

Wounded Warriors and the Virginia Tech Tragedy A Police Chaplain's View

By Thomas R. McDearis, Ph.D.



April 16, 2007, was already a strange day in Blacksburg, Virginia. Nestled in the Blue Ridge Mountains, Blacksburg is accustomed to unusual weather patterns. However, 35 degrees, snow flurries, and wind gusts of 60 miles per hour are quite odd for spring, even in a town where the joke is, “If you don’t like our weather, wait an hour, and it’ll be something else.”

I was taking the day off that Monday. As ridiculous as it now seems, I thought I had a problem. My printer had gone out, and I was complaining, in my mind, that I had to go out in that wretched weather to buy a new one. Moving slowly, having no urgency to be anywhere, I had just stepped to another room when I heard my cell phone ringing. Unable to reach it, I thought that they could leave a message, and I would call them back. Seconds later, it rang again. Experience told me that this call was important.

Upon answering the phone, I heard a member of the local rescue squad say, “Do you know what’s going on? There’s shooting, lots of it. Somebody’s inside Norris Hall, and they’re shooting the place up. You better get over there fast.” Having once been a deputy sheriff, I knew the gravity and danger of such a call.

I currently serve as a chaplain of the Blacksburg Police Department and as the senior pastor of the Blacksburg Baptist Church. Sensing that the day was about to thrust me into places where instant identification would be crucial, I grabbed my badge and my police uniform from the closet. But, before I could get dressed, the phone rang again and again. Lieutenant Bruce Bradbery, now a captain, of the Blacksburg Police Department yelled, “Pray! Pray hard! Don’t stop. Go to the hospital as fast as you can.” Another call came from an unidentified number. Although I still am unsure

who it was, I never will forget the voice saying, “It’s terrible. Come quick. We need your help.”

The Unthinkable Attack

At the time, I had no way of knowing that the first chapter of this tragedy had begun over 2 hours earlier when the same assailant shot and wounded a young woman in her dorm on the Virginia Tech campus. She would die 2 hours later. Upon hearing either the gunshot or the girl’s cry for help, the floor’s resident assistant went to her aid. He was shot in the head upon entering her room and died instantly.

Although it is not known why this first assault was made, this tragic event revealed itself to be a mistake toward the assailant completing his ultimate plan. Had that event not occurred only those officers on patrol and the command staffs of the

Virginia Tech and Blacksburg police departments would have been available to respond to the shootings in Norris Hall. However, following the first shootings, a student in a neighboring room reported what she thought was someone who had fallen from a bunk bed in the room next door. Virginia Tech Rescue was dispatched, and a Virginia Tech police officer responded as well. Upon arrival, the officer found two bodies and called for assistance. As time passed, that initial call brought a contingent of officers from the Virginia Tech and Blacksburg police departments, including the emergency response (SWAT) teams from both, to the campus. Also, the Blacksburg police requested patrol assistance from the Montgomery County Sheriff’s Office, a call that made still more officers available when the shootings began in Norris Hall.

At 9:42 a.m., the first call was received from Norris Hall; others would follow. An active shooter was on the second floor of the classroom building. Officers from both Virginia Tech and Blacksburg responded. Although the assailant had chained the doors of Norris Hall from the inside, the police made entry within 8 minutes of the first call. Breaching doors with gunfire and bolt cutters, they made an attack on the second floor of Norris Hall where they could hear shots being fired in rapid succession. They immediately announced their presence upon reaching the second-floor hallway. At that time, one more shot was heard, that of the assailant taking his own life. The building then became utterly silent. No screams or calls for help were heard. A room-to-room search was conducted. Once the suspect was identified and the floor was secured, the medical evacuation began.

The Terrible Toll

As I raced to the local hospital, I could tell something truly terrible was unfolding. Law enforcement units and ambulances from across a 40-mile region were streaming toward Virginia Tech. En route to the hospital, I called Lieutenant Bradbery for an update. I had no idea that he was

Dr. McDearis, a former deputy sheriff, is the lead chaplain for the Blacksburg, Virginia, Police Department and the senior pastor of the Blacksburg Baptist Church.



loading injured and dying students from the classroom building into his police SUV and speeding them two blocks away to the staging area where dozens of ambulances were now lining up to transport the wounded. I asked where he was, and he replied, "I can't talk now. Get to the hospital. This is bad. I've never seen anything like it."

Tragedy is not new to me. While in college, I not only served with the sheriff's office but also worked part time for a funeral home and with the local ambulance service. Later, while serving my first rural church, I was a captain with the county's fire and rescue service. I have seen my share of death and injury, but not like this.

