

‘Cries and Screams and Sobs’ in Colorado

They all held out hope. Every last one, even as the reality of the horrific movie theater shooting set in.

Until the official word came down that their loved one didn’t survive *The Dark Knight Rises* midnight tragedy, they were going to believe.

“There is still hope,” Rapid Response team chaplain Becca Dowling said as she comforted the victim’s family members. “Let’s pray they are still alive. That God would comfort us. We held out hope.”

But one by one, the news turned dire. Tragically, and against all human logic or reasoning, a 24-year-old gunman had taken 12 lives and injured 58 others.

The Dowlings—Jack and Becca—were the first chaplains on the scene at 7:45 a.m. and were ushered into Gateway High School to minister to those desiring emotional and spiritual care.

It’s the fourth shooting that the Dowlings have deployed to as chaplains, but never so rapidly. Already stationed at the Colorado Springs wildfires, roughly 70 miles south of Aurora, Jack and Becca responded immediately that morning and God opened doors for these chaplains to provide comfort in a time of impossible uncertainty and mourning.

“...Incredible intense grief,” said Becca, who heard “their cries and screams and sobs.”

It was all God’s timing, she said. “Being there right away,” said Becca, one of 11 chaplains who ministered over the weekend. “Where the hurt was so raw, so new. If we had arrived four hours later, we would not have known that.”

In the initial wake of Friday's tragedy, Becca described the chaplains' role as mostly "a ministry of presence."

"There's a lot of silent **prayers** going out," she said. "It's not a **ministry** of a lot of words."

One such instance actually happened in the ladies' restroom, where the mother of one of the survivors frantically rushed to try to wash the blood off her daughter's purse. Her daughter's boyfriend, who reportedly shielded her from the gunman with his own body, was one of the 12 killed.

"This shouldn't have happened, this shouldn't have happened," the mother said, endlessly scrubbing the purse.

"I put my hand on her shoulder, said a **prayer** for her to be able to calm down. It took about five minutes, but the Holy Spirit took over and He calmed her down."

But as the morning turned to afternoon, news of the fatalities started trickling in and in some cases denial met reality.

Time after time, the news was not good.

"Awful," Becca said. "One dad was so angry, he went to every hospital himself personally (trying to get answers). Some were just sitting there with a glazed look.

"Just sad, sad, sad."

Chaplains have deployed to more than 135 natural and man-made disasters—spreading the hope and **love of Christ**—since 2002 in all shapes, sizes and situations. But the complexities of the Aurora shooting created a highly diverse arena of ministry opportunities.

Jack, a retired police officer himself, prayed and encouraged "countless" police officers, many who worked that night.

The chaplains were invited to attend a special Friday service

at Calvary Chapel Aurora—a church heavily involved in last summer’s Rock the Range outreach Festival—to minister as 33 people from its congregation were at the movie theater on Thursday night.

Several thousand came to an official vigil at the Aurora Town Hall Sunday and chaplains had the opportunity to pray with 14 people who accepted Christ in their lives for the first time.

“That was a really special time of ministry,” Jack said.

The memorial services will continue this week and beyond.

On the hillside across the street from the movie theater, people started leaving candles and flowers. Now the hill “keeps building.” Twelve white crosses have been added and the area overlooking the theater has turned into an unofficial around-the-clock mourning area.

Chaplains will continue to have a presence there, along with the shopping mall adjacent to the movie theater. So far, everyone who they have come into contact with has been affected by this, from those being evacuated around the shooter’s booby-trapped apartment to others dealing with survivor’s guilt.

“Surprisingly, we’ve talked to a lot of people who were in the theater,” Becca said. “A mom and dad ran out of the theater as soon as the shooting started and left before there was a lockdown on the parking lot.”

The 11 **chaplains** currently deployed have divided themselves into two shifts to cover what is “literally day and night” ministry. Two fresh chaplains will be arriving on Wednesday as they will continue to make themselves available to share the hope that can only be found in Jesus.

“The need is unbelievable,” Becca said. “But God opens these wide-open gaps for us to walk through every time we go to a

disaster.”

A chaplain will be attending each funeral service to offer condolences on behalf of the Rapid Response Team and will give the mourning family a leather-bound Billy Graham Bible.

“What a privilege it is to be a part of this ministry,” Becca said. “And to feel God’s hand upon it.”

Read Franklin Graham’s statement on the Colorado shooting.

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