis Donelson says, “The theology of 1 Peter is . . . built around the problem of abuse from neighbors and the suffering it causes. The most obvious purpose of the letter is to provide encouragement. This is done by creating a theological narrative that not only gives meaning to suffering but also treats suffering as a blessing.”26

First Peter speaks to the necessity of loving one another, which creates some controversy for Donelson. He says:

The controversy lies in how Christians can behave in a holy way toward people who are abusing them. Is there an appropriate Christian way to honor people who are causing suffering? First Peter’s response to this puzzle is to call upon the story of Jesus. In fact, the primary role of Jesus in 1 Peter is to model a pattern of behavior in the face of suffering (and a pattern of divine response to that suffering) . . . . This pattern involved not sinning and not giving in to the desire for revenge when faced with abuse.27

First Peter then becomes for the Christian community a guide for dealing with and responding to suffering and abuse. I do think it is necessary to clarify that this book does not condone abuse and does not encourage the one be a

27 Ibid., 21.
doormat, as it were, to an abuser. Rather, this speaks to the already established reality that Christians are not immune to suffering, pain, abuse, and other bad things happening. So instead, 1 Peter gives encouragement to follow the pattern that Jesus has already established to not give into revenge or retaliation. Instead, the goal is to point to the hope that is within us, to point to the good news of Jesus Christ.

**Good News!**

It may be helpful to consider the good news of Jesus Christ at this point. What is the good news? And what is the message that Jesus proclaims? The good news is that there is something more to this life, and in the midst of the brokenness of humanity God sent God’s Son to be light in the darkness and to be our Redeemer. Central to the Christian faith is the death and the resurrection of Jesus and the promise that with God death is not the last word. Instead there is the promise of life, eternal life. This is the hope that is within us. Fred Craddock argues that the hope that is within us that 1 Peter calls upon us to be ready to share “here refers to one’s entire faith stance rather than simply the hope of an afterlife.”

So that means that Jesus’ death and resurrection has to mean more to the faith community than just the promise of eternal life in death. In other words, our eternal life must begin on this earth. There also must be something that we learn from the life of Christ.

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Throughout the New Testament we are called to be Christ-like.

Consistently the author of 1 Peter points to Christ as the model for how people of faith are to live, especially in light of one’s suffering.29 Jesus also taught and instructed his followers in how to respond faithfully to persecution and suffering. Specifically, in the Sermon on the Mount Jesus said:

Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. “Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.”30

A little later in the Sermon on the Mount Jesus continued to instruct on how his followers to respond to one who harms them by saying:

You have heard that it was said, ‘An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.’ But I say to you, do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also; and if anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well; and if anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile. Give to everyone who begs from you, and do not refuse anyone who wants to borrow from you.31

And regarding loving our enemies, Jesus said:

You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous. For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? And if you greet only your brothers and sisters, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.32

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29 Donald P. Senior. Jude and 2 Peter/ Daniel Harrington, 1 Peter (Minneapolis, Minn.: Michael Glazier Books, 2003), 97.
30 Matthew 5:10-12
31 Matthew 5:38-42
32 Matthew 5:43-48
Much of what Jesus said in Matthew’s Sermon on the Mount regarding suffering, persecution, and how we are to treat our enemies Jesus reiterated in Luke’s Sermon on the Plain in which Jesus said:

Blessed are you when people hate you, and when they exclude you, revile you, and defame you on account of the Son of Man. Rejoice in that day and leap for joy, for surely your reward is great in heaven; for that is what their ancestors did to the prophets .... Woe to you when all speak well of you, for that is what their ancestors did to the false prophets. But I say to you that listen, love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. If anyone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also; and from anyone who takes away your coat do not withhold even your shirt. Give to everyone who begs from you; and if anyone takes away your goods, do not ask for them again. Do to others as you would have them do to you. If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them. If you do good to those who do good to you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners do the same. If you lend to those from whom you hope to receive, what credit is that to you? Even sinners lend to sinners, to receive as much again. But love your enemies, do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return. Your reward will be great, and you will be children of the Most High; for he is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked. Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.33

In the Gospels Jesus is clear that the expectation of his followers is to turn the other cheek, not retaliate and respond to evil with evil, love our enemies, and to know that there is blessing in persecution. Not only did Jesus say this and instruct his followers in this way. Jesus also exemplified this. Perhaps the most profound example is found at the end of Jesus’ life.

One of the best examples of Jesus not retaliating or seeking retribution was at his arrest in the garden. According to Luke 22:47-53, when Jesus was

33 Luke 6:22-23, 26-36
arrested, one of the disciples with him drew his sword and cut off the ear of the high priest. But Jesus said, “No more of this!” And he touched his ear and healed him. (Luke 22:51) Another example of this comes during the crucifixion of Jesus as he said one of his last words from the cross, “Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing.” (Luke 23:34)

So not only does the author of 1 Peter suggest Jesus set as the example for people of faith to model, Jesus does that in the Gospels as Jesus taught his followers to turn the other cheek and love their enemies. And Jesus exemplified this himself by turning the other cheek, offering words of forgiveness, and even healing the ear of one of his captors.

1 Peter: Authorship, Focus, and Faith

There is some question as to the authorship of 1 Peter. Donald Senior suggests that 1 Peter was written by Peter or someone inspired by Peter, saying:

Purportedly written by the apostle Peter (1:1, 5:1) and delivered through his trusted associate Silvanus (5:2), the letter may have originated from a “Petrine group” in Rome that took its inspiration from the venerable apostle and his missionary associates (including Mark; see 5:13) and now carried forward his teaching and his pastoral encouragement to the far-flung Christian communities that were growing in Asia Minor.34

Whereas The New Interpreter Bible suggests that the apostle Peter may or may not have been the author of the epistle indicating that the style of the writing, particularly the Greek prose, the references to the Hebrew Scriptures, the theological development with its similarities to the Pauline community, and the

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34 Donald P. Senior. Jude and 2 Peter/ Daniel Harrington, 1 Peter (Minneapolis, Minn.: Michael Glazier Books, 2003), 3.
timing of the letter as it relates to Peter’s death and the spread of Christianity.\textsuperscript{35}

Regardless of authorship, The New Interpreter Bible helpfully claims:

> Whether it was written by Peter or by a later Christian in his name, the epistle helps to strengthen Christians in times of distress; sets their lives within the history of God’s activity, which moves from creation to consummation; holds up the atoning death of Jesus Christ; and encourages mutual love among Christian people and forbearance of enemies. Nothing in this list would be impossible for the historical Peter to enjoin; nothing loses its power to share faith if the words were written by some later Christian in his name.\textsuperscript{36}

Paul Achtemeier is one of the leading theologians on the book of 1 Peter. In his commentary he has this to say about the section of 1 Peter (1 Peter 3:13-17) which contains our focus verse of “Always be ready to make your defense to anyone who demands from you an accounting for the hope that is in you.” (1 Peter 3:15b):

> Because the theme of this passage — Christian life in the midst of hostility — is familiar throughout the letter, one is dealing here with the core of the author’s message to his readers who are facing social oppression and persecution. Points touched on elsewhere are here made thematic: Christians are not to give offense (vs. 13), they are to hold Christ as Lord (vv 14-15a), they are to give the lie to accusations of evil by living a good life (vs. 16) because it is better to suffer for doing good than for doing evil (vs. 17). Indeed, ideas expressed repeatedly in this letter are concentrated in these verses: (1) Christians regularly suffer rejection and disgrace; (2) they must do what is good even if their goodness is the occasion for suffering; (3) suffering is to be due only to their doing good, not to any evil they do; (4) because they suffer for doing good they are blessed; (5) Christian lives must witness to their hope, because Christ’s triumphant resurrection carries with it the promise for the Christians’ future.\textsuperscript{37}

\textsuperscript{36} Ibid., 233.
Regarding suffering and making a defense of one's hope Fred Craddock says, “However, in the text before us is the issue of suffering at the hands of others, suffering intentionally inflicted on Christians by their neighbors.” And goes on to say:

But be ready for the unexpected. Someone may interrogate you about the hope within you. (Hope here refers to one’s entire faith stance rather than simply to the hope of an afterlife.) You should be able to offer a defense of the gospel you have embraced. We have no clue as to whether the questioning was by private citizens or public officials. In any case, think through your answer ahead of time lest you and the church be embarrassed either by your frightened silence or your empty enthusiasm.

