

Pastor of Air Asia Victims Encounters Heaven in Midst of Tragedy

When Air Asia Flight 8501 crashed into the ocean late last year, hundreds of families and friends suffered dear losses—but none so acutely as Mawar Sharon Church (Rose of Sharon), in Surabaya, Indonesia.

The congregation had 45 people—more than a quarter of the passengers—on the plane. But for Pastor Philip Mantofa, the loss has catapulted his church into the spotlight. Now, Mantofa is speaking out on how this tragedy has strengthened his faith and given him glimpses of heaven.

Charisma News: How has this loss affected your church?

Philip Mantofa: Our church has always been like a big family. Even though not everyone necessarily knows everyone, our sense of belonging as one body of Christ is strong since most of our members belong in small groups and ministries. This tragic loss has only increased our dependence on God and appreciation of each other. Love—God's love—is in the air!

Charisma News: What is the church doing to cope with the loss?

Mantofa: Firstly, first-aid. We were among the first to have arrived on the scene—at the departure area of our international airport—to meet the families of the missing passengers on the doomed plane. Then, we immediately set up a care center in which we provided an ongoing prayer/worship atmosphere to strengthen the faith of those who awaited the fate of their loved ones. Food and beverages were also provided to care for them physically, so none would fall sick.

We dispatched teams of trained, Christian counselors by shifts, standing by to help. Also, we assigned one pastor from our church for every mourning family, so we could customize to give the support they need. Particularly when the bodies of their family members were found and they had to identify them, we couldn't leave them to face these horrific situations alone. "Being there with them and for them" is our greatest ministry yet so far. Doesn't the Bible say we ought to cry with those who cry?

Charisma News: How will the church move forward?

Mantofa: No words can describe the feeling of loss we have all experienced here, especially the passengers' families. Unnecessary comments haven't help a bit, and we don't attempt to answer the big "WHY" question. However, the Holy Spirit has been real in our church as the Comforter. As their pastor, I must say that I couldn't be prouder of my members as they carried each other's burden without second thoughts. The most glorious moment was when I witnessed how one bereaved family encouraged and prayed for another out of their own initiative. I could say that I almost saw heaven in that situation. Yes, we are moving forward!

Charisma News: How has your faith aided you in such a tragedy?

Mantofa: Faith is the only thing I got. Though I can't quite make sense of it all, my faith in God has not been shaken. God is not evil, and surely this accident is not His fault. Could He not have prevented this? Of course, He can! But if He has not, He is greater than my thoughts. God has not promised us a smooth life in this imperfect world; but He has promised to be with us through it all. Here in Indonesia, Jesus isn't only to live for; He is to die for! I will follow Him no matter what, and others will follow me as I follow Christ. Finally, as His love is unconditional to us, so our faith should be *unconditional* to Him. The Lord gives, the Lord takes away, blessed be the name of the Lord!

Charisma News: What has the Holy Spirit taught you in this time?

Mantofa: That no one is exempt from suffering. That crash, it could have been me in it or anybody. Nobody is special, not even Christians or preachers—only Jesus is! We are only loved. The only thing that is certain in this life is our salvation. Blessed are they whose names have been written in the Book of Life!

Charisma News: Was there a spiritual purpose behind their trip? Some have speculated they were on a mission trip.

Mantofa: Mawar Sharon (Rose of Sharon) Church, which I pastor, has 45,000 members. For the numeric reason alone, it is quite normal to bump into our church members wherever you go in, around, and from Surabaya city. We have lost 45 beloved members which consisted of several family units who coincidentally took the same route and boarded the same jet to Singapore that dreadful morning. Many traveled on holidays and they didn't necessarily know the other families, though of the same church.

Charisma News: How has this affected your personal faith?

Mantofa: My faith in Jesus hasn't changed, for it is never circumstantial in the first place. Christ is my Lord in all the seasons of my life, whether joyous or sad. When my faith hits rock-bottom, then my bottom is the Rock. Then, my faith gets even stronger than ever!

Mantofa's Supernatural Vision from Heaven

Let Go & Let God!

"But I would not have you ignorant, brothers, concerning those who are asleep, that you may not grieve as others who have no hope. For if we believe that Jesus died and arose again, so God will bring with Him those who sleep in Jesus" (1 Thess. 4:13-14).

“Upon the accident which befell Air Asia flight QZ 8501 in December 2014, God showed me this imagery that you see on this canvas. On board the doomed plane were 162 passengers, and 45 of them *are* (not were, they are *forever*) our church members. Instead of grieving without hope as the godless do, we who believe in Christ have eternal lives.

“From the deep ocean, the souls of men and women deared to many and beloved by God ascended to heaven by the way of the cross. They marched into glory in white arrays.

“Though all human lives are but like smoke which evaporates too quickly, blessed are those whose names have been written in the Book of Life. The Lamb of God will wipe every remaining tear from their eyes, and they shall live as stars and diamonds in the sky, as angels on high, and as sons and daughters of the King of heaven. So, let go and let God!”