

Covering Natural Disasters

How can journalists cover natural disasters without exploiting the tragedy?

Are there practical tips for going to disaster-affected sites and producing quality pieces?

**Bobby Ross Jr. presentation at Associated Church Press
convention in Chicago on May 1, 2025**

INTRODUCTION

- **About me:** I started work at *The Christian Chronicle* on May 1, 2005. That means today marks my 20-year anniversary with the *Chronicle*.
- **When I joined** the *Chronicle*, I had spent 15 years in secular journalism — mainly working for *The Oklahoman*, the daily newspaper in Oklahoma City, followed by stints with The Associated Press in Nashville and then Dallas.
- **By the time** I came to the *Chronicle*, I had gained quite a bit of experience covering death and disaster.
- **For *The Oklahoman*,** I reported on the 1995 Oklahoma City bombing and the deadly 1999 tornadoes that struck Oklahoma. That's not to mention that state prisons were my beat for a while, and that meant serving as a media witness for executions. I witnessed at least three executions — including the first woman put to death in Oklahoma since statehood. I was assigned to cover a few other executions, but they got called off at the last minute.

- **For AP**, I reported on Americans killed in the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. In one case, I interviewed a 23-year-old woman who lost her father (hit by a vehicle) and her husband (helicopter crash) in Iraq.
- **Other stories I did** ranged from a 5-year-old boy who was raped and murdered ... to the quadruple murder of four high school students, including two football players ... to the deaths of eight senior citizens killed in a church bus crash. Another reporter and I covered a long day of funerals in a small Texas town.
- **In another case**, I interviewed a serial killer behind bars right before he was scheduled to be executed. I was on the media witness list for his lethal injection. But the killer ended up resuming his appeals.
- **So when I went** to work for *The Christian Chronicle* in 2005, I was 37 years old. At the time, I thought I was an old, frazzled journalism veteran. Looking back from my vantage point at 57 years old now — 37 sounds so young. I mean, my children were 11, 7 and 5. And now I have two grandchildren who are 6 and 3. Time flies!
- **For those who** are not familiar with *The Christian Chronicle*, we are an independent newspaper that covers Churches of Christ in the United States and around the world. Our fellowship comprises about 12,000 autonomous congregations in the U.S. and thousands more around the world. These congregations grew out of what's known as the Stone-Campbell Movement — also known as the Restoration Movement — in the 1800s.

- **So maybe that** background helps understand where I was coming from when I joined the *Chronicle* in 2005. At that point in my life, I was just a bit tired of all the death and destruction. There was a naive part of me that thought: *Hey, I'm going to go work for a little Christian newspaper, and I won't have to worry about all that hard stuff anymore. I'll just write happy stories about friendly Christians living happy lives.*
- **How do you think** that worked out for me?
- **Just a few months** after I started my new job, Hurricane Katrina hit New Orleans and the Mississippi Gulf Coast. "The Storm of the Century," many called it. Hundreds were killed. Thousands were left homeless. Fhope
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- **As it turned** out, it's hard to be a journalist and not report on a lot of death and destruction. In the nearly 20 years since Hurricane Katrina, I've covered more natural disasters than I can recall. Tornadoes. Wildfires. And yes, more hurricanes. Hopefully, over the years, I've gotten better at it. Which leads us to the purpose of today's session.

QUESTION NO. 1

- **I was invited** this morning to talk about covering natural disasters and explore two questions.

