

# A WORLD IN MOTION



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Project Hero is helping to ensure the future of the Church in Syria through aid distribution.



## THE NUMBERS: RECENT NATURAL DISASTERS



3

The number of simultaneous active hurricanes, recorded on 7 September 2017



8.1

The magnitude of the 8 September earthquake off the coast of Mexico



\$400 billion

The estimated combined cost of Hurricanes Harvey and Irma



8 million

The number of acres that have been burned by wildfires in the US and Canada in 2017

## NATURAL DISASTERS AND DISCUSSIONS OF FAITH



By *Cherolyn Amery*

About 6.5 million homes in Florida, two-thirds of the total, are without power after Hurricane Irma cut a deadly path through the state, officials say. Relief operations are under way and engineers are working to restore power, but many areas remain stranded. The islands of the Florida Keys and western parts of the US state bore the brunt of the category-four hurricane. Irma hit Florida on Sunday [10 September] and weakened to a tropical storm before becoming a tropical depression early on Tuesday. Media reports link at least four deaths to the storm in Florida. Irma is the most powerful Atlantic storm in a decade, and caused widespread destruction [and at least 37 fatalities] on several Caribbean islands. (*BBC News*)

### Recent spate of natural disasters

The trio of hurricanes in the Atlantic Ocean (Irma, Jose and Katia) came swiftly on the heels of Hurricane Harvey, which flooded significant parts of Houston (Texas) between 25 August and 2 September and resulted in at least 46 confirmed deaths. On 8 September, a magnitude 8.1 earthquake occurred just off Mexico's coast, killing more than 60. This was the most powerful quake to hit Mexico in a century. In another part of the world, devastating monsoon rains in South Asia in August affected more than 41 million people and caused more than 1,000 deaths. Also in August, vast wildfires wreaked havoc in Portugal and Spain, and early in September, western states in America fought raging wildfires as well.

Amidst all this, discussions and debates about the connection between religion and natural disasters have risen to the fore again. This is nothing new.

According to Christiana Zenner Peppard (an associate professor of theology, science and ethics at Fordham University), "with unexpected cataclysmic weather events, people across time and space have always looked for explanations". She told the *New York Times* that "how we talk about it is reflective of our worldview" and that "it is attractive to certain segments of the population to look at unforeseen apocalyptic-style events as fitting into a particular kind of narrative."

### Disasters and faith narratives

Various research has been done into how people of different religious backgrounds respond to natural disasters. Shankar Vedantam, in a 2010 blog article in *Psychology Today*, said that "religious believers and non-believers quickly reach diametrically opposing conclusions about the implications of the disaster... for non-believers, natural disasters are evidence that God doesn't exist [while] believers usually experience a strengthening of their faith after a disaster."

A document that forms part of the FEMA (Federal Emergency Management Agency) training, entitled "*Faith in Disasters*", highlights research in Bangladesh (Schmuck, 2000) that shows that those who believe flooding is the "will of Allah" do not prepare their homes for the floods, which puts them at greater risk. Another study quoted in the document (Furnham and Brown, 1992) indicated that "Muslims and Jews tended to stress God-type explanations for the disaster more so than Christians and atheists." A 1999 study by Gillard and Paton in the Fiji Islands found that Christians made the best recovery after a disaster (compared to Hindus and Muslims) – this was attributed to donations that came in for Christian victims from around the world.

Another study, by Chris G. Sibley and Joseph Bulbulia, looked at religion and health before and after the 2011 earthquake in Christchurch, New Zealand, that killed 185 people and caused extensive damage. Their findings included the following: "Among those affected by the earthquake... a loss of faith was associated with significant subjective health declines ... upholding faith might be an important step on the road to recovery."

# NEWS HEADLINES



**German** Chancellor Angela Merkel said she would seek an end to Turkey's membership talks with the EU in an apparent shift of her position during a televised debate weeks before a German election. "The fact is clear that Turkey should not become a member of the EU," Merkel said in the debate with her Social Democrat (SPD) challenger Martin Schulz. The comments are likely to worsen already strained ties between the two NATO allies that have deepened since Turkish President Tayyip Erdogan's crackdown on opponents in the aftermath of a failed coup attempt in July of last year.



**Egypt** signed a memo of understanding with China worth about \$739 million for an electric train to a new capital the north African country is building, the Egyptian investment minister said. Egypt also signed during President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi's visit to China an agreement for funding worth \$45 million for a satellite project, Minister Sahar Nasr said.



