A DEVASTATING FIRE IN SHELBY

It’s been a long fire season already and its only June! In March the Narrows Gulch fire destroyed 37 homes, injured twelve townspeople, and killed a hundred head of cattle while coming close to destroying the jeans factory on the edge of town. If it wasn’t for the Ashland fire department that sped over to Shelby most of the south side of town would be completely gone. But that was nothing compared to what’s happening now!

You are an Iliff alum serving as a religious leader in Shelby, a small worship center of about fifty souls. People come from all over to worship there and many have attended for years. The population consists of a mix of young families, senior long timers who are veterans, and a number of visitors who are drawn to your message of justice in ministry. Despite keeping busy as a religious leader you also serve as a part-time chaplain at Shelby Community Hospital. This affords you great connections with the larger community. You participate there in a group with chaplains, seven or eight, and local pastors on the topic of trauma, post-traumatic growth, and moral injury. Three are retired military chaplains, two hospice chaplains, and others.

June 6th began as a beautiful day but about 11:15am the main fire station siren was heard calling all volunteer firefighters in for action. A fire is reported at the jeans factory and the drought conditions and strong winds have already pushed the fire into the heavily wooded eastside neighborhood threatening 350 homes. Already 23 houses are in flames and another 46 have burned to the ground. A number of your parishioners live in the eastside neighborhood including five elderly men, long time members, who landed together in France in 1944 to fight the Nazis.

As a Shelby Fire Department (SFD) volunteer chaplain you headed for the main fire station too. There the incident commander assigned you and several others to warn the people of the eastside to evacuate. Last year Mayor Reggie Slump and town counselor Ibonka Bunk defeated a measure to improve town warning capabilities. Now people have died!

Upon arrival you are told that 119 homes have been destroyed and the number is growing. The jeans factory is destroyed putting the young families in your church out of work and threatening the economic viability of Shelby itself, two local firefighters were mortally injured, and Governor Thatcher has requested fire management assistance from the federal government. An incident management team from the FEMA Regional Office is on the way.

As you drive into the neighborhood you notice that the wind has died down and the fire is slowing. You drive street by street telling people they must evacuate immediately while keeping an eye on the flames down the street. While there you notice a large number of immigrants including several with limited English speaking proficiency who are seeking sanctuary in Shelby. As you give warnings you experience moral stress in not knowing how long to stay with each person/family and urge them to leave, or whether to move on to the next household. You wonder if any even understand what you are saying. You also experience moral stress knowing that today is the anniversary of D-Day, the invasion of Europe, and the elderly men from your church who live in the fire zone are unaccounted for.

When you’ve finished warning people you return to your religious community and discover three of your WW2 vet parishioners have been located but two are missing. Their wives are at the building along with hundreds of evacuees. Last year the American Red Cross asked to use the building as an evacuation center and shelter and your religious leaders agreed. The Salvation Army mobile canteen has arrived from Ashland and is serving breakfast, lunch, and dinner to evacuees.

Fortunately the religious community where you lead worship didn’t sustain any damage to their building but the small independent evangelical Christian church nearby did sustain fire damage and your community has invited them to worship with you. In addition you and the religious leaders of your community decide to hold an evening prayer service at your facility.

You are experiencing anxiety and moral stress from having to help evacuate families, and now you are at your worship place providing spiritual care to evacuees and families there. It seems a bit odd but you are experiencing flashback memories of a fire you worked years ago while serving as a religious leader in another town. There your home was burned down and in the evacuation one of your family members was seriously injured. The chaos and anxiety now begins to pull tears out of you but you quickly stuff them inside admonishing yourself that this “is not about you.”

You and your religious leaders begin planning an evening prayer service. You spoke that afternoon with the minister whose church suffered fire damage. He has told you that he wants to use biblical readings about fire as a purifying image in the Bible. He sees the fire as a call from God to take a moral inventory on their lives. He reminds you of the religious leader you served under long ago when a fire destroyed your home and nearly your family. Back then that guy said we just needed to “pray away” the fire.

Write an imaginary pastoral care conversation with this minister, in which you are trying to offer spiritual care to him, while also helping him understand the need for an intercultural prayer service at which anyone in this town will feel welcome.