Lewis Donelson further addresses this by saying, “Since the content of the account is ‘the hope that is in you,’ the defense against a public accusation. Thus the purpose of the defense would not be to protect the believer but to persuade the nonbeliever of the truth of the gospel. The word ‘hope’ certainly includes anticipation of future reward, but it also has a more general sense of trust in the gospel.”

And Leonhard Goppelt adds, “Sometimes debates lead to legal trials. But this is not the situation that is primarily in view here. Here every Christian is summoned to be prepared at all times in relation to every person to give an account about the meaning of being a Christian.”

As we discovered in the midst of our media mayhem, there are important characteristics to sharing an effective public witness. They include authenticity,
tone, internal hope, readiness, faith perspective, a call to be focused, and be rooted in the gospel message.

As we have already established, one of the challenges the Christian church faces is hypocrisy and inauthenticity. Therefore, the hope that we proclaim, especially in light of suffering, must be real. The witness must come from a place of sincerity. Paul Achtemeier speaks to this when he says, “What is new in this section is the need for Christians to be ready to give a public defense of their faith, here, typically for our author identified as their ‘hope,’ a defense to be given with due deference and backed by living out what they confess.”  

The verse that follows 1 Peter 3:15 says, “Yet do it with gentleness and reverence. Keep your conscience clear, so that when you are maligned, those who abuse you for your good conduct in Christ may be put to shame.” (1 Peter 3:16) This verse and the continuation of the call to witness to our hope also calls upon the one giving the witness to be intentional with their tone. This witness must be shared with gentleness and respect. Fred Craddok said, “However, when you do witness, do so with gentleness and respect. Nothing is so alienating and obnoxious as Christian witnessing with arrogance and condescension, with rudeness and intrusion. Have a sense of the appropriate.”

Donald Senior says that, “The author [of 1 Peter] beautifully characterizes

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Christian faith and practice as ‘hope that is in you,’” which then calls upon the community of faith to actually have an internal hope. This echoes the concern of authenticity and also challenges Christians to have such a relationship with Christ so that our hope comes from deep within us.

Throughout the gospels Jesus is consistently calling his disciples to live intentionally. Part of that intentionality is to live with readiness — ready for Christ to return — and in 1 Peter 3, “Always ready for a testimony to anyone who asks you the reason for the hope that is in you.” This is one of the most often quoted verses of the letter, and it eloquently states the fundamental mission of witness that the author encourages the community to accept. Even though faced with suffering from those who want to harm the community, the Christians are nevertheless to be always ready to give a “testimony” or defense of their hope to anyone who questions them.

Donald Senior does go on to talk about the importance of a faith perspective. He says, “Looking at the whole situation with the eyes of faith is what enables the Christians to have hope in the first place and that same vantage point impels them to give such witness to others.”

Another valuable characteristic of effective faith sharing is for the witness to be focused, perhaps having only one point. It is easy to get lost in the details, and in our case it would have been too easy for the press to incorrectly capture our witness had we tried to make too many points. Therefore, having one focus,

44 Donald P. Senior. Jude and 2 Peter/ Daniel Harrington, 1 Peter (Minneapolis, Minn.: Michael Glazier Books, 2003), 95.
45 Ibid.
46 Ibid., 98.
one point, is helpful in conveying a strong witness. Andy Stanley and Lane Jones speak of this directly in their book, Communicating for a Change. They encourage preachers and speakers to be focused and have only one point in their messages.47

Lastly, any effective witness must be rooted in the gospel message. And all Christian proclamations are rooted in the first Christian proclamation, “I have seen the Lord,” which was proclaimed by Mary Magdalene when she witnessed the resurrected Christ. (John 20:18a)

For us, our experience in light of a terrorist bombing and the press’s desire to tell a story challenged us to be ready with a witness of the hope that is within us. 1 Peter reminds us that suffering happens, yet even in the midst of suffering Jesus calls his followers to turn the other cheek, to not seek retaliation, and to point to the promise of resurrection hope that is within us.

My desire is to propose a way for a congregation to communicate a faithful witness. What does a faithful witness look like? It seems to me that a faithful witness for God means that Christians are striving to be more Christ-like in the things that we say and do. A faithful witness exhibits love for all of humankind. A faithful witness is consistent with Jesus’ own penchant for the least, the last, and the lost. And a faithful witness is consistent with Scripture.

In John 13:34-35, Jesus said, “I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.” And regarding the depth of love one can have for another, in John 15:13, Jesus said, “No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends.” So one way that we see a faithful witness is through the ways that we show our love for one another.

In the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5, Jesus said of his followers that:

You are the salt of the earth; but if salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything, but is thrown out and trampled underfoot. You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid. No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way,
let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.  

Part of a faithful witness is living as salt and light. The salt adds the flavor of God to the world and the light illumines and points back to Christ.

Disciples of Jesus are also warned in the Scripture that it is not up to us to be the judge of others. Instead, that is God’s responsibility. For example, in Luke 7:37 and 41-42 Jesus says:

Do not judge, and you will not be judged; do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven; ... Why do you see the speck in your neighbor’s eye, but do not notice the log in your own eye? Or how can you say to your neighbor, ‘Friend, let me take out the speck in your eye,’ when you yourself do not see the log in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your neighbor’s eye.

In Romans 2:1, 4 Paul speaks of judging other as well. The Scripture says,

Therefore you have no excuse, whoever you are, when you judge others; for in passing judgment on another you condemn yourself, because you, the judge, are doing the very same things. Or do you despise the riches of his kindness and forbearance and patience? Do you not realize that God’s kindness is meant to lead you to repentance?

According to John 3:17 “Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.” In other words, Jesus was sent into the world not to condemn or establish and perpetuate an unfaithful witness of the gospel to the world.

And in the Old Testament the prophet Micah expressed what it is that God requires of us. The Scripture says, “He has told you, O mortal, what is good;
and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?" (Micah 6:8) The bottom line is that God expects that we participate in justice, that we show mercy, loving kindness, and walk with God.

So a faithful witness is not one of judgment or condemnation. I believe that people are yearning to hear a faithful witness from the church in times of crisis to restore hope, to remind us that God is bigger than anything that is happening in the world around us, and that the church is a safe place of welcome.

**Unfaithful Witness**

However, the reality is, the church has not always done this. Perhaps more accurately, there are people who have spoken on behalf of the church or even on behalf of God who have been a great example of an unfaithful witness.

A faithful witness and an unfaithful witness may seem to be subjective. And, at times it may be. However, the reality is there are witnesses that come from persons who represent the church that help provide hope and draw others to God, and there are witnesses that turn people away from the church and God.

Adam Hamilton wrote the book, *When Christians Get It Wrong*, in response to “some pretty strong negative perceptions of the Christian faith.” This book specifically came as a result of conversation that Hamilton had with one particular young man who had these negative perceptions of faith. In Hamilton’s book he references the work of David Kinnaman and Gabe Lyons from the Barna Group who wrote the book *unchristian: What a New Generation Really Thinks*

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About Christianity. Some of the telling statistics that Hamilton pulls from that book, especially as it relates to “the attitudes and behaviors that young adults [find] off-putting.” Specifically, “they found that 91 percent of young adults who are not involved in church described Christians as anti-homosexual, 87 percent of them described Christians as judgmental, and 85 percent of them described Christians as hypocritical.” Additionally, “75 percent felt that Christians were too political, and 70 percent thought Christians were insensitive.” Sadly, these statistics ring true. Unfortunately, some of the worst witnesses to the Gospel of Jesus Christ have been Christians who have been perceived as insensitive, judgmental, and mean-spirited.

Kinnaman and Lyons share some examples of comments that people who are outside of the church make as it pertains to Christians being too political. I would also suggest that these statements are more than about being too political and overlap into areas of being too judgmental and hypocritical.

- Christians don’t even follow what the Bible says; why do they try to tell everyone else how to live morally?
- They do not seem to prioritize the poor and needy in their political agenda, as Jesus commands.
- Christians do a lot of complaining about the society and how bad things are in politics, but they don’t do much more than complain. The point is that you have to offer more than an opinion.