- **The first question:** **How can journalists cover natural disasters without exploiting the tragedy?**
- **I'll offer** a few simple ideas. They mostly all revolve the same basic biblical principle: the Golden Rule. Which is best summarized by Jesus' words in Matthew 7:12: *"So in everything, do to others what you would have them do to you, for this sums up the Law and the Prophets."*
- **To put that** another way, how would you want a journalist to treat you if you were the victim of a storm? If you lost your house in a wildfire? Or if a loved one died in a tornado?
- **My first tip** for covering natural disasters without exploiting the tragedy: **Make time to be human. Put people first. Not deadlines.**
- **I often found** that difficult to do back when I worked for a daily newspaper and later a global wire service. Editors wanted you to approach the relevant sources on the scene or call them on the phone and get quotes quickly.
- When I covered the Oklahoma City bombing for *The Oklahoman* in 1995, we did individual profiles of all 168 victims — including 19 children. Sometimes we were trying to gather details from a victim's loved one even as that person was still holding out hope that their relative might somehow be found alive in the rubble. Our mission of reporting on all those victims sometimes caused us, as reporters, to rush an interview or push a grieving source to get the point. I'm older and hopefully wiser now. I pray I'd do better in a similar scenario today.
- **I occasionally do** freelance stories for the *Washington Post* when they need someone in Oklahoma. About 10 years ago, the *Post* contacted me on a Sunday morning. They asked if I could go to

Stillwater, Oklahoma, and do some reporting. The previous day, a woman had crashed her car into a parade crowd gathered to celebrate Oklahoma State University's homecoming. Four people had died, and dozens were injured.

- **I accepted the assignment.** I knew houses of worship would be gathering that Sunday to pray about what happened. I knew residents would be leaving flowers and other memorial items at the crash scene. I felt confident I could get enough material on the aftermath and the ongoing investigation to write a good story. And I did. My piece was published on the *Post's* front-page that Monday.
- **But one thing** I didn't do was contact any of the victims' relatives. The *Post* had me on a tight deadline, and I didn't feel right calling people grieving unfathomable losses in search of a quick quote for a newspaper that person wouldn't even read the next day. My stance might have been different if I worked for the local paper or *The Oklahoman*, a state newspaper circulated in Stillwater back then.
- **So here is** my second tip: **Avoid drive-by interviews of survivors or victims' relatives after a disaster.**
- **If you feel** that their voice is important to your story, give them a call and clearly identify yourself. Explain your desire to talk to them about their experience or loved one. Let them decide whether they want to talk or not. Give them an opportunity to decide when. If possible to visit them in person, offer to do that. Take all the time they want to do the interview. Don't rush them. Listen. Don't interrupt. (Deniece Bell-Pitner and Britt Farmer.)
- **My third tip** for covering natural disasters without exploiting the tragedy: **Look for the helpers.**

- **This is not** a concept original to me. It's an idea attributed to the late Fred Rogers — better known to generations of children as Mr. Rogers.
- **Rogers famously said** this: “When I was a boy and I would see scary things in the news, my mother would say to me, ‘Look for the helpers. You will always find people who are helping.’”
- **My fellowship** — Churches of Christ — is known for engaging in a lot of arguing and disputes over doctrinal matters and other things we Christians like to disagree about. But when a hurricane or a tornado or a wildfire strikes, my fellow Church of Christ'ers are some of the most caring and giving people in the world.
- **So after 20 years** of working for *The Christian Chronicle*, I know that when a disaster occurs, the Churches of Christ Disaster Relief Effort — a ministry based in Nashville — is going to be loading 18-wheelers full of food and emergency supplies. I know other ministries are going to be organizing volunteers to go help clear debris and feed people. And I know local congregations are going to be active on the ground, doing their best to meet the needs of neighbors.
- **So, in the early stages** after a disaster, when the situation on the ground is generally hard to figure out, I know that there's a story waiting in the disaster relief efforts getting under way. And those stories of the helpers not only don't exploit the tragedy, but they give people a way to respond to the terrible images they're seeing on TV in a positive way — by donating money or time to help.
- **And my fourth tip** for covering natural disasters without exploiting the tragedy is this: **Don't just look for the helpers. Look for a little bit of hope, even when it might seem in short supply.**