Arriving before I could hear the wail of the first sirens from approaching ambulances, I thought the emergency department of Montgomery Regional Hospital looked surreal, like an episode of "ER." Doctors, nurses, and technicians suited in their sterile gowns; the entire hospital abuzz with the trauma alert; four surgical suites cleared for trauma surgery. It was eerie and, oddly, quite reassuring.

Several police officers arrived at the hospital almost in tandem with me. As they began setting up security and a media area, I was summoned to a trauma room to minister to a young student who had been gravely wounded in the first attack at Ambler-Johnson Hall and whose eyes now portrayed the close of life. I offered a prayer of benediction. Minutes later, she was evacuated to the region's level-one trauma center where neurosurgeons awaited her arrival. Sadly, shortly after leaving our hospital, the young woman died.

As I emerged from the room, Lieutenant Bradbery called me and said, "I've just put eight students in an ambulance and they're on their way.

Tell the ER to be ready." After passing the message, a number of us went to the ambulance bay to await the incoming victims. Within minutes, the first sirens blared into the hospital driveway as we stood ready to unload the broken students. Yelling "red," meaning the students were critical and a top priority, we grabbed the stretchers and pushed them to waiting medical teams. One girl, shot several times, grabbed my hand and said, "Hold me.

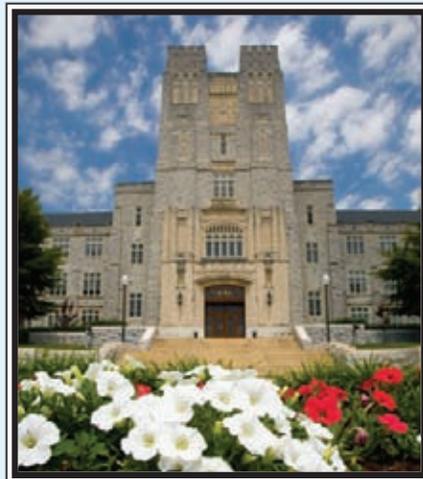
I'm gonna die." I held her as long as I could, and, thankfully, she did not die.

In less than 10 minutes, the driveway was filled with ambulances bringing 18 of the 25 wounded victims to our hospital. Many were badly injured and some less so, but all were stunned and shocked that such a thing could happen. They mirrored the feelings of the entire community.

As the first line of ambulances unloaded their shattered cargo, we all became annoyed

that we could not hear any other sirens approaching. What was the hold up? What was taking so long? As we stood in the ambulance bay awaiting more victims, a nurse came to me with tears in her eyes. "That's all of them," she said, "but they say they have at least 12 dead, maybe more." Only then did it hit us. We would hear no more sirens. A silence had befallen Norris Hall. A silence no siren could awaken.

Fifteen minutes later, I called Lieutenant Bradbery. Asking how many victims were dead and hoping that he would correct the number I had been told earlier, I never will forget his answer, "I don't know for sure, but it's like a war zone. I'd say between 30 and 40. At least that many." My mind could not comprehend 12 dead, much less between 30 and 40. For me, however, even worse was to come.



The Inner Turmoil

Less than 10 minutes after speaking with Lieutenant Bradbery, I received a call from my church staff regarding a missing student who had been in room 211 of Norris Hall. By this time, I knew that some of the worst carnage in Norris Hall had occurred in room 211. Yet, I had no way to confirm this student's whereabouts. I immediately canvassed the hospital to ascertain if she had been brought in without my noticing. She was not there. I then called the other hospitals in the region, spoke with police officers on the scene, and gave them her name and description. There was no sign of her. I knew this left only one place for her to be, but I tried to tell myself that several victims had yet to be identified at other hospitals. Surely, she was one of them.

For the next 3 hours, I cared for the less severely wounded students, letting them talk and helping them with phone calls to their parents and friends. We set up a hospitality room for the friends of the wounded. Dozens of them arrived seeking information and support, and we did the best we could to keep them calm and informed.

I made my rounds to the many police officers from several agencies surrounding the hospital. How were they doing? What were they thinking? What did they need? How could I help? Questions any chaplain would ask in the aftermath of a major tragedy.

By 1 p.m., the worst of the crisis at the hospital had subsided, so I left to go to Norris Hall. Another chaplain and I arrived just as the process of removing bodies began. To me, the Virginia Tech campus is one of the most beautiful state university campuses in America. Most of the buildings are constructed of magnificent stone known locally as Hokie Stone, named for the Virginia Tech mascot.