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50 Adam Hamilton, *When Christians Get It Wrong* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2010), x.
51 Ibid.
52 Ibid, 4.
• Christians talk about being driven by family values when they vote, but a lot of their families are in bad shape too.

• They run the risk of turning people away from the cause they are trying to promote by losing sight of real people. Christians do not show grace toward people. They judge their actions without walking in their shoes.53

For me, what these statistics communicate is a lack of understanding from the church to the unchurched segment of society and misses the mark in communicating with and connecting with these persons. These statistics name a barrier that exists between the secular world and the Christian church.

So I would suggest than an unfaithful witness is one that creates division, derision, involves finger pointing, judgment, and condemnation. An unfaithful witness does not point to the love of God. When we are being an unfaithful witness we are not the salt of the earth and light of the world as Jesus calls his followers to be. An unfaithful witness puts individuals and the church in the role of judge when clearly Scripture indicates that God is the judge.

I do think it is valuable to consider what has been communicated in times of crisis that may have not been a good witness for the church.

My intention is not to single out any particular individuals or theological perspectives, but one cannot help but think of both Pat Robertson and Jerry Falwell when considering some notorious comments made in times of crisis. Both

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Robertson and Falwell have been members of the clergy and have had very public careers, whether that is in broadcasting, writing, or higher education.

**Haitian Earthquake**

An example of an unfaithful witness made from the church came after the devastating earthquake in Haiti in 2009, which claimed more than 200,000 lives and caused Pat Robertson to say on The 700 Club that the earthquake was retribution for the Haitians’ “pact to the devil.” Specifically, Robertson said, “...something happened a long time ago in Haiti, and people might not want to talk about it. They were under the heel of the French, you know, Napoleon the Third and whatever, and they got together and swore a pact to the devil. They said, ‘We will serve you if you'll get us free from the French.’ True story. And so the devil said, ‘OK, it's a deal.’”

**September 11, 2001**

CNN reported after the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, that Jerry Falwell was blaming the attacks on the secularization of the American society. Again, on the 700 Club, Falwell said, “I really believe that the pagans, and the abortionists, and the feminists, and the gays, and the lesbians who are actively trying to make that an alternative lifestyle, the ACLU, People For the American

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Way, all of them who have tried to secularize America, I point the finger in their face and say, ‘You helped this happen,’ God will not be mocked.”

Falwell had made this comment two days after the terrorist attack, and CNN reports that later this same day, Falwell, in a phone call to CNN, “stepped back a bit, saying that only the hijackers and terrorists were responsible for the attacks. But Falwell reiterated that forces trying to secularize the U.S. ‘created an environment which possibly has caused God to lift the veil of protection which has allowed no one to attack America on our soil since 1812.’”

Pat Robertson and Jerry Falwell are not the only persons to have ever made statements after a crisis that were an unfaithful witness for the church. I suspect there are times when each one of us have said something unhelpful and inappropriate, making the church, faith, or God look unappealing to the secular world.

**Hurricane Katrina**

An unnamed blog writer wrote on August 31, 2005 that after Hurricane Katrina hit land that soon enough there would be commentary as to why this

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happened from “the lunatic fringe.”58 This writer goes on to say that they received an email from a group that calls itself Columbia Christians for Life stating that the satellite image of Hurricane Katrina looked like a six-week-old fetus. The message continued by saying, "The image of the hurricane . . . with its eye already ashore at 12:32 p.m. Monday, August 29, looks like a fetus (unborn human baby) facing to the left (west) in the womb, in the early weeks of gestation (approx. 6 weeks). "Even the orange color of the image is reminiscent of a commonly used pro-life picture of early prenatal development. Louisiana has 10 child-murder-by-abortion centers," the groups says, and "five are in New Orleans."59

Why?

So often, when bad things happen, in the church we tend to try to explain them. Many times the question is “why?” and we cannot answer that. In 1983 Rabbi Harold Kushner wrote the book When Bad Things Happen to Good People. When bad things happen we often ask “why?” Yet, I think that the writings of people like Rabbi Kushner as well as our collective life experiences suggest that it may be more appropriate that our question be “what do good people do when bad things happen to them?”

Adam Hamilton recently wrote a book along these same lines. His book is Why? Making Sense of God’s Will. And in it Hamilton urges his readers to

59 Ibid
rethink commonly held presuppositions about God as it relates to suffering. And then he goes on to say, “One thought has often struck me when I meet people who reject God in the face of suffering. Rejecting God doesn’t change the situation that has caused our suffering; it only removes the greatest source of hope, help, comfort, and strength we have.”

In our recent history the Haitian earthquake, September 11, 2001, and Hurricane Katrina have been notable crises and some of the most memorable and notorious responses from the church have been unhelpful. Sadly, one of the consequences of this is that this can turn people away from the church. When we are admonished by Jesus to be his witnesses to the ends of the earth, we must then consider what kind of witness we are with our words and our actions.

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CHAPTER FIVE

A PROTOCOL FOR MAKING A FAITHFUL WITNESS

Prepare for the Worst, Hope for the Best

After I found myself in a position of not knowing what to do and having no training, I thought there really needed to be a protocol for pastors and churches to follow for those unforeseen situations in which we sometimes find ourselves. Ideally, in a perfect world, this is a protocol that we would never have to use. However, the reality is bad stuff happens and there are crises whether or not we are prepared for them. So the best we can do is to prepare for the worst and hope for the best.

Ideally, this protocol would be something that pastors and churches study before a crisis occurs so that some of the things to do before a crisis happens can be put into place. Then the protocol would need to be someplace that is easily accessible for the moment that it would be needed.

The following are the suggestions that I have regarding a protocol for the church to follow for those times when the church is in a position to maintain the integrity of its voice in the media spotlight during times of crisis. And even though this has been stated before, it bears repeating, this is for a time of crisis and not a time of scandal. The response of the church, the pastor, the leaders, and those involved will likely look very different during a scandal than it will during a crisis. This protocol is based on my own experience in dealing with the press after the terrorist bombing injured six members of my mission team in Kampala, Africa. I
also base this on conversations that I had after the bombing with Mike McCurry (who was President Clinton’s press secretary) and Jerry Wolgemuth (who is the Susquehanna Annual Conference of the United Methodist Church Director of Communications).
Protocol

Before a crisis

1. Get to know local media before a crisis occurs
2. Know who in the congregation works in the media or public relations, talk with them before a crisis happens, add their phone numbers to your cellphone
3. Learn if there is a policy in place for the church, denomination, annual conference, diocese, presbytery, judicatory, etc, etc. If so, know and follow that policy
4. Know some basic tips on how to do a TV Interview

During a crisis

1. Pray!
2. Follow the already existing policy. Make the appropriate contacts
3. Prepare facts and details
4. Think like a reporter
5. Know who you are representing
6. Have an intentional attitude
7. Be clear about who does the talking

After a crisis

1. Debrief
2. Answer questions that leadership have who were not in the loop
3. Document
4. Organize
Unpacking the Protocol

Before

Before a crisis even can happen pastors and church leaders should get to know local media and members of the press. The reason for this is to have an already established relationship with the press. When moving into a new community it would benefit the pastor to make contacts with the newspapers, radio stations, and even community leaders and introduce him or herself. This already established relationship will help create an environment of trust should a crisis arise.

Another crucial thing to do is to know who in the congregation works in the media or public relations and then to have a conversation with them to have them at the ready so that should a crisis arise, the pastor knows who to contact. Their phone numbers should be in the church leader's cell phone already so that if in the midst of a crisis a call needs to be made, those numbers are already handy.\footnote{Mike McCurry Interview}

It is also important to know what any existing policy may be for a church, denomination, geographical region, etc. For example, in my annual conference we have a staff member who serves on behalf of the annual conference as the director of communications. He was one of the first calls I made after I learned of the bombing. One of the distinct trainings in my memory is that we as pastors do not speak for the church at large unless we have been cleared by our director of communications to do so. This certainly adds a layer of protection for the church when we are thinking about making a positive witness. In my experience that
also gave me some confidence to know what were some appropriate or inappropriate things to say. If a policy already exists, it is more than prudent to be aware of that and to follow it, before finding oneself in a crisis.