The **EU's** Court of Justice dismissed complaints by Slovakia and Hungary about EU migration policy, upholding Brussels' right to force member states to take in asylum seekers, in the latest twist to a divisive dispute that broke out two years ago when over a million migrants poured across the Mediterranean.

## FROM A CHRISTIAN PERSPECTIVE

A 10 September blog article in *The Economist* highlighted three different sorts of religious "voices" that have recently been heard in response to the spate of tropical storms and hurricanes.

One voice is from faith groups who are calling for a change to the constitutional ban on religious bodies receiving federal funds so that religious structures can be repaired and religious bodies can be compensated for food and shelter given to disaster victims. President Donald Trump supports a change to the current status quo, saying that churches should be able to receive money from FEMA.

A second voice is that of "zealots" who have claimed that the hurricanes are "divine punishment for behaviour of which God disapproves". This has been a common trend for a number of years, with Hurricane Katrina and Superstorm Sandy being attributed to "the homosexual agenda" and abortion rights. An article by Kimberley Winston in Religion News Service (RNS) describes these voices as belonging to "a subset of religious conservatives", and says that while certain Christian conservatives are sometimes the loudest in this regard, they are not

alone: "Muslim imams in Egypt blamed Sandy on an anti-Islamic film, and at least one Jewish rabbi blamed Katrina on the US support of the Israeli pullout of Gaza."

The third voice highlighted by *The Economist* is from "religious inspired charities [that] have been working hard to anticipate and ease the woes of the neediest victims". Winston also wrote about how the "vast majority" of religious groups and leaders "respond to all kinds of natural disasters with concern, prayer and warm outreach".

One thing that is clear about natural disasters is that many people question their beliefs and seek answers in their distress. While Christians may differ on their opinions of "divine judgement" and the "purpose of suffering", natural disasters create a vast home-ground mission field in which to offer Gospel-based compassion, hope and comfort. At such times, it is critical for believers to be wise about which "voice" they choose to use.

**PRAY > For the millions around the world impacted by natural disasters > For believers to choose the right "voice" when dealing with natural disasters > For the global Body of Christ to display Jesus' heart of compassion to those in need**

## TWO YEARS ON: REFUGEES IN GERMANY



By *Donnelly McClelland*

There is something hugely admirable in Angela Merkel's determination to stick to her refugee policy. She has defended it for two years straight in the German political arena and is beating no retreat as she campaigns for a fourth term in this month's general election. Through a punishing programme of election rallies and interviews, she has insisted that the stand she took in 2015 was the right one for Germany, and she has no regrets. Faced with a similar crisis, she would take the same decisions again. Her stand draws anger and cries of "traitor" from some of the crowds she addresses – though she points out, rightly, only from a very small minority. Still the parson's daughter, perhaps, Merkel is accentuating the positive and campaigning on the moral high ground. (*The Guardian*)

### Germany's 'open door' policy

An article in *Reuters* stated the following: "By the end of 2015, 890,000 asylum seekers had entered Germany, many without proper identity checks, overwhelming local communities. A year after Ms Merkel's decision, and following a series of small-scale attacks in Germany by Islamist militants, her popularity ratings plunged 30 points to 45% and she faced questions about whether she would run for chancellor again. Yet today, 63% of Germans

say she is doing a good job and, according to a recent Bertelsmann Foundation survey, 59% believe the country is on the right track. A crucial factor behind Ms Merkel's rebound has been the decline in asylum seekers entering Germany, only about 280,000 arrived in 2016, with another drop expected this year."

Germany's robust economy has proved strong enough to absorb the influx of refugees without major cracks emerging in society. A recent survey ranked terrorism as Germans' main fear, but a separate poll for the *Bild* newspaper showed they do not see curbing immigration as a priority.

### Personal observations

After two very different exposure trips – one to Lebanon in May 2016 and a more recent visit to Hamburg, Germany – some very striking observations were made. Firstly, Germany has truly gone the extra mile to welcome and provide for refugees. The 'camps' are incredibly well situated and equipped, varying from semi-permanent 'container-style' complexes to permanent apartment-style developments that do not look like camps at all. It is no surprise that so many pushed to make it all the way to Germany, despite the road being long and difficult.

The proportion of refugees to native inhabitants is vastly different in the two countries. In Lebanon, one in five people was a refugee in 2016, giving the country the largest number of displaced people relative to its own population. This would make the economic strain on the two countries vastly different.

The response of refugees when asked about the future and prospects of returning to Syria was totally opposite in Germany and Lebanon. In Lebanon, many refugees said without hesitation that they longed to return; those in Germany struggle to see any future in Syria.

