

MINISTRY AT THE AMISH SCHOOLHOUSE SHOOTING

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My mission as a chaplain to Troop J of the Pennsylvania State Police is to share salvation's hope with a hurting world. To let people know that Christ loves them and "gave Himself up" for them. In the course of my duties I encounter daily crises, people moving through life's passages and facing constant perils. I trust God to use me, transcending solitary struggles and powerful forces in order to advance His kingdom (2 Corinthians 6:1).

In some 50 years of ministry, I have come to prize the value of "being" with people. It is ministry of "walking around" or "presence:" meeting people on their own ground in order to help them face perplexities and deal with doubt. As a minister of Christ, this is my primary duty.

A chaplain has a specialized ministry in a unique setting. Troopers are daily confronted with danger, pressure, and public exposure. It is essential to work at building healthy and healing relationships, both warm and caring. In the face of a crisis, such as the horrific shooting of ten young girls at the Amish schoolhouse in Nickel Mines, my duty is to serve the troopers and others at the scene, no matter how shocking it may be. Above all, I must keep my cool, to be the person who can keep it together for those who are stunned by events, when all else seems to be falling apart. I walk with people as they progress through the normal chain of emotions triggered by trauma. There is always some confusion and chaos at any shooting, at least at the outset. Prayers for God's grace and mercy are so very vital at that time.

The morning of the shooting I arrived at the schoolhouse in a police cruiser. Already at the crime scene were a number of troopers, whom I know by first names. Blood covered their uniforms since they held the injured and dying girls in their arms. Some were in a state of astonishment and naturally having emotional struggles.

Their immediate need was the familiar face of one who cared and understood their feelings, who accepted them just as they were. I immediately embraced a number of troopers. Sergeants directed me to those that they deemed critical so I could comfort and demonstrate care.

At such a time, words fail and tears flow. Tears are a language all their own. Every individual who witnessed that horrible encounter needed a presence, someone to just be there for them, to listen and to say, "It's okay" and "You're okay: 'to be a representative of our Lord. Everything happening seemed so unreal at those moments. The response by the troopers was well organized; each trooper knew what his/her job was and carried it out in an exceptional manner. They looked out for each other and searched for ways they could be of assistance to the whole Amish community. As they took up their positions, they spoke to everyone in a most respectful and caring manner.

I observed the volunteer fire companies, fire police, the sheriff's department, ambulance and emergency response teams, and others working together beautifully to assist in this disaster. The officer in charge of the case asked me to act as a representative to the Amish bishops and help to find out the identity of the girls in the school by talking with the 20 year-old teacher. The bishop and his two assistants sat on the hill in front of the schoolhouse. The usually bucolic Pennsylvania Old Order Dutchman appeared stunned and bewildered, in shock by the volcanic emotions he was experiencing.

He asked if he could go to the Amish farmhouse just up the road so he could minister to the parents and grandparents gathered there. I was able to get a trooper in a patrol car to take us up to the farmhouse. Our Commissioner offered to fly the parents in his helicopter to the hospitals where their girls were being treated, but they already had vans at the farm waiting to transport the families.

As I entered the farmhouse, I asked the owner and the bishop if I could pray, in English, for all the parents and grandparents gathered in two rooms. He encouraged me to do so, as he looked in his prayer book for a Pennsylvania Dutch prayer that would be appropriate. I was moved to tears as I felt the weight of their loss and a burden for each soul present. I prayed as the Spirit of God led me. A week later when the Amish parents, grandparents, and leaders held a meeting at the Bart Firehouse, some of the parents thanked me for that prayer.

The teacher at the farmhouse wrote down the names of the girls in my Day-Timer, and I gave them to the trooper case manager for his record. The young schoolteacher was struggling with feelings of guilt for having run from the schoolhouse to call the State Police when the boys escaped.

I told her the next day in the presence of the boys, the school board, and the bishop, "You did the right thing that God would have you to do in leaving the girls to call the police, for you saved them from further harm: "The bishop responded, "You did the right thing in telling her that, thank you: 'A demonstration of the unusual nature of the Amish community can be seen by the questions they asked me. "How should we spend this money we are being given?" "How can we pay the Pennsylvania State Police for all they have done for us?"

The Amish consider me to be "English:'so my interaction and ministry among them is very limited but they taught me a great deal. They said, "We forgive this man for what he has done:' and said it immediately. What an unexpected jolt that gave me! I looked for anger, fury, and a desire for revenge upon the man who shot their girls, all ten of them.

Instead, I am astonished, even dumbfounded, by their Christian charity. Is this not what Christ taught us? What an example to organized and established churches! To all believers! No humanistic secular philosophy or psychological jargon but simple faith and forgiveness. "What can we do for the Roberts family?" was the question of this forgiving community.

Such forgiveness seems foreign to sinful human nature, but nothing is more characteristic of divine grace. Both justice and mercy are great virtues. Isn't it truly supernatural to forgive when your precious daughter is suddenly killed without mercy? The Amish families of five dead girls and five wounded girls went even further and asked that donations be directed to the shooter's family. That's grace upon grace!

My ministry now is follow-up and aiding in the healing process. Since I experienced post-traumatic stress from combat in Vietnam as a military chaplain, I feel qualified to assist our troopers and their families who are demonstrating the same symptoms.

Yes, troopers have hearts, especially for children. Naturally, they have anger toward the perpetrator. "How could anyone do such a thing?" is a question on the minds of all. I often quote Jeremiah 17:9, "The heart is deceitful above all things, and beyond cure. Who can understand it? I, the Lord, search the heart and examine the mind..."

Tears, gratitude, and anguish were shared among troopers and victims alike in a remarkable meeting in wake of the shootings that left five Amish girls dead. As we gathered in the Bart Firehouse with the Amish families, there was a reaching out to each other, a lessening of grief and anguish.

Troopers who were the first responders talked for hours with the Amish. The quest for closure was

marked by the appearance of three of the girls shot and wounded by the distraught milk truck driver. This meeting had been carefully arranged by the Amish community to exclude the press, so the girls could express gratitude and identify the troopers who had saved them. It was a very emotional time, but the troopers put their hearts out on the floor and the Amish did the same. It was comforting to both the girls and the troopers deeply affected by the tragedy. Most of us have never had an experience like this one and may never again face such trauma. As one Amish man put it, "My mind is so full that my pen cannot stay after it:'

We trust in a Sovereign Lord, and we know that His redemptive providence is always at work in spite of diabolical schemes and sinful actions. The Lord Jesus Christ is our Comforter and our Peacemaker.