Mike McCurry also suggests knowing some basic tips on how to do a TV interview. Usually in seminary the church pastor has not been trained to speak to the press or to give an interview, so a few tips and pointers are worth knowing. Mike McCurry suggests the 5 “C”s, which are Credibility, Candor, Clarity, Compassion, and Commitment.62

Credibility means that we must always know that the information we have is accurate. In the midst of a crisis the information can be changing much more quickly than we can monitor. So we must be careful in speaking with the press to say things like “what we know at this point.”63 If we as pastors and church leaders lack credibility in what we are saying publically and to the press, the voice of the church will lack integrity, and this will not be a witness.

Candor means that we are honest about what we do not know.64 Sometimes a reporter will ask a question during a live interview and we will not know an answer. If we try to speculate or if we make up an answer we are not being honest. Again, this threatens the integrity of the church’s voice and the opportunity for this media exposure to be a witness.

Clarity means that the pastor or church leader must first plan out what he or she wants to say. Mike McCurry suggests having a 3X5 card in your pocket with the one thing that you want to remember to say written on it. And that card

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62 Mike McCurry Interview
63 Ibid.
64 Ibid.
must remain on you during the interviews.\textsuperscript{65} It seems to me that if a pastor or church leader wants to emphasize a message, especially for the sake of a witness, then that message needs to be clear and consistent. In the time span of an interview there may only be enough time to make one strong point. This is the one point that Mike McCurry suggests be written on the 3X5 card.

Compassion for the reporters is the next “C”,\textsuperscript{66} which is somewhat self explanatory. The reporters are doing their job. Jerry Wolgemuth reflected on this with me and suggested that it is important to be pleasant and polite with the press. Also it is important to not be a know-it-all or arrogant. Jerry has also made it a point to tell the press “thank you for your good work.” He also suggests that when a pastor or church leader is speaking with the press that it is not OK to argue with the press. He suggests that unless it is a significant issue, it does not help to argue with the press, especially if you get misquoted. In Jerry’s experience a retraction is often not printed, and if it would be, it is buried in the paper.\textsuperscript{67} Again, this was something of concern for me when we were responding to the press on Media Mayhem Monday. I really wanted for us to have compassion for the reporters and the work that they were doing. I did not want for us to be pushy, arrogant, or difficult with the press. I felt that having that kind of behavior would be a bad witness.

And, the last “C” is Commitment. Mike McCurry says that this really means perseverance, but that does not begin with a “C”. Mike goes on to say that “the point is that it takes commitment to invest in communications, to elevate the

\textsuperscript{65} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{66} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{67} Jerry Wolgemuth Interview
communications function in the [organizational] chart, to make sure the communications folks have a “seat at the table” when big decisions are made, and that those who communicate need to commit to on-going training and perfecting their ability to communicate effectively on behalf of the organization.  

Once these preventative measures are in place, which will aid the pastor or church leader during the time of crisis, there are a number of things that it will be necessary to do during the crisis as well.

**During**

The very first thing, which may seem obvious, is to pray and then pray more. If the desire of the church and those persons who are speaking on behalf of the church is to be a witness, then that must be our first prayer. We also need to pray for God’s help and guidance we as navigate this crisis. We must pray for the crisis situation and all of the persons who are involved. Everything we do and say as it relates to this crisis must be bathed in prayer.

The next thing that the pastor or church leader needs to do is to follow any already existing policies. For example, in our annual conference of the UMC I knew that I needed to contact my district superintendent and our director of communications for the annual conference. These would be the two people who would help me navigate the next steps. And again, part of the policy for the Susquehanna Annual Conference of the UMC is that the director of communications does the speaking to the press for us. We do not do that, and we never say “no comment.”  

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68 Mike McCurry Interview
The next step for dealing with the media during this time of crisis is to prepare. At this point, the pastor or church leader can prepare a fact sheet, a 3X5 card with the information that you want for the media to report, and have information available as a resource. One of the things that we did not do in my experience of dealing with the press was to have a fact sheet prepared. In hindsight, this was one of the suggestions that our director of communications made. Had we had this kind of information the necessary details would have been in each of the reporter’s hands, thus freeing them to ask different questions and freeing us from answering these same questions. So the next part of the protocol is to have a fact sheet prepared for the media personnel.

After preparing the fact sheet, the pastor or church leader really must decide what it is that he or she wants to say. What is the one message that the pastor is going to convey to the press? Again Mike McCurry has suggested that it is prudent to write this statement on a 3X5 card so that the pastor or church leader can have that in his or her pocket and always be ready, clear, and consistent with the message or the quote that you want the media to repeat.

From there, the next piece of preparation is having information available as a resource. One way to do this would be online, whether that is through a blog, a website, or even a Facebook page. For us, this came in very handy. The mission trip already had an existing website, which the team had set up to use to communicate with the folks at home while they were away. This was also a place to give updates on the activities and the ministry that was taking place on this

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69 Jerry Wolgemuth Interview
70 Mike McCurry Interview
trip. Quickly, this also became the place where we could share updates of information that we knew as it pertained to the bombing and the status of our mission team members. This also was a resource that was widely used by the press as they continued to look for updates to tell the story.

After preparing, the next step in this protocol is to think like a reporter. Anticipate with whom they will want to speak. Especially in a time of crisis, this is an opportunity for the church to give witness. So the question then becomes, who is able to give voice to this witness? And the other reality with this is that nothing is ever off the record. If you have something that you do not want to get into the newspapers or be seen and heard on the evening news, it is best to simply not say it.

Lanny Davis talks about his experience in the White House and how he had to learn this the hard way in his book, Truth To Tell: Tell It Early, Tell It All, Tell It Yourself: Notes from My White House Education, which he wrote in reflection of his service as Special Counsel to President Clinton. In this book, Davis talks about information with reporters being “off the record,” “on background,” and “deep background.” While nothing is ever really off the record, one can make a statement to the press and ask that it be off the record. Davis, based on his White House experiences, said that:

‘on background’ . . . meant that the source would be identified not by a name but by some generic job description or identifier, such as ‘White House official,’ an ‘administrative official,’ a ‘White House lawyer.’ And ‘deep background ‘— a term made famous by Bob Woodward’s agreement with “Deep Throat” during his reporting on Watergate — means that the information or facts may be used, but the source cannot be
identified, even generically, or quoted directly.\textsuperscript{71}

Something important to keep in mind, Davis says, is that in his experience, some reporters had different understandings of what each of these meant.\textsuperscript{72} I would add that this is a good word of caution for any setting.

One thing to remember though is that even when individuals are speaking, and while they are speaking for themselves, they are also representing the church. So the next step in this protocol is to know who you are representing. This is an opportunity to give voice and make a witness for the church. This is not an opportunity for a church leader or pastor to push a personal agenda or to misrepresent the position of the church.

The next step in the protocol pertains to the attitude of the pastor or church leader and anyone else who may be on site during the interviews. If this is going to be a witness for the church, then the message on camera must be consistent with the behavior of the speakers. It is crucial that the pastor or church leader be pleasant and polite. It is not helpful to be arrogant or to argue with the press. This is an opportunity to give support to the public witness that we are trying to be through the ways in which we behave.

After the dust settled on our Media Mayhem Monday I received an email from a lay person in the annual conference who had this to say:

Jerry and Kathy-
I received a phone call tonight that nearly brought tears. [A] reporter for [a] radio [station] in Philadelphia . . . called me to tell me about the outstanding job done today by you both at


\textsuperscript{72} ibid
Christ Community Church in Shamokin Dam. He said he was not only speaking for himself, but also reflecting the views of other journalists who were at the church reporting on the tragedy that occurred in Uganda.

I know how difficult it was for you both, Jerry and Kathy, to deal with the media horde, and to help the families and friends of those injured in Uganda to deal with the news media . . . [My friend] said everyone was gracious, very professional, and accommodating to the reporters. He said you both were very good spokespersons for the church. From him, that's high praise, indeed.