## NEWS HEADLINES



Japan upgraded its estimated size of **North Korea's** latest nuclear test to a yield of around 160 kilotons — more than ten times the size of the Hiroshima bomb. Japan's latest estimate far exceeded the yield of between 50 and 100 kilotons indicated by UN political affairs chief Jeffrey Feltman at the UN Security Council. Pyongyang's test of what it described as a hydrogen bomb designed for a long-range missile triggered global alarm and has divided the international community as it scrambles for a response.



The Lebanese Shi'ite group **Hezbollah** has declared victory in the Syrian war while **Russia** said government forces had driven militants from much of the country where President Bashar al-Assad's rule seemed in danger two years ago. The comments from two Syrian government allies mark the most confident assessments yet of Assad's position in the war, though significant parts of the country remain outside the government's control.



The **UN** Security Council will hold an urgent meeting to discuss violence churning through western Myanmar, after the UN's rights chief warned that "ethnic cleansing" appeared to have driven over 300 000 Rohingya Muslims from the country.

The Body of Christ is clearly active in both nations with various churches and organisations reaching out to these displaced people in noteworthy ways, but is it enough?

### FROM A CHRISTIAN PERSPECTIVE

After both visits, it was again clearly evident that the refugee crisis is an incredible opportunity for harvest. The mass movement of people in the world serves as a reminder of His call to reach all nations – not only does He call some to go, He also brings nations to us, not just that they have an opportunity to hear the Gospel and be saved but that the Church be revived to fan the flame of passion for His Name and His Glory.

There is, however, an overwhelming sense (particularly in the more affluent nation of Germany) that this 'window of opportunity' has an expiration date. Hearts will not be as receptive as the lures of affluence and opportunities for self-advancement increase. The Church in Germany faces a tremendous challenge: a critical tipping point in their history.

Culturally, Germany today is a highly secularised society. One poll suggests that Germany is the third most atheist nation in Western Europe. But it was not always so. Germany is the birthplace of the Reformation (celebrating its 500th anniversary this year) and was a missionary-sending nation from as early as the 1600s. According to 2016 statistics, 48.9 million Germans (58.3%) still claim to be Christian, of whom 23.6 million are Catholics (28.5%) and 21.9 million are Protestants (26.5%). But many of them take no active part in church life, and less than 2% are evangelicals.

A local mission organisation leader, Dr Juergen Kramer, expressed his concern that active German

believers account for not much more than 1% of the population, and that German churches in general are struggling, being still too inward-focused with not enough focus on making disciples. He believes that the German Church will need additional assistance from the broader Church if the full potential 'harvest' is to be realised. He acknowledges the wonderful growth in new believers, many of whom are from a Muslim background, but he believes that it is more as a result of their search and not so much a result of intentional evangelism by German believers. A 2015 study estimated some 15,000 Christian believers from a Muslim background in the country, most of whom belong to an evangelical or Pentecostal community.

Bishop Heinrich Bedford-Strohm, the presiding bishop of the Protestant Churches in Germany, said the following last year: "We have experienced a revolution of empathy in our country since the summer of last year, based on the commitment of hundreds of thousands of volunteers just in the Christian parishes throughout Germany, and many more in other organisations. The evangelical church alone has provided an additional 100 million euros in Germany to accompany refugees."

Herein lies the tipping point: are there enough passionate, Word-believing, outward-focused, active German Christians to seize the incredible opportunity that the mass arrival of nations within Germany's borders offers, or will the opportunity be missed and the harvest 'rot in the fields'?

**PRAY > For the Church in Germany to seize the incredible opportunities within their communities > For the Global Body of Christ to take hands with the German Church in reaching the enormous harvest field**

## BRICS: CHALLENGES AND IMPACT



*By Andrew Richards*

[During the recent BRICS summit] Chinese President Xi Jinping urged BRICS nations to deepen coordination on global matters, and push for a more "just" world order, by boosting representation for emerging and developing countries in international bodies. Reiterating that emerging and developing markets have been the primary engine of global growth, Xi called for a bigger role for BRICS in speeding economic governance reforms and promoting trade, especially as rising risks veil a global recovery. "BRICS countries should push for a more just and reasonable international order," Xi told a summit of the grouping, which includes Brazil, Russia, India,

China and South Africa. "We should work together to address global challenges." (Reuters)

### BRICS, then and now

BRICS was originally a grouping of four nations, with South Africa being accepted into the group in 2010. Since its inception, the group has launched its own bank (known as the New Development Bank) in opposition to the World Bank, and has established its headquarters in Shanghai, China. BRICS nations are defined by their large, often fast-growing economies and significant influence over regional affairs, and all, except Russia, are members of the G20.