- **In New Orleans** after Hurricane Katrina, I met the Marsalis family. Charles, Angela and their four sons survived the floodwaters by escaping to the balcony of their church. Eventually, a boat rescued them from the roof of the church. And a helicopter plucked them from a highway overpass.
- **Despite their ordeal**, the Marsalises and their sons never lost faith — in God or each other. In fact, the storm motivated the family to start a new church to serve a neighborhood beset with drugs, gunfire and prostitution. That church still thrives today.
- **Among those touched** by the Marsalises' story was God himself. Actually, God never weighed in directly on their story, but Academy Award winner Morgan Freeman did. And as you may recall, Freeman played God on the big screen. He came and interviewed the Marsalises for a documentary series he did on faith.
- **The Marsalises' story** was one that took time to develop. I interviewed them and did multiple stories over the years.
- **That leads to my fifth** and final tip for covering natural disasters without exploiting the tragedy: **Stick with the story even after it fades from the news. When everyone else moves on, check in to see how the people and the community are doing.**
- **Five years ago**, I covered tornadoes that claimed 25 lives while raking an 80-mile path of debris through Middle Tennessee. I profiled a 4-year-old victim named Hattie Jo Collins, who was known for her colorful headbands adorned with flowers, rainbows and unicorns.
- **Just last year**, Hattie's parents — Matt and Macy Collins — sat down with me. That's right: It took years before the couple gave their first interview about what happened to their family that night. But the story was just as compelling at that point.

- **They discussed** their tornado experience, their faith journey and their daughter's amazing words the night of the tornado. Short version: She told her mother, "Momma, I can see Jesus. And he's wearing all white."
- **And the couple explained** their decision to start a ministry serving other parents who lose children. Years passed before I was able to do that interview, but I felt so blessed — like I was on holy ground — to sit in a room with that couple as they poured out their hearts.
- **OK, that about covers** the first question. We'll have time for questions later.

QUESTION NO. 2

- **The second question** is this: **Are there practical tips for going to disaster-affected sites and producing quality pieces?**
- **Yes, I can offer** a few tips. And once again, these are not rocket science. They are simple ideas that have worked for me.
- **My first tip: Unless you work for a major daily newspaper or wire service, don't rush in.**
- **The immediate aftermath** of a natural disaster is filled with chaos. The story is not going away if you wait a day or two or a week to head that direction, especially if you are a weekly or monthly publication with time to let the story develop.

- **So sit tight** and watch developments at first. Report what you can from home, such as the disaster relief efforts and interviews with folks on the ground that you can reach by phone. And look for opportunities to go to the scene and report a story that will be both helpful to survivors and engaging to your audience.
 - **My second tip: Make contact with folks on the ground, and make sure they are OK with you coming and reporting.**
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- **I'm not saying** you need anyone's permission to go to a disaster scene. But it's helpful if you have one or more contacts on the ground who knows who you are and is OK with you coming and is, hopefully, willing to show you around a little bit. That'll make your work much easier showing up in the middle of a national disaster aftermath and recovery.
 - **In January, I had** a reporting trip scheduled to Southern California to write about a grant program for improving preaching. But about that same time, wildfires struck the Los Angeles area. So I started checking with church leaders in some of the affected areas, and I connected with a minister named Rodney Davis.
 - **I mentioned to Brother Davis** that I would be in the area, and I asked if it would be OK for me to visit his church and check in on the disaster relief efforts. He said, "Sure, come on." I still wasn't real sure what I'd find or how helpful the church would be to my reporting efforts. But when I got there Brother Davis met me immediately. He introduced me to folks who were distributing food, water and emergency supplies. And he offered to give me a driving tour of the

hard-hit community of Altadena, California, where hundreds of homes were destroyed.

- His helpfulness made my job much easier. And we talked as we drove about the overwhelming nature of what we were witnessing. He showed me a few sites where churches were burned to the ground. And we got out of his car and walked around. I ended up with black marks all over my shoes and clothes from the ashes.
- **That's not an official tip, but it's an unofficial tip: When going to disaster zones, don't wear your best shoes or your Sunday best. Because you're likely to end up covered in soot, mud or other storm debris.**

A friend of mine looked at this presentation for me and suggested, "You may want to include, 'Take extra underwear.'" It's true. While flying home from New Orleans after one reporting trip after Hurricane Katrina, I got stuck in Houston. My friend came and picked me up at the airport. And then he took me to Walmart because I was out of, well, essential clothing. So yeah, maybe pack extra. But back to my recent coverage of the fires in Southern California.

