

+Ministry After Gun Violence

Since our mass shooting 20 months ago, I've spoken to dozens of pastors wanting to be a part of healing their communities after their own mass shootings. I am about to go on sabbatical which I pray means a respite from violence and conversation about violence. So I am writing down some things, in hopes it won't be needed while I'm away, but just in case it is...

Pastor, if a mass shooting, God forbid, happens in your neighborhood, please know you are far from alone. Please pick and choose what is helpful to you from my experience:

***Put on your own oxygen mask first.**

I had just given blood to help another mass shooting in El Paso when ours occurred. I was already feeling physically weak. The trauma I saw after responding to the hospital's call for clergy was emotionally draining as well. Eat, sleep, exercise, go to therapy, ask someone to pray for and with you, whatever it takes to care for yourself. Check in with your own family. This happened to you, too. You will get calls and emails from many places. You don't need to return any. First things first.

***Respond to your congregation.**

This is the primary flock you are called to shepherd. Be with them, gather your leaders, pray together, tend to those who need extra care. Preach about this event, pray about it in worship, make a space for lament. Toxic positivity is not helpful, nor is a tirade about gun control. Mourn together.

***Witness to your community.**

For me, that meant facilitating an ecumenical prayer service immediately after the event, as well as at the one-year anniversary. It also meant holding space for lament and healing by working with community leaders to create a "Family Resiliency Center." The FRC, funded by the Texas governor's office, continues to respond to the trauma with free, walk-in mental healthcare services for anyone affected by our event. Holding space for lament also meant choosing to continue to talk about what happened, to write columns in the newspaper about it, to keep sending "thinking of you" cards to those directly affected, to be the church that had room for tears, anger, and hope.

***Care for those directly impacted.**

Our whole community was terrorized by a mass mobile shooter, so our congregation became a mobile movement of mass love. We baked dozens upon dozens of cookies the week following the shooting and took them to our emergency rooms and ICUs, to our EMTs, to the wrecker services, and to our post offices who lost a mail carrier. After that, we organized a meal for all of those who were injured or whose loved ones were killed. We felt they needed to know each other. We invited families through our victim assistance office at the Department of Public Safety. Our ministerial alliance came on board to bring comfort food. Yes, bringing a plate of home baked cornbread muffins to victims of a mass shooting felt like putting a bandaid on a gaping wound, but it was something, and the Holy Spirit took our little offerings and worked some healing beginnings that day.

***Find beauty.**

Chalk art at memorial services, flowers to first responders, a dancer who shared a prayer in movement at a worship service, a rainbow unbidden in the sky at the one-year anniversary event, all of these signs of beauty and more helped the ugly images begin to recede ever so slightly. If there's beauty, celebrate it, and point it out, so others can also reaffirm the goodness of life and of our God who is with us.

***Advocate as you are led.**

If you do your research, you will discover that this uniquely American problem is not about more access to mental health care, though that's needed for other reasons. It's not about how sinful we are, though that is true. It's about how easy access to military-grade weapons is. For me, the most meaningful advocacy for change comes in a hyper-local way. Attending local town halls, standing with victims' families as they find their way through the legal system, and badgering our local state and national representatives is what I feel called to do. You will find what you feel called to do. Just don't do nothing.

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