When the BRICS nations first came together, Brazil had just elected its first female President (Dilma Rousseff), China's Xi Jinping was yet to be elected, Vladimir Putin was prime minister under Dmitry Medvedev, Narendra Modi was a Gujarat politician and Jacob Zuma had just become the fourth president of South Africa.

Today, almost 10 years later, Jacob Zuma is facing corruption charges, with half the nation seeking his removal. Brazil is no better off, with Dilma Rousseff having been impeached and the new president, Michel Temer, already facing a barrage of accusation

## FOR FURTHER REFERENCE

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Please visit our website for up-to-date information on events around the world.

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that could mean his departure as well. A border dispute between India and China almost led to war between the two most populous countries. And Russia, having been in the spotlight since its annexure of Crimea, is losing prominence as the ongoing North Korean missile crisis has seen Vladimir Putin replaced by Kim Jong-Un as the new 'bad boy' of geopolitics. From the outside, BRICS looks like a mess, but when it comes to financial investments and development, the five countries that make up the 'counter-west-order' are making significant gains in the developing world.

### Independent BRICS 'strongmen'

China's 'One Belt One Road' economic initiative, for one, is causing Western leaders to take notice of China's growing geopolitical influence that threatens to unseat the US as the de facto world leader. China's launch of its first operational aircraft carrier, whereby it officially announced that it is now a 'blue water power', and the opening of its first military outpost in Africa, is further proof that China is thinking long-term when it comes to the global influence it seeks.

Russia is viewed by most in the West as a disruptive presence in the Middle East, especially when it comes to Syria and its continued support of the Assad regime. Some even suggest that if it was not for Russia, the Arab Spring revolution that started in 2010 would have had a fruitful end in Syria with regime change, leading the Arab world into a new future of democracy. Democracy, however violently introduced, is perhaps a dream never to be realised by the people of the Middle East – something the people of East Ukraine will soon find out for themselves.

### FROM A CHRISTIAN PERSPECTIVE

Daniel 2:21 says "He [God] changes times and seasons, He removes kings and sets up kings." If believers hold to the sovereignty of God, and the fact that God alone has the power to appoint

leaders for certain seasons, then when viewing the geopolitical scene today, believers must understand that God is at work, for the good of His Kingdom.

Some have said that Jacob Zuma is South Africa's 'greatest evangelist'. Most would strongly refute this claim, but were it not for President Zuma, a million South Africans would probably not have come together in prayer for the country earlier this year. South Africa is also the gateway into Africa, and now with the first outside branch of the BRICS bank having opened in the country, South Africa is in a unique position to influence the rest of the continent. This can only open doors for missionaries from South Africa wanting to serve elsewhere on the continent.

China's economic hunger has led to a network of 65 countries, most of which fall within the '10/40 window' of least-reached people groups in the world. The Church in China has correctly identified that God has placed Premier Jinping in power, allowing the Church to 'piggyback' on the country's economic expansion and so reach the peoples of the Muslim world.

It does not take an expert in geopolitics to notice that the world is changing. Russia is threatening Europe, China is threatening the US, India is becoming more prominent in Afghanistan in a bid to close in around Pakistan, and South Africa and Brazil are becoming more politically unstable in a way that could eventually lead to future violent confrontation and even civil war.

Yet God remains sovereign. And depending on the 'lens' you look through at world events, believers will either interpret God working for the eventual good of His Kingdom, or will miss an opportunity to be part of what God is doing.

**PRAY > For wisdom for BRICS leaders, that they will lead their nations justly > For the Church in BRICS nations to seize the opportunities that the organisation has opened up to them**

## KNOWLEDGE TO ACTION



### PROJECT HERO

*Helping to ensure the future of the Church in Syria*

In partnership with Lebanese Christian leaders, INcontext aims to distribute food, clothing, medicine and basic necessities to the Church in Syria.



**Project Hero** focuses on those who choose to remain in Syria, who deal with the daily bombings from which others have fled, and who encounter death as part of daily life. Those who have stayed have done so for two reasons: either they have been unable to get out (for reasons such as old age or a lack of finances), or they have refused to leave Syria because it is home and they still believe they have a role to play in the reconstruction of the nation.

**"You stand beside us with your big support, we thank you for all your giving for the church and its people." - Pastor in Damascus**

To support this project, please make use of the INcontext bank details and use HERO together with your email address (as much as possible of it) as reference.

If you have any questions about this project, please contact our project department ([gustav@incontextministries.org](mailto:gustav@incontextministries.org)) or [CLICK HERE](#) to visit the website.