Columns
Ministry



A Kentucky National Guard flight crew from 2/147th Bravo Co. flies over a flooded area in response to a declared state of emergency in eastern Kentucky July 29, 2022. (CNS/Reuters/Sgt. Jesse Elbouab, U.S. Army National Guard)



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September 6, 2022

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On April 2, 1977, a so-called 500-year flood raced through the Tug Valley in Mingo County, West Virginia. Five months after the event, when I went there in September as part of an ecumenical team of “disaster counselors,” houses were still spray-painted with red Xs and awaiting demolition.

Federal Emergency Management Agency, or FEMA, trailers were still parked on the berm of the highway waiting for people to live in them, because there was no land outside the flood plain to place trailers. Whole families were still living in "temporary" campers. State roads still had large pockmarks of broken asphalt. Bridges across creeks — the only way in or out for residents — were still washed out. And coal companies who had strip mined acres and acres on the mountains above Tug Valley still sat scratching their corporate heads wondering how such devastation could have happened in that valley below.

Now, 45 years later, in a neighboring state, you can see the same scenario: houses red-Xed for demolition, FEMA trailers on their way (they come after the campers), potholes all over the roads and washed-out bridges still trapping people who cannot cross their creeks for necessities.

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But now in 2022, it is strip mining on steroids — mountain top removal — that played a major role in the worst flood in Kentucky's history. But coal companies are not scratching their corporate heads this time because they have all gone, leaving behind abandoned mines, acres of un-reclaimed slopes and claims of bankruptcy.

Jack Spadaro, a former top federal mine safety engineer told a reporter, "If you get an area that has been strip mined, and the soil has been stripped off, and the upper layers of the soil and rock have been dumped into a valley fill, you have a surface that is not fully vegetated and you get no water retention whatsoever, and that is what causes these flash floods.”

Climate change has exacerbated floods in Eastern Kentucky. And when you mix climate change with 1,400 square miles of land that has been altered by mountain

top removal, with heavier rain due to carbon emissions, you have a perfect storm.

There is an African proverb: "When two elephants fight, it is the grass that suffers." What we have here are two elephants fighting: climate change and unregulated altering of the earth's surface. Who is the "grass" in this scenario? Just watch the news or listen to the radio: It is Appalachian people who live in poverty.

Soon, the suffering of the people of the mountains will leave our corporate consciousness. But the suffering will not soon end. I wonder if the people of Eastern Kentucky will have the same experience that we had in West Virginia in 1977.

I remember The Tug Valley Recovery Center trying to help people find land to put their FEMA trailers (FEMA would not provide a trailer unless it could be placed out of the flood plain). They looked for higher land for trailers to encourage people to build away from flash flooding. But it was impossible to find land because in 1977 80% of the land mass of Mingo County was owned by four land-holding companies who would not release any of their land — even for purchase.

Today's news reports that the people of Eastern Kentucky need water. I know that is true. Five months after the flood in the Tug Valley, if there were any wells left, their water was not useful. Fragile water systems in the small communities in the area had been swept away or they were clogged with mud. Brown water commonly came out of spigots for many months after the actual flood.

Television stations in Louisville report that what people need now is money for building supplies and medicines. There is enough food and more than enough used clothing. That was my experience too; I remember tractor trailers of food there even five months later. The item we had in large quantity was Moon Pies. We had enough Moon Pies for everyone in the county to eat their fill. But after a while even Moon Pies are not so good.

And, oh, the used clothing! We were using a school classroom as a base for volunteers and for storage. Half the classroom, floor to ceiling, was filled with used clothing. We sorted through bridesmaid dresses, swimsuits, slacks with zippers removed, blouses with no buttons, torn or stained clothing, three-piece men’s dress suits and even tuxedos with cummerbunds.

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All well and good, I suppose. But in 1977 — five months after the flood — people were living in campers or with relatives and there was no place for people to put their belongings, especially off-season clothes. Most had taken what they could use at the moment. If Eastern Kentucky volunteers are having a similar experience, I do understand why they do not need more clothing.

So, if the 2022 Kentucky flood victims have clothes, and food and water for now, what do they need most? From my experience with one flood in one moment in time, I suspect they need what our Mingo County ecumenical team brought to the Tug Valley in 1977.

In response to that disaster, The West Virginia Council of Churches took up a statewide collection and determined that the money from churches would be best used to fund people from different denominations to work for one year in trailer courts and homes. Ursuline Sr. Jean Marie Hettinger and I were asked by West Virginia's Bishop Joseph Hodges to represent the Catholic diocese.

Our role was simply to ask, "How are you doing today?" Then we waited for the story of the personal experience of the flood to come tumbling out in words and feelings. Victims of disasters need to tell their stories. They need to express their feelings to someone who will listen. They need a new person who will listen to them for as long as they need to talk. And that is what we did. We did not offer to do anything. If there were things they needed, we pointed them to others who could help. But our role was to listen and maybe hold a hand or offer a tissue. It was then, and I suspect it is today, an important part of disaster recovery.

After five months, the debris in Kentucky will be gone, mud will be shoveled away, home repair will be underway, FEMA applications will be filed, and hopefully family support and Social Security benefits will be returning. But after five months and beyond, hearts will still be breaking, eyes will still be overflowing with tears, sleepless nights will still happen, and hands will still need to be held. In five months and into the coming year, I hope and pray there will be volunteers who will be in Eastern Kentucky doing what we did more than 40 years ago in the Tug Valley in West Virginia. I know the need will be there.