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SPECIAL TO THE NEW YORK TIMES OP ED/665 words

‘UNMET NEEDS ROUNDTABLE’ OF FAITH COMMUNITIES

 CALLS FOR NYC TO REDEFINE VICTIMS OF SEPT. 11

By the Rev. Dr. Stephen Bouman, Bishop of the Metropolitan New York Synod of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA)

The term “unmet needs” has become new nomenclature in the aftermath of Sept. 11 in New York City. While assistance for widows and children is obvious, the breach grows wider for many affected by the tragedy. Tens of thousands are falling through the cracks of a system that has narrowly defined who are victims and where they must live.

 Consider the Korean woman let go from her seamstress job in October with a letter saying that she was laid off due to the Sept. 11tragedy. She’s behind in her rent, doesn’t have her green card and is afraid to ask for help because of her immigration status.

 Or the woman from Ghana who was dismissed from a midtown Manhattan hotel in September with a letter saying the layoff was due to the attack. Although she has been brought back to work sporadically, her wages have decreased drastically, forcing her to send her children to Ghana, so family members can care for them.

 Our friends in Chinatown have been especially hard hit, yet they remain outside geographic categories to qualify for help. Other victims are so traumatized and tired, they can’t tackle the morass of paperwork to apply for assistance.

 Faith communities and social service agencies in New York City have gathered to stitch up a safety net for such victims of Sept. 11. More than a dozen faith and community organizations met recently in a spontaneous “unmet needs roundtable” to discuss how they can help. Lutheran Disaster Response of New York (LDRNY) has taken a leadership role in bringing these groups to the table. As the Church, we’re called to this role.

Many are heeding the call. Our partners in the unmet needs roundtable include the United Methodist Committee on Relief, Presbyterian Disaster Relief and others. FEMA’s Ken Curtain, voluntary agency liaison, is helping facilitate our response.

 We’re doing what we can to assure that people can make a mortgage payment, buy groceries or see a counselor, even if they can’t afford it. We’re finding that many church groups and disaster response efforts have funds for Sept. 11, but lack the structure to dispense money to those in need. LDRNY has established a care management program, Project LIFE, specifically designed to help victims of Sept. 11 for whom no assistance is available. It receives hundreds of calls every day from people whose lives have been torn apart by the wave effects of Sept. 11. It is our hope that this project extends out and reaches people who can’t seem to get help.

 While the church is doing what it can, more needs to be done. We implore the city and other public assistance programs to redefine those affected by Sept. 11, being realistic about what truly has happened here.

 There’s no formula for grieving and healing, and the process doesn’t submit to geographic guidelines. We’re on new ground in New York. It’s easy to understand how someone who lost a spouse is affected by Sept. 11, but in reality, we’ve all been affected in different ways. Some ways have yet to be understood.

 Let’s not fall into finding easy, tidy solutions to Sept. 11. We can’t just say, “OK, let’s dispense our money and be done with it.” All of us affected by Sept. 11 want to know that God, and our communal compassion, aren’t “moving on” until we’ve all begun to heal.

 The Church will be there for the long term. We invite the city and other assistance agencies to join us.

May the words of the prophet Isaiah be true among us:“You shall be called the repairer of the breach, the restorer of streets to live in.” (Isaiah 58:12)

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