

Annunciation Pastor Points to God's Healing Power 1 Year After Church and School Shooting

Just over a year after gunfire shattered the peace at Annunciation Catholic Church and School, Father Dennis Zehren is reflecting on how faith has carried the community through grief and toward healing.

Zehren became pastor shortly before a gunman fired dozens of rounds through the church's stained-glass windows. In the year since the shooting, he has emphasized biblical mourning, pastoral presence and the assurance that suffering does not mean God has abandoned His people.

For the first time in more than 30 years, Annunciation's pastor is living in the house on campus. Zehren considers that decision part of his responsibility to help the children regain a sense of security.

"This is my home, and I hope that kind of instills in them a sense of security and a sense of safety," Zehren told MPR News.

He wants students to know that "Father is always here, looking over his sheep, always looking over the sheepfold, and making sure everything's all right."

That visible pastoral presence points to a greater spiritual reality. Violence may shake a community, but it cannot drive God away.

"We don't feel like it's something that God has abandoned us when we suffer," Zehren said. "We recognize that God is right

there in the midst of it.”



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God Meets Us in Our Grief

In the immediate aftermath of the Annunciation church and school shooting, Zehren's sermons sought to reassure frightened students and grieving parishioners. His teaching now explores how Scripture helps Christians process trauma without ignoring the pain.

"Saint Paul tells us in his letter to the Romans that we are to weep with those who weep," Zehren said. "So, the Bible never just tells us we'll just try to cheer them up or just try to get them to move on, but he tells us to weep with those who weep."

Biblical healing does not require us to pretend the hurt is gone. God enters our grief, draws us together and begins restoring what violence attempted to destroy.

Psalm 147:3 declares, "He heals the broken in heart, and binds up their wounds" (MEV).

Zehren has seen signs of that healing in Annunciation's students. On Halloween, one first grader dressed as Sophia Forchas, a student who was critically injured in the shooting. The child wore blue clothing modeled after the outfit Sophia wore when she left the hospital.

"I think she recognized that Sophia was somebody that inspired her, and somebody that she had grown to love through this experience," Zehren said. "And that's one of the ways we find healing."

Annunciation chose "Guide Our Feet into the Way of Peace" as its theme for this school year. It teaches students that peace

is not passive but something they must intentionally pursue.

One year later, the wounds have not been forgotten. Yet where darkness once intruded, God is binding broken hearts, restoring hope and leading a wounded community forward in peace.

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