As we entered the archway of this grand 1920s-era classroom building, a door suddenly burst open, and through it came a stretcher carrying a stark black, sadly occupied, body bag. It was the epitome of paradox.

Over the next 2 hours, we chaplains paced the area talking with stunned and sometimes angry police officers. I found one officer standing behind a bush with tears in his eyes, clearly wanting no one to see him. However, most were doing better than I had expected. Having shifted early into "cop mode," they performed their arduous tasks with poise and professionalism. Most had placed the bulk of their emotions in neutral. They all knew that they had important work to do that could not be hampered by tears or rage.

Sometime after our arrival at Norris Hall, I received another call informing me that no one had found the missing student from our church. I called the police command post to see if she was listed among the wounded. She was not. I decided to go to room 211 to see if she was there. However, as I started toward Norris Hall, I received a phone

call from Blacksburg's police chief. The Inn at Virginia Tech had been designated as the receiving point for the families of the deceased. The chief asked me and the other chaplain to join a lieutenant at the Inn to establish a command post and to begin the process of notifying the families of their losses. I told the chief that I was about to go search for the missing student, but she asked me to avoid doing so. She told me that even if I found her, I could not tell her parents until the police had positively identified her. Understanding the situation, I followed the chief's instructions. However, this was hard for me. I was functioning in two roles on April 16, 2007. I was a representative of the

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Blacksburg Police Department, but I also was the pastor of the Blacksburg Baptist Church. These roles rarely are in conflict, but, occasionally, the lines between them can become blurred. This day was one of those times.

Upon arriving at the Inn, the first people I saw were the missing student's parents. There was anguish on their faces. Suddenly, I felt like I should have gone to Norris Hall to find their daughter. That is what I would have wanted someone to do for me. I quickly called to ask if the victims of room 211 were still in the classroom, but the bodies had been cleared. A wave of guilt swept over me. As a police chaplain, it is not my job to seek out and identify murder victims, but, as this family's pastor, I felt an obligation to try to find their daughter. Yet, I knew this was not my choice to make. The final choice lay with the chief of police. My job as a chaplain was to inform the many families of their losses and then minister to their needs. But, those two parents right in front of me were *my* church members. I felt so torn inside. However, my great respect for our chief and the knowledge of my role in this tragedy led me to follow the chief's instructions. To be effective, a police chaplain must understand this role, and, if you cannot fulfill the requirements of the job, you should step out of it. I chose to try to fulfill the requirements of the position, even though it left me feeling guilt-ridden.

From the early evening of April 16 until the early afternoon of April 17, we informed families of their tragic losses. It was a slow process. Most of the students were not carrying identification, so nearly all had to be identified by other means. As the families received the grim news, a few were calm and almost stoic. Most, however, were not. If

I live 100 years, I never will forget those screams, one after the other for 2 consecutive days. It was months before I stopped hearing those screams in my dreams. And, oh, how desperately those families clung to hope. Those poor people grasped to every ounce of hope they could for as long as they could. They were so desperate for the truth. But, until the truth was finally spoken, in their minds, their children, husbands, and wives were still with them. Again, it was such a paradox: families desperately wanting to know while, simultaneously, never wanting to know.

On the evening of April 16, a second personal blow came my way. Having been called to make another notification, I asked the name of the victim. The chief turned and handed it to me. I was shocked when I saw the name of another student who also attended our church. A girl who always seemed to sparkle with joy; I rarely saw

her without a smile on her face. She had big dreams for the future, she had the drive and the intelligence to make them come true, and all of her dreams included God and the greater good of humankind.

The Invisible Wounds

The following days were a blur. President Bush and Governor Kaine arrived on April 17 for the joint memorial service on campus. I helped escort the families to the coliseum while dozens of police officers provided security. Then came the funerals. I led three of them and assisted the police at the funeral home and at the sites of several others. Between the services, we conducted critical incident debriefings with the police officers. Many were held at my church. But, regardless of the setting, the response was usually the same. Some officers were annoyed because they were required to be



present. Some were talkative. There were tears. Often, there was silence coupled with a deep sense of mutual compassion. Everyone understood how the others were feeling, so support and respect permeated the various police departments.

Like most of Blacksburg, I spent the following days trying to make sense of the senseless act that so shattered our town and our university. I wanted to think that, until the morning of April 16, a broken printer and a day of blustery weather were among our more significant crises, but such was not true. Less than a year earlier, in August 2006, two local officers were killed in the line of duty, shot by an escaped prisoner. The police officers and sheriff's deputies of the region still were grieving when the Virginia Tech tragedy unfolded, thus making April 16 even more heart wrenching and stressful.

