

*The following reflection is written by Rev'd David Malina, who is currently the pastor of Christ Lutheran Church in Waterloo. He is also the Dean of the Two Rivers Ministry Area, of the Eastern Synod.*

I have to admit that my first thought when hearing that the Worship Conference on the theme “Responding to Disaster” – a weighty, serious topic to be sure – would take place in the idyllic, paradise-like vacation-land of Victoria B.C. on Vancouver Island seemed too oxymoronic. Disaster in paradise? We easterners tend to think of Vancouver Island as a must-go-to destination for relaxation, decompression, and exhilarating, inspiring views. Who wants to think of disaster in such a beautiful place as Vancouver Island? We want to escape into a sealed, sanitized, insulated bubble, away from disastrous musings, sadness and heartbreak, at least while on vacation, don't we?

The reality is, of course, disaster can strike anywhere, at any time, when we least expect it, on Vancouver Island, or anywhere else. It has the power suddenly to shatter our imaginative, sanitized bubbles. As much as we would like to believe we can escape into and insulate ourselves in these falsely-imagined bubbles, even for a short time, the reality is, we can't. The ominous “Tsunami Evacuation Route” signs along the mountainous, winding, pretty road leading into Tofino remind us of this. It's not *if*, but *when* disaster will strike. Are we prepared?

The speakers and workshop leaders underlined this message: Are we ready? Are we pastors and worship leaders prepared to offer liturgies and prayers at times of heartbreaking disasters, which help us absorb, process through, and respond to disasters when they eventually happen, both in our personal, individual lives, as well as in our corporate lives.

Keynote speaker Lizette Larson-Miller, Anglican priest and professor at Huron University College, London ON, sharpened our call to be “on the ready”, both internally, and also pastorally and liturgically for when disaster strikes. She also sounded the strong note of God's presence in and through a disaster or tragedy, of trusting God with our expressions of lament, and how all of our prayers and liturgies ultimately lead us to renewed hope in the Holy One, who is in all things, and holds all things – both joy and sorrow, both death and life – together.

Conference musician Chad Fothergill of Temple University, Philadelphia, in one of his presentations, lifted up a memorable statement: “God's world is *good*, not *perfect*.” God's world is a messy, complicated place, and in so many ways, a mystery beyond rational explanation. As Job of old stood speechless before the whirlwind of

God's presence, we too stand awestruck and speechless before both the soaring beauty and goodness of God's creation, as well as the heartbreaking, gut-wrenching disasters and tragedies that befall us.

An image that stays in mind from my time on Vancouver Island this past July, arises from my visit to "Cathedral Grove" in Macmillan Provincial Park located in the ancient Douglas Fir forests of the central regions of the island. It is the image of the "nursery log", or "nursing log". This image speaks to me of both death and life, held together in one dynamic process. On New Year's Day 1997, an intense wind storm toppled many of the ancient, 800 yr. old, giant, towering Douglas Firs, leaving the forest floor strewn with massive fallen trees, branches and logs. Death was everywhere.

But many of these dead trees and logs became "nursery logs", providing the necessary moist, nutrient-rich environment for new shoots, new shrubs and plants to take root and grow. The dead and rotting logs became incubators for new life. One could see this happening everywhere. Death and life held together in dynamic tension. One can't exist without the other. We can't escape this.

This pattern in creation mirrors the same pattern in our lives of faith and spirituality, where the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus is central. The cross - the nexus of death and new life.

Both the Worship Conference, and the place in which it was held, for me brought together this inexplicable, complicated, messy mix of disaster, tragedy, sorrow, hope, joy and new life, all happening at the same time. And through it all, God holds all in all.