- **As Brother Davis and I** drove through the burned neighborhoods, I asked him if he'd ever seen anything like this. It's a cliché question, I know, but I was genuinely curious. He said he had not, and then he turned the question on me. I immediately thought of the scene after Hurricane Katrina and said so. I described driving miles and miles and miles from New Orleans to the Mississippi Gulf Coast and seeing nothing but destruction.
- **I think our conversation** probably goes back to one of my original tips: Be human. Connect on a personal level. That doesn't mean losing your journalistic objectivity, but it does mean being willing to

have an actual conversation and don't hide behind your reporter persona.

- **That said, I'm an introvert.** I'm not a big talker. If you are, you might want to be human while at the same time zipping your lips as much as possible. I've seen some reporters who are so eager to tell their own story that the person they're supposedly trying to interview can't get a word in. That's not helpful, I wouldn't think, when it comes time to write the story.
- **OK, here is a third tip** for going to disaster-affected sites and producing quality pieces: **Record as much as possible. And take as many photos as possible.**
- **I'm old enough** to remember when we didn't have unlimited digital recorders on our phones or the ability to take photos with our phones. Now that we do, journalists should take advantage of them. Yes, still take notes. But keep your recorder running so you don't miss a great quote when the "official" interview stops or hasn't started yet. Sometimes the best material comes when engaged in informal chit chat. And in these digital days, it's easy to upload all your conversations up to an app like Otter and quickly transcribe it.
- **As for photos**, taking lots of digital images will help refresh your mind and allow you to describe scenes better when the time comes to write. I'd recommend snapping such images even if you have a photographer along with you. It's a form of note-taking that you won't regret.
- **A fourth tip**, and this one may sound obvious, but it's true: **Talk to as many people as possible.**

- **Ask how the disaster** affected them. Ask where they were or what they were doing when it occurred. Ask how they're helping, or if they're a victim or survivor, what they need.
- **You won't have room** to quote everyone you talk to. But some of the best interviews occur after you feel like you've already got enough information. Force yourself to talk to another person or two or three even after you feel like you've got all you need. You'll be surprised how often those final interviews end up being some of the best ones.
- **A fifth tip**, since we've ventured into Captain Obvious territory: **Be curious.**
- **I know that sounds** like a given, but often, if something makes you curious, readers would want to know the answer to your question, too.
- **An example that comes** to mind: In January 2022, my *Christian Chronicle* colleague Audrey Jackson and I traveled to Mayfield, Kentucky, to report on tornado relief efforts.
- **As you might recall**, an EF4 twister that December destroyed hundreds of homes and businesses in that small town. Nearly two dozen people were killed in the area.
- **This is where my curiosity** comes in: As Audrey and I drove around the downtown area in Mayfield, we kept seeing these large churches that had been destroyed or heavily damaged. Now, since The Christian Chronicle reports on Churches of Christ, we were not there to report on the bigger picture.
- **But I couldn't help but Google** and realize that no one in the national media had reported on the huge loss of churches in general. I pitched a story to my friends at The Associated Press, and they bit. So I was able to do a big national story on how the tornado had

affected Mayfield's religious community. The piece got picked up by newspapers all over the U.S. and even ran on a local front page there in the area.

- **As I wrap up my prepared** remarks, there's a meme that I see on Facebook sometimes. It goes like this: "Sometimes the best evangelism is telling people you're a Christian and then not being a complete jerk."
- **I think there may be** a little truth to that meme. And we might adapt it just a bit to our roles as journalists, particularly as faith-based journalists. Perhaps the best thing we can do as reporters covering natural disasters is to tell people that we're a reporter and then not be a complete jerk.
- **Better yet, we can** be kind, caring, ethical, compassionate human beings eager to tell important stories that matter to our audience and fellow people of faith.
- **I thank you so much** for your time and attention. I'd be happy to answer any questions.