I read a number of stories today as I tried to follow the progress of the story. The courage and grace of the victims, and the grace of those who are here in the U.S. showed in every story. Instead of condemning, which would have been easy to do, folks showed compassion and love in their comments. Folks could have chosen not to speak, and they would not have been criticized, but they chose to speak, to share through their hurting, God's enduring love.

I praise God for you both in this difficult time, and pray for physical and spiritual healing for all those who have been affected by these terrible attacks.73

This email, I think, is a powerful testimony to how important this particular step of the process is. The attitude of the pastor or church leader can and will have an effect on the reporters as they do their job.

The last step of the protocol during the crisis is to be clear about who does the talking. This needs to be clear to the people at the church as well as the reporters. While the press can choose to speak with anyone and anyone can choose to speak or not to speak with the press, it is important that it is clear who the designated spokespersons are for the church. In an email to me, Jerry Wolgemuth said:

It is important to be clear about who does the talking with the press in a crisis situation for two reasons. 1) It is important that the message to the press, or other inquiring

73 From an email received from a lay member of the Annual Conference
persons, has consistency. Conflicting statements are a red flag to good press people, because it not only reveals error but can indicate that there is hidden information. 2) An annual conference has a person on staff who has been trained to handle information to the public. This relieves church staff from much of the stress of dispensing information in a crisis situation and assures a certain level of integrity with the press.74

After

After the crisis, there are a few things that should also be done as a part of the protocol for the church when speaking with the press. First, it is important for those involved to debrief and discuss what was learned. The reality is that this is an important step to do after any kind of event, but especially after a crisis. And pastors and church leaders really need to be able to name the things that were learned, what worked, what did not work, and then adjust accordingly for the future.

Also, the leadership that may not have been in the loop during the crisis will need to be caught up. They may have questions. They may need pertinent information. They may also have some thoughts regarding the event and how it was handled.

After these opportunities for conversation have happened, it is important to document and make a written report of the event and of any necessary details. Some of these details might include a synopsis of the situation, a brief narrative of events, information that was shared, correspondence that was received, and anything that may be important regarding this crisis and the media response.

74 Jerry Wolgemuth email
The last thing that the pastor or church leader needs to do after a crisis is to organize the information, which would include contacts, business cards, notes, etc. Part of the organization of this information will include making the decision to keep and file this information or to throw it away.

Again, the intent of this protocol is to have at the ready a plan for pastors and church leaders. For me, it was necessary to have some kind of help or guidance, because I felt overwhelmed and unprepared for the response of the media. I did not have time to think of a plan of action. It was too late to know media contacts and public relations persons from the congregation. But if we can begin to train pastors and church leaders to be prepared for these types of unexpected crises, then should something happen, we are in a more intentional position to truly create a witness out of a challenging situation.
CHAPTER SIX

EVALUATION: CAN WE BE A FAITHFUL WITNESS?

A Brief Debriefing

The truth is I think that I survived Media Mayhem Monday through God’s grace and well placed professionals and volunteers. I do not know what I would have done had I not had Jerry Wolgemuth by my side as the reporters filled the church parking lot and building. Because of Jerry’s experience, and because he was not stirred up by the whirlwind and instead was able to approach this whole situation as an opportunity to promote ministry and be a witness to the work of God in this world, so much of this experience went smoothly. Also, because we had staff members in the church who were able and willing to jump into action and answer the phone, take messages, comfort the family members and church members who stopped by the church, this situation went as smoothly as it did.

After the dust more than settled on this experience I spent some time with Jerry Wolgemuth discussing and debriefing our experience together. He, too, said that we had good office help on that day and had we not had it we would have been sunk. Jerry also shared with me that this type of craziness can cause someone to become unglued. Yet our folks maintained their focus as much as possible considering the stressful circumstances.

For me, I started the day so overwhelmed. I was still overwhelmed by the reality of our situation. One of the worst imaginable things had happened. Our mission team members were victims in a terrorist bombing and I did not know too
many details. And I was totally unprepared for the media’s response and the
story that this became. I did not begin Media Mayhem Monday with the idea that
this was an opportunity to be a witness. In fact, it was not until later as the day
wore on that I realized that was the moment we were in.

It was later that Jerry said to me that this was media time without cost. I
would like to clarify that this was media time without financial cost to the church.
Certainly, there were a lot of other costs for this media coverage. We had the
stress and anxiety of not knowing what was happening with our mission team
members who were receiving medical care in Africa. We had the concern and
worry of the family members who were here, thousands of miles away from their
beloveds. We had the reality of the lost lives of Pastor Peter, Becky, and Francis.
There certainly was plenty of cost. Jerry told me that this was a God moment, if
we would let it be that. One of the risks we have is getting in the way of what God
can do in a moment like this. This was not about us. This was about who God is
and what God can do even in the midst of this terrible act of violence.

Were We a Witness?

So at the end of the day, the question becomes, were we able to maintain
the integrity of the church’s voice in the media spotlight during this time of crisis?
Despite our lack of preparation, despite not having a clear plan, despite feeling
like we were in a whirlwind, I do think that we were able to maintain the integrity
of the church’s voice and be a witness in this time of crisis.
I suspect that one of the ways that I know this is true is through the
response we had via comments on articles, the emails and calls we received,
and at least one newspaper article dedicated to disagreeing with my theology.

**The Good**

As soon as the news of the terrorist bombing and our mission team’s
presence and survival of the bombing made the local, national, and international
news I started to receive calls and emails from persons who wanted to offer their
words of support, prayers, and encouragement. Some of what I heard is this:

- A woman from North Carolina called and left a
  message saying that my Christian walk touched her
  heart.
- Another woman from North Carolina emailed saying,
  “I saw your interview this morning on CNN. Your strong
  faith was evident. I was impressed that as a young
  woman your commitment to Christ and your church is
  very evident. I live in Fayetteville, North Carolina, and
  attend a non-denomination church. Your congregation
  (especially the youth) is blessed to have you as a leader.
  Your servant-heart to Christ impressed me. I am not one
to write to individuals who appear in the news; I just don’t
have the time, but, [I] had to make time to say thank you.
God bless you.”
- A graduate of the local Susquehanna University and
  pastor who lives in New England wrote, “I want to thank
  you for your church ‘going to the ends of the earth’ to
  spread the gospel as well as do good work. God will
  continue to use what happened for his glory.”
- From a prisoner I received a letter saying, “I send my
  most deepest thoughts and prayers to those hurt in
  Uganda. Please don’t allow the acts of the devil stop
  you at Christ Community from doing the Lord’s work.
  Africa and the world needs Jesus Christ! I love what
  you’re doing. God bless you all.”
- From a pastor in Arkansas I received an email saying,
  “God is with you! I heard the recent news about your
  Uganda mission team. Our church recently sent a team
to Uganda, returning only a few weeks ago .... Thank
you for sending your team to Uganda. Even with the challenges and dangers, God used and is using them for Christ's glory — not only in Uganda, but now throughout the world. Please rest assured, your church, the mission team members, and you are in our prayers. God bless you!"

- From a woman who shared her name but no other information, I received this email, “I read the America Online article about the tragedy that has befallen your mission team and wanted to let you know that I am praying for them as well. We are one body, many members... when one part suffers, the rest mourns. It is my prayer not only that those injured will be healed and protected but that their families will know divine peace and comfort. I rest in the beautiful truth of sovereignty that promises us that even horrific, brutal acts of evil will be undone and used for good. In moments such as these, when the rawness of the wound may speak louder to our souls than the promise of future good, I simply bow my head and trust that the Shepherd will not leave his flock even in the valley of the shadow. May His strong right hand uphold you on your right and on your left. May He encompass you with His grace. God bless you all.”

- And from a man in Texas I received this email, “My heart hurts and goes out to your congregation during this trying time. I want you to know I am praying for your congregation and the missionaries right now. May God provide healing to not only the missionaries and the congregation. I don’t know why things happen, but I do know that God’s love is going to shine through this darkness. When I am faced with a crisis I always remember Micah 7:8 ‘Do not gloat over me, my enemies! For though I fall, I will rise again. Though I sit in darkness, the Lord will be my light.’ May God bless all of you and shine his light during this dark time. May God bring a speedy recovery to all of the men and women injured during this blast and may God bring healing to our brothers and sisters in Uganda that have lost loved ones.”

