

Ministering After Horrific Connecticut School Tragedy

As dusk settled on a community in turmoil Friday night, crisis-trained chaplains from the Billy Graham Rapid Response Team arrived into Newtown, Conn. Just hours earlier, an unspeakably evil act shook the foundation of this town and left anguish and pain where there was once peace and joy.

A gunman entered a school and killed 20 children and six adults, along with his mother and himself.

"This time the tragedy is different for all of us, including the chaplains," said Al New, deployment manager with the Billy Graham Rapid Response Team, who arrived at 6:30 p.m. the day of the shooting. "We're all well-trained in what we do, but none of us have ever dealt with this many young children being killed in any tragedy like this."

The chaplains have heard from many in the area that this can't be happening; not in an idyllic rural area like Newtown. "We're seeing a community of people that never would have expected anything like this tragedy to happen in a small town in Connecticut. Mainly what we're seeing is a lot of tears, and a lot of people who are nervous about what tomorrow is going to bring," said New.

Tragically, it did happen here, and now the hundreds of people affected are left trying to make sense of a senseless situation. Ginger Sanders, a chaplain coordinator who spent yesterday ministering to survivors, repeatedly used the word "horror" while discussing the state of those with whom she interacted.

"The horror. I met with some teachers yesterday and the horror and the shock; the disbelief and the pain," said Sanders. "The concern for the children in their classroom that saw all of

this. The ache that's in their hearts because they still don't really know what's going on."

Ministry Focus

In a small community like this, everybody has been affected one way or another. In the immediate aftermath of the tragedy much of the chaplains' ministry was focused on First Responders, particularly those who were on the scene Friday morning.

"The First Responders, in particular, are the ones maintaining that emotional front that they are supposed to be strong," said chaplain coordinator Leo Grabowski, a former law enforcement officer. "But when we get them aside, they talk and break down. We're here as a ministry of presence. Just a shoulder to lean on, a pat on the back. Just to listen, watch them and help them."

Sanders shared her own interaction with one state trooper. "He had tears in his eyes. He said, 'I'm a believer in Jesus Christ. The pain is still there, but I know I have comfort and hope.' The hurt is so raw. The pain is there. We asked if we could pray for him. He said, 'I'm on duty, but I will keep my eyes open if you will please pray.'"

In addition to the First Responders, chaplains have been reaching out to the teachers, local pastors and even the counselors that were brought in to aid in the recovery. "Surprisingly, much of our ministry was to the counselors themselves," said Grabowski. "After they hear what's happening, they need to unload. A human being can only take so much, and when they hear these horror stories of the young children – babies – being slaughtered, it affects them. They thought they could get through it because they've heard things in the past, but nothing prepares anyone for the shock of this carnage."

He added, "We're here for the pastors and have come alongside

them as well. One pastor just told me, 'We weren't taught this in seminary.' As chaplains, we're prepared just to actively listen, and – above all – to pray."

What Do You Say?

What do you say in a time like this? What words bring comfort to those who have seen, heard, and done so much; who have witnessed such unspeakable horror?

According to the chaplains, this isn't the time for words.

"Sometimes you don't say anything," said New. "You just come alongside them and let your presence be known. Just be there. Sometimes we'll ask the officers and First Responders, 'How are you holding up?' And we'll just let them begin to speak and share."

Sanders shared one example of this ministry of presence. "A teacher at the school walked by me yesterday, and she wasn't even close to where the shots were. But I said, 'Do you need a hug?' She just collapsed into my arms.

"They see us come up as Billy Graham chaplains and they just know we're here to give them love and comfort in the name of Jesus," Sanders continued. "They need a hug, and sometimes we don't need to say anything. Just be there for them."

Please Pray

The chaplains ask that you pray for the people of Newtown and all those affected. Pray for the First Responders, the counselors, the teachers and the pastors. Pray for all of the media outlets that are on-site. Most of all, pray for the heartbroken families who are experiencing the incalculable sorrow of losing a child in such a violent, evil way.

The chaplains all acknowledge that this deployment is incomparable, and is a struggle for them as well. They covet your prayers as they seek to minister with the hope of Christ in this disaster. Pray for them, and for their ministry.

“Pray for the town of Newtown, that God’s supernatural peace would invade their souls and spirits,” said Grabowski. “Pray for us. Pray that we would be active listeners and hear God in this, and say the right thing at the right time, knowing when to be silent.

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