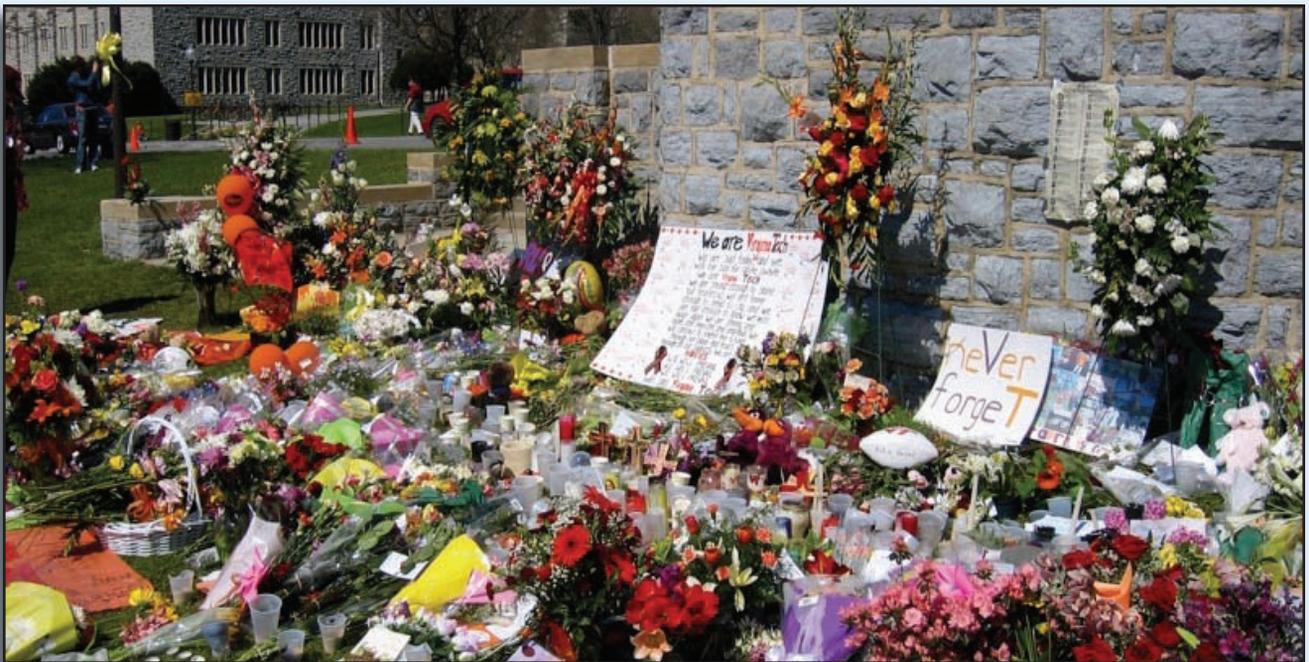
In the days that followed, many spoke honest words to me that were hard to hear, "It feels like God took a day off that Monday." How do you care for people amidst such doubt and suffering? It was a dilemma being faced by all of the police chaplains from every department involved. What

do you say when you know, all too personally, the frustration that everyone feels?

Having been a cop, I know the culture. I knew from experience that this was no place for spouting scripture or offering unwanted religious platitudes. Yet, even among these strong, determined warriors, support was needed. What should we do next? At least a partial answer soon came, something different from what I had previously witnessed.

In the aftermath of the Virginia Tech tragedy, officers from five area agencies began making contact. Most did not want the others to know that they were talking to the "cop's parsons," so they would call at night or find some reason to drop by our churches. Some called to ask if I wanted to join them for lunch. Some just needed to let off steam. Some did nothing more than tell the latest joke. Some sent e-mails or text messages. But, in the months following the tragedy, seldom a week went by without calls from officers, their spouses, or their significant others.

Officers would stop us in the halls of the police headquarters "to chat." More police officers and



sheriff's deputies passed through the back door of my church in April, May, and June 2007 than had been inside that building in 50 years. Most were not there to "find God," although a few did so in the weeks after the shootings. But, most did not come for overt religion. Some came sincerely asking, "Tommy, how are *you* doing?" Others just wanted to share their story with another who was there. But, the point is that many came, and all were welcomed because *they* were the wounded warriors. They had walked in the blood of children and in that of heroic professors who tried to bar classroom doors with their bodies in an effort to save their students. These warriors in blue and brown were indeed strong and professional, but they were wounded nonetheless. They had seen a huge chunk of hell that day, as well as another on that earlier August day when their comrades had fallen