**The Ugly**

And the reality, not everyone will hear a witness as the church speaks out during a time of crisis. I did receive only one email that was full of negative
feedback. It was written in all capital letters and came unsigned; however, it did have an email address attached to it. It said:

- “How stupid and irresponsible are you for letting a 16 year old go do your stupid mission??? Why would you let her go to such a horrible country where there are terrorists and rapists?? Are you totally stupid and naïve?? I hope her injuries are on your conscious the rest of your life. Keep our kids home in the US. Have you tried helping people here you dumb asses? Fix people here 1st!!! Keep it in the United States. Stupid people do stupid things and now look. How out of touch are you??? P.S. Don't feed me the God crap. God has better sense. There are rapists, you are lucky she was not raped or kidnapped.”

The Bad

This was not the only negative response to our witness. There was a newspaper article written by an atheist who disputed what I had to say, and CNN posted an interview that they did with me on their beliefblog, which stirred up many folks to make comments that did not support my theological position. When CNN asked me “what impact do you think the bombing and the injured missionaries will have on broader Christian missionaries?” I said, “It creates more of an urgency to make sure we are being faithful to how God is calling us to address the evil that exists in this world, and to make sure that we are reminding ourselves that God is in the midst of this and that God is bigger than any evil.”

The author, Al Stefanelli, goes on to say that my point of view “[is] one that is
celebrated by many Christians. However, there remains the contradictory
Scripture in the Christian Bible . . .” Stefanelli continues in this article saying:

The problem of biblical contradictions, as well as errors, atrocities, and absurdities has been very well documented and many atheists regularly discuss the issue of how Christians can look upon the horrors that are perpetuated in the name of one god or another and understand how anyone can justify it as the will of God or some sort of test of faith in God.

The fact remains that acts of terrorism in the name of religion have caused horrific loss of human life and an unfathomable cost in terms of money, all over conflicting ideologies and Muslims are not the only ones who are guilty of religious terrorism.

Yet, pastors and religious leaders through the world such as the Rev. Kind continue to preach to their congregations that more infusion of religion is necessary to fight a war that they are partly responsible for by destroying indigenous cultures.

I have to confess, I have mixed feelings about being quoted and referenced in this article. On one hand, I think I must have done my job in proclaiming a witness to the Gospel of Jesus Christ if I have the atheists upset. On the other hand, these types of comments about faith, God, and the work of mission teams are so terribly misunderstood. Therefore, I wonder if we did not have a clear enough message for this particular atheist to hear.

On this same CNN blog as of August 31, 2010, there were fifty-five pages with comments from various readers. Some of the comments respond directly to what I had to say regarding God being bigger than evil. Some responded to my answer to the question, “Do you worry that this will dissuade would-be missionaries from going to Uganda or elsewhere?” To which I replied, “We know

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76 Ibid.
that this is something that can happen at home as well. That's the reality of the world in which we live. We are not going to be motivated by fear. We're motivated by the love of God for us.”

Some of the comments that were left said:

- How can something that does not exist be bigger than evil? Wouldn’t it be better that we as humans are better than this? STOP THE HATE and quit using “god” as the source of the hate.
- I love how religious people enjoy calling others fools when at the same time preaching about beliefs with little to no evidence. It’s a profound irony that they resort to a one-liner in their book that just blankets all opposition to its doctrine as idiotic. Religion, at it’s core, serves as an impediment to discovery and growth. It literally stops the conversation. The sad part is that so many people are OK with this, since the creator of the universe promises you eternal paradise for not questioning his holy book.
- More to the point, if he’s so powerful and omnipresent, why is he such a sadist as to allow these atrocities? He’s supposed to be omniscient, right, so he knew it was going to happen and did nothing.
- God is not, nor ever will be, the source of hate. God loves all his children. That some people use God as an excuse isn’t exactly God’s fault, is it? Men kill over a woman. Is it the woman’s fault? Men kill over a football game ... is it the football game’s fault? Human beings are selfish and flawed. God offers a way past that, a way to be forgiven for our many failings. God does not make you a perfect person, just a chance to be forgiven and, through Him, a little better. Any person who espouses hate and intolerance is NOT a Christian no matter what they claim.
- I actually think most of you are missing the gist of the article, which is people are trying to help other people, a bomb exploded, several were hurt, but they are going to keep trying to help.
• They were not trying to help — they were trying to infect others with their beliefs, like all missionaries. That’s why they go there, that’s why they hold their meetings — to convert others [to] their religion. They are busybodies with an agenda.
• The Rev. Kathleen Kind — not the sharpest tool in shed, is she?
• She said, “We’re motivated by the love God has for us.” How do you fault a person motivated by love?
• She’s just another vapid huckster in on the shill.
• What’s more important than love ...? I’ll tell you: Intelligence. Something religious people have no use for, or their entire world view would collapse and they’d lose their condo in FairyLand.
• It’s funny how all these people read and comment on the Belief Blogs when they don’t even believe in a God. Why do you bother reading these stories? Thank you, Lord, for these people. You love them all unconditionally even if they chose to deny your existence. Thank you for that.
• If there is a god, I sure feel sorry for him or her... she/he gets blamed for everything. Guess what happened in Uganda makes “God” a serial killer.
• Sounds to me as if it’s God punishing these so called missionaries for the condoning of violence and murders of gay people in Uganda. If they can call earthquakes, hurricanes, oil spills, etc. ... the punishment of God on America, the same can be said for them.
• Once again, a pastor shows how little he’s read of the actual holy books he [sic] pretends to be an authority on; either that or he is blatantly lying about them. These actions are explicit directives from God. It’s all there to be observed to anyone willing to read the Koran. Time to be honest about the contents of these books. The time for respecting what people believe the creator of the universe wants them to do is long since passed ... how many bomb blasts do we need to see?
• Good to see pastors and religious folk pandering for the cameras in Uganda while the rest of the country falls apart. At least the church will get some money ...
that's all that really matters to "religious folks." What a sham. And “His Child” ... it's precisely the fact that you talk like you are mentally disturbed that so many people are leery and disdainful of religion.

And this is just a sampling of some of the comments from those fifty-five pages of comments.

So the question becomes, what do all of these comments mean? For some, there was a clear witness to our faith as we shared our story. And for so many more, there is a need for the church to give witness; however, the unbelieving audience is having a hard time believing.

**Missing Minnesota Couple: a People of Prayer**

On January 13, 2012, the Costa Concordia cruise ship veered off its navigational path and collided with a reef, which put a gash in the boat's hull, thus causing the boat to capsize. This tragedy took the lives of some of its passengers and there are still people who are missing today. On the list of the missing are Jerry and Barbara Heil who are faithful members of St. Pius X Roman Catholic Church in White Bear Lake, Minnesota. Upon learning of this tragedy and the missing Heils, the media contacted their church looking for statements.

I recently spoke with Lawrence Erickson, the parish business administrator, to discuss his experience in working with the press during this time of crisis. I was especially interested in talking with him because I did read lovely stories about Jerry and Barbara Heil who were faithful church members, people
of prayer, and good friends to the church and the community. And these details all came from members of the church and staff members of the church.

Erickson shared with me that their parish was in a season of transition when this crisis happened. Their former priest has been relocated and their newly assigned priest was on a trip out of the country. That meant that Erickson, the parish business administrator, would be a chief point of contact with the media, as one of his duties is to care for official communication for the parish. Part of the staff policy for this church is that Erickson does the speaking for the parish. After the news broke of this crisis, Erickson spent virtually the entire day with the media.

Erickson did share with me that the other people from the church who spoke were very connected with him and knew his intent. He was clear that he could not force people to not speak with the press, and he was not concerned about maintaining control of the story. But he was not willing to speak with the press about anything related directly to the incident, and he would not speak for the family of the Heils. Rather, he and others from the church would speak about their experience with Jerry and Barbara Heil, what they have known of them in their many years of experience together, and about them as individuals.

Based on Erickson’s own life experience in business and in the military, he knew what could happen with the media as a result of this accident. His feeling is that it is not fruitful to fight the media. Instead, they should be invited in. So he made it a priority to call back almost every media outlet that called him. Again, the only statements that he would give were from his personal experience with
the Heils. These people along with others were involved in a terrible, terrible accident. Erickson said it was not his job to judge the situation, the captain, the cruise line, the rescue effort, or anything else like that. Instead, this was an opportunity to tell the world how great Jerry and Barbara Heil are and what they did for the church.

