

Austin Pastor: How to Respond in the Aftermath of Serial Bombings

The Austin serial bomber took his life once surrounded by police officers in Round Rock, Texas, north of Austin.

Leading up to his identification and death, his actions killed two African-American men in East Austin after two package bombs exploded. The families of Anthony Stephan House and Draylen Mason lost their loved ones due to a cowardly act of senseless violence.

Before these tragedies, the two families knew each other, having family members who all attended the same church. These men were dearly loved and remembered fondly by friends and family.

On the same day Draylen died and his mother was injured, 75-year-old Esperanza Herrera was injured by a package bomb. Apparently, the package was addressed to a different house number.

These first three bombs were all placed on the doorsteps of homes in East Austin. All three bombs injured or killed people of color.

Now, while the police are sorting out the 23-year-old bomber's motives, the nation is left wondering why. During the investigation, the police did not call these crimes an act of terrorism –while they gathered evidence –nor a hate crime –to keep the investigation broad. I don't know the semantics of labeling crimes, but regardless of the official designation: *These bombings were fueled by hate. These bombings were an act of terror.*

In the past couple of days, another bomb injured two young white men who were walking around their neighborhood in Southwest Austin. Apparently, a trip wire set off this bomb, and yet another bomb exploded in a Fed Ex facility an hour outside of Austin. Investigators think it may have been sent from the Fed Ex on Brodie Lane where my daughter and I often go to work on photo albums. These last few bombs led police to the perpetrator.

Targeting Austin?

I love Austin. It's a beautiful, vibrant, artistic and an increasingly diverse city.

At the same time, as one of the fastest growing cities, it can also be a lonely place.

As the site of South by Southwest, the Austin City Limits Music Festival, and headquarters for several international tech companies and startups, Austin is known for innovation, live music, and amazing food.

Yet, in spite of its progressive reputation, Austin has also had a history of segregation, gentrification, and division. These bombings have exposed some of these past wounds, leaving our communities of color mourning the loss of loved ones and grieved over what appears to be racial targeting. As followers of Jesus, we too should deeply care about this.

Even as only 13 percent of the city attends a local church, the level of cooperation between churches from different denominations and different ethnic backgrounds is quite remarkable, and something I have observed and valued while leading a local congregation in south Austin.

Together, people of faith can be the mobilizing force for healing.

So how should we respond?

As we're left with: Why Austin? Why this? Why these communities? We should also ask ourselves: How should we respond? How can God be using this for our good and his glory? In light of the hope we have in Jesus, how would he have me care for others in the midst of this situation? Here are a few ways to respond this and other heartbreak in our social fabric:

1. Grieve for the loss in Austin and other tragedies the country has recently experienced.

From cover to cover of the Bible, we see God's people lament, sometimes individually but often corporately. With the constant flurry of our modern news cycle, it's easy to become callused toward the events going on around us. For Austin, this month's events are a little too close to home. The reality of the injustice toward innocent people should cause our hearts to grieve: grief for the past injustice toward racial minorities, grief for the lives lost here in Austin, Parkland and others, grief for the brokenness sin has caused in our world.

2. Turn to God.

Tragedies like this remind us how powerless we actually are as human beings. Life is fragile. Life is precious. God is bigger than our circumstances. Our lamentation should propel us toward a big God.

If you are afraid, ask God for courage. He can help us step out in faith.

If you are angry, tell God. He can handle our emotions.

If you are mourning, let yourself mourn.

At a recent memorial for the victims of these bombings, the community who came in support of the families of those who were victims of the attack sang "Amazing Grace," a beautiful

reminder of God's love for us even when love is so lacking in our world.

Our society is sick. Bombings and school shootings are symptoms of our brokenness.

- God can bring peace to those of us who have lost someone we love.
- God can bring healing to those who are hurting, anxious and angry.
- God can forgive us and heal us as we turn to Him.
- God can bring justice in this terrible situation.

Instead of first going to social media and sending #thoughtsandprayers, we should actually pray. Pray that the Lord will break our hearts for the things that break his. Pray that our communities will be reconciled along racial lines and that true healing will come where wounds once prevailed, especially among fellow believers. Pray that in the midst of real, unimaginable, unfair tragedy that those far from God will know, hear and see his kindness through the people of God.

3. Know your neighbors.

You can live in Austin for years and never know your neighbor. This can be true in other big and fast-growing cities. We need to get off the couch and walk across the street to meet our neighbors.

Invite them into your home. Hear their story. Find out their passions, their hopes, their dreams and find out ways you can serve them. When the time is right, ask how you can pray for them.

We are hard-wired to know and be known. It's how we were created and one way we look like our creator. So seek out the people God has placed in your circles of influence, both literal neighbors and neighbors in the cubicle next door, the

mom whose child your kids play with, the people who frequent your favorite café and beyond. Rather than binging on Netflix, turn one night of the week into a time to connect with your neighbors.

4. Take care of each other.

We can start by serving those who have been directly affected by the bombings.

Rather than hiding in our homes, we need to engage with others around us. We need to be vigilant and intentional. Who are the people in our lives who are hurting, who need a meal, a listening ear, someone to weep with or gentle arms to fall to? God's love for us is extravagant, and because of this, our love for humanity too should be extravagant.

5. Long for Christ's return.

In our fallen state, tragedy will come. With a heavy heart, repentant of the rebellion that first started in the garden, we should long for the return of Jesus. Our cry should be: Come Lord Jesus, and our response should be to love those who are different from us, kindly sharing with them the grace through faith in Jesus.

This broken world needs us to become the people God created us to be. We can turn what was intended to foster hate to mobilize us to love. We can turn what was intended to foster fear and terror to mobilize us to bring peace. {eoa}

Dr. Eric Bryant serves with Gateway Church in Austin along with senior pastor John Burke. Previously, Eric served with Erwin McManus at Mosaic in Los Angeles, a church known for its creativity and diversity. Eric is the author of Not Like Me. Find him online at [www.ericbryant.com](#) or on Twitter.