I asked Lawrence Erickson if he had any concerns in speaking with the press or if he established any boundaries. He told me that the reporters were not permitted to be in the nave for Mass, for the Rosary, or in the Adoration Chapel. However, the reporters were permitted into the prayer service that they held, which drew 500 people in attendance, but the church allowed only two cameras: one still and one filming.

At the archdiocese level, they do have a media specialist. This person had been on the job for two weeks when this story broke. So Erickson would run information by him, and he was on site for the prayer service. Otherwise, the reporters interacted with the church staff and members.

I asked Erickson if he had any concerns about any of the other staff members or members of the church saying something that would potentially be unhelpful. He said that the people at the church are a great bunch of people and that everybody understood. They were able to set aside some of their other tasks and responsibilities and all work together for the sake of this story and sharing about the Heils. Erickson said he was not concerned about others speaking about judgment, because they were on the same page and knew they needed to emphasize that they have a job to do, and that is to pray.
Wanting to learn from his experiences as well as what he may have perceived as any mistakes made while dealing with the press, I did ask Erickson if he would have done anything differently. He said that he would not.

Additionally, I asked if he had any tips for a church in a similar situation dealing with the press after a crisis, and he said that it is important to pray, to have a consistent message, and to use wider resources. He also spoke of some of the work that he has been doing at this particular parish, which is to have a team leadership approach. So the work that the staff had already been doing along these lines equipped them to respond together to the needs of the press. He also told me that if they operated under a different system they would have then needed guidelines.

From the wider community the members and staff of St. Pius X have also been receiving support. They have heard of others holding prayer services. And other people in the community have offered support, prayer, and encouragement to them as well.

As we finished our conversation, Erickson shared with me what I think is the most important suggestion when it comes to having a plan or a protocol for the church to maintain the integrity of its voice in the media spotlight during times of crisis. He said that overall, as a congregation or church community, what is the message that your church gives out? And he said that if everyone knows the purpose of the church when an incident comes up, it is the same message and everyone knows it. For example, foundational for St. Pius X Church is to restore all things in Christ in the church, whole community, and the common good. This
was the same message that the staff and members of the church were sharing through the media during this crisis.

**Surviving the Press in Virginia**

I spoke with a United Methodist pastor serving a church in Virginia, who wished to remain anonymous, about his experience with the press after a shooting that occurred late on a Saturday night in his community. By morning a 16-year-old was dead and an 18-year-old victim (who was a member of the church) was in surgery. The families asked the pastor to hold a prayer vigil the next night at the church. Immediately rumors started to spread, and there were news reports “on the internet, radio, and local stations.”

These rumors alleged drugs, drinking, a teen party, and a fight over a girl. The pastor reflected that “the lack of accuracy and diligence becomes an unfortunate part of this ordeal.”

The initial impression of the press by the pastor was that it appeared as though their facts were not checked and the initial reports were not true. In fact, the pastor went on to say:

My sadness after that first 24 hours was that the press almost appeared to know they were airing false information so that someone who did know better would be compelled to respond with a more accurate report. But who would want the onslaught of media showing up at your front door, persistently knocking and calling? For me, while at home with my family after the hospital visit, I began to get calls. We have an unlisted number, but that was no deterrent.

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77 Interview with The Pastor, March 6 and 7, 2012.
78 Ibid.
79 Ibid.
The pastor ended this day with a call to his district superintendent to be sure that he knew what was happening as well as complete a few interviews. Regarding the pastor’s experience with the press, he reflected:

In order to meet their 11 p.m. deadline for the nightly news, they appeared frantic in their persistence to get the story out with anyone or anything that could be quoted to this story. As such, I was misquoted in their online print reports in three separate situations, including the divulging of confidential information I had not been the source of... but they were hyper-focused on the scoop, clearly not accuracy. Here I am having to apologize to a guy who’s just been shot over what was said in the media in a time where he’s fighting for his life.80

The pastor began Monday by offering support and pastoral care to the 18-year-old survivor and his family. The press was set up and ready to do their job first thing on Monday, too. The pastor said:

In our parking lot at 8 a.m. were all the news outlets — local paper, radio, and TV affiliates. All were set up with their gigantic antennas and booms ready for any “action” or newsworthy story that might develop. While comforting one family in our worship center, I turned around, only to realize we were being video-taped. Then, as I was discussing boundaries with the cameraman, the mourners were then assailed as they left the church building. The press was intense as they immediately jockeyed for an interview on their way to the parking lot. It felt very intimidating. No seminary class trains you for media management.81

In order to handle the press, the pastoral care needs, and the needs for that night’s Prayer Vigil the pastor needed to have a conversation with his church staff in order to have a plan for getting through this already long day. He said that:

Despite having called everyone into the office to help for the day, we were just too busy to keep up. We had no PR point person, no extra hands on deck to answer phones or run copies of bulletins.

80 Ibid.
81 Ibid.
or establish pages on our website for grief posts or announcements of how the night was going to proceed.\textsuperscript{82}

The pastor had tried to negotiate with the press regarding boundaries for the Prayer Vigil. While the press had requested to have cameras in the service not all of the involved parties initially were agreeable. The church had arranged for the press personnel to wait in the kitchen. And the pastor had established three rules: “no presentation of the survivor, no close-up shots of the families or persons grieving/ showing support, and that they were to stay in the back [in the] allotted space.”\textsuperscript{83} The pastor went on to say that “within 10 minutes, all three rules had been violated.”\textsuperscript{84} Friends, family members, and church members, were irritated by the behavior of the press and found themselves serving as “Prayer Vigil bouncers.”

The pastor went on to say about the role of the press:

The press taped the entire service. Their reports afterward were mostly respectful, with one exception, where he quoted me as having said, “Though we were not allowed to tape the survivor per the instructions from the pastor, ______ ______ (\textsuperscript{*he gave his name*}) spoke this evening to a packed house full of friends and supporters.” His name had not been shared even by the Sherriff — it did not need to be shared, but if the race to have a “1st” was his goal, he was the “1st” to share the survivor’s identity.

The role of the press made this event a new brand of complex for me. On one of the television network’s Facebook pages, they asked the question immediately after the Prayer Vigil ended: “Since this shooting took place during a drug deal gone bad, shouldn’t the survivor face charges? What do you think?” Many quotes from the Prayer Vigil were then logged back at the station; they took down their

\textsuperscript{82} Ibid.  
\textsuperscript{83} Ibid.  
\textsuperscript{84} Ibid.
post after an hour of rebuttal from the community.\textsuperscript{85}

The pastor reflected on some of the things that he learned after this crisis in his church and the experience he had with the press. He said that he “learned that the press can be your enemy or your best friend, and we had not utilized them as best friends.”\textsuperscript{86} The pastor did try to have a consistent message in the interviews by that “we cannot allow these negative situations to have the last word.”\textsuperscript{87} He also said of the church that their best moments were when they pulled together and he had to learn to delegate “on the fly” and to trust that people would care for many extra details during this crisis.\textsuperscript{88}

I asked the pastor to evaluate my protocol based on his experience with the press after a time of crisis. He shared with me that he wished that he “had done all of them in the order [I] have them listed.”\textsuperscript{89} He went on to say, “How foolish did I feel, for instance, when a week after all of the media mania, a man in our church came up to me and commented on his field of employment: Public Relations!”\textsuperscript{90} The pastor also said to me of his experience, “We are living proof that a policy is indeed best developed prior to — not during — a crisis!”\textsuperscript{91}

I also asked Jerry Wolgemuth, the Susquehanna Annual Conference Director of Communications, to evaluate our shared media experience after the terrorist bombing in Uganda. Jerry told me that we should have had a fact sheet to give to each of the media personnel. He also said that he underestimated the

\textsuperscript{85} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{86} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{87} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{88} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{89} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{90} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{91} Ibid.
story that this would be and suggested that he should have anticipated better what the story could turn out to be. It would have been helpful had he prepared for the worst. And as Jerry and I talked, in hindsight I really wished that we had kept the sound on during the prayer service. Words of hope and healing were shared by Bishop Jane Allen Middleton and Rev. Dr. Thomas Salsgiver, my district superintendent, during the prayer service that could have been quoted and repeated through the press. Perhaps even hearing the Scriptures read, the hymns of faith sung, and the words of hope could have had an impact on the media personnel who could have been listening.

**Sharing the Protocol**

If this protocol will help the church maintain the integrity of its voice while in the media spotlight during times of crisis, it will need to be introduced to pastors before a crisis happens. A couple of suggestions were made by the district superintendents of the Susquehanna Annual Conference, including offering a training in the annual conference to help educate around this issue, and offering the protocol as a quick reference on the annual conference website. The protocol could also be shared through other resources that focus on the educational and training of pastors and local churches. Since this is something that is not typically taught in seminary, it is crucial that training happen for pastors before a crisis can happen.
Can the Church Give a Faithful Witness?

So the question then is, can the church give a faithful witness during times of crisis? Erickson and The United Methodist pastor did not have policies in place when the press arrived at their churches. I, too, did not have a plan or a protocol. Erickson shared that his experience with the press was positive. My experience was mostly positive. The United Methodist pastor hit some speed bumps as he navigated through his time with the press. Yet in each scenario, some kind of positive witness of who God is and what God is doing was proclaimed. It seems to me that some of that was due to God’s grace being bigger than our human action in these events and some of it was mere luck.

However, I would argue that if we each had a protocol in place prior to our crises, each of us would have had an easier time navigating the onslaught of the press. We also would have been more clear and direct in getting out the message that we wanted to have heard.

There is a temptation, as has been modeled by others, to offer an unfaithful witness, yet, with the proper preparation and protocol in place, the church can proclaim a faithful witness, always ready to make our defense to anyone who demands from us an accounting for the hope that is in us.92

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92 From 1 Peter 3:15
APPENDIX ONE

A Prayer Service of Comfort and Hope

12 July 2010

Gathering Words

Hymn   O God Our Help in Ages Past #117 vs. 1-3

Scripture Lessons

   Isaiah 43: 1-4a, 5a
   Psalm 139:1-18
   Romans 8 selected verses
   John 14:1, 18, 27

Hymn   Great Is Thy Faithfulness #140 vs. 1& 3

Time of Prayer

   During this time, members of the mission team, as well as our brothers
   and sisters in Uganda, will be named. People are welcome at any time during the
   prayers to come to the altar. There will be a time of individual prayer. The
   response after the prayers will be:

           Leader: Relieve the suffering of name

          All: Grant him/ her peace of mind and a renewed faith in your
               protection and care.

Hymn   My Hope Is Built #368 vs. 1-3

Words from Bishop Jane Allen Middleton

Prayer

Benediction

Hymn   It Is Well With My Soul #377 vs. 1,2,4
APPENDIX TWO

God Will

Sermon for the Sunday after the terrorist bombing.

I think we need to talk about this past week. And it is hard to know where to begin. There are the unanswerable questions of why did this happen? And the questions that we are tempted to ask that begin with ‘what if?’. There is also the role of our faith and God in the midst of this. And there is the future — where do we go from here? What is our response? What is the response of faithful Christians?

Let’s start with the questions.
Certainly I have them. And I am sure that you have them too.
Why did this happen?
Why were some lives spared and others not?
What if someone else had been there?
What if the schedule of the day had been different?
What if some of the team members had not traded seats around the table with some of their African friends?
The truth is —
I do not know the answer to these questions. And I don’t know that there is any answer that anyone could give that would make us feel better or that would satisfy our questions.

Forever the church has struggled with this: Why do bad things happen to good people? Certainly our mission team was in Uganda to do good work; to do God’s work. And they went, because they felt called by God out of their comfort zones to serve in this way. Pastor Peter, Francis, and Becky, they were also doing God’s work, and they were innocent.

Yet this terrible thing, this bombing happened. People were hurt and lives were lost. Why? One of our realities is that evil exists in our world, and because of that, sometimes bad things do happen to good people.

But what we need to remember is that even in the bad, even in the worst situations, even in the midst of acts of evil, God is present and God is at work.

I believe that God grieves with us. That God’s heart is broken when this type of thing happens.

We may never have the answers we long to hear for our many unanswerable questions.

And the only way then that we can face a tragic situation like this is to totally rely on God to fully put our faith and trust in God. Truthfully, without God, I don’t know
how we could possibly face this or any of the other difficult things that come our way.

For example, when I am at funerals, there is a huge difference in the response of persons who have a relationship with God and those who do not. At funerals, often times with people who have a relationship with God the folks grieve, cry, ache, hurt, and find hope in resurrection. They find comfort in God and the promise of eternal life. And those promises are real and really mean something to them.

People who do not have a relationship with God also tend to cry, grieve, ache, hurt, but often don’t know the promise of resurrection and eternal life. Those are the people who often do not know or believe in the promise of resurrection and eternal life. Too often these are folks who leave the funeral or the cemetery with no hope.

I never want our faith in God to sound like mere words. Our faith in God is a lifestyle. This is how we live. And faith then helps us to face those difficult days and situations like we’ve had this week.

I am reminded of a quote from Martin Luther King Jr. who said, “The ultimate measure of a [person] is not where [he or she] stands in moments of comfort and convenience, but where [he or she] stands at times of challenge and controversy.”

And now, brothers and sisters, the world is watching in the midst of this challenge and controversy to see where we stand.

In the Gospel Luke 6:46-49 Jesus talks about a person who built his house on a solid foundation, on a rock. And when the storms came, the storms did not shake his house. And the person who built on ground without a foundation, when the storms came, the house fell and the ruin was great.

Our solid foundation is Christ. We sing in the hymn My Hope Is Built, “When all around my soul gives way, Jesus then is all my hope and stay. On Christ the solid rock I stand, all other ground is sinking sand, all other ground is sinking sand.”

Christ has got to be our solid rock, the foundation upon which we build our lives, because at some point in our lives, we each face storms.

There’s a story told, for which I don’t know the source, which goes like this: There was a ship that wrecked in a furious storm, and the only survivor was a little boy who was swept by a wave onto a rock. He sat there all night battling the waves until the next

93 Luke 6:46-49
morning when he was spotted and rescued.

Someone later asked him, “Did you tremble when you were on the rock during the night?” And the little boy said, “Yes, I trembled all night long. But the rock didn’t.”

We may tremble, but the rock, our Rock Jesus Christ does not.

So where do we go from here?
In the book of Jeremiah in the Old Testament the Israelites have been scattered into exile. And the message that God has for the Israelites is to: build houses and live in them, plant gardens and eat what they produce, take wives, have sons and daughters, take wives for your sons and give your daughters in marriage. Multiply there. Seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile and pray to the Lord on its behalf.

And then a few verses later, the text continues with, “For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope. Then when you call upon me and come and pray to me, I will hear you.”

So where, then, do we go from here?
The challenge in Jeremiah is to find peace where we are in the midst of our current reality. To pray, and when we pray, Jeremiah reminds us that God hears us.

And there is a promise for a future with hope!

Brothers and sisters right now there is a lot we do not know. There is still a lot of uncertainty. But we do know that God is with us and God will provide a future with hope.

God will provide the strength we need for each day.
God will be the healer of those who are injured.
God will comfort us as we grieve.
God will sustain us.
God will raise up leaders at the Bwaise Pentecostal Church to continue this ministry.
God will provide.
God will give us the courage we need.
God will remain a solid and secure foundation when we face the storms of life.
God will always be bigger than evil.
God will continue to give us the love we need to show and not hate to those who hate us.
God will give us the faith we need for each day.

94 Jeremiah 29:4-14
And God will provide a future with hope.

Amen.

Following the sermon there will be a time for anointing with oil. Throughout the church’s history the oil has been a reminder of God’s healing presence. God heals in many different ways, physically, emotionally, relationally, spiritually. Sometimes we are anointed for ourselves or on behalf of someone else. Today, I'd like to invite you to the altar rail for a time of prayer and anointing as we continue to trust that God will heal us and give us the strength we need for the coming days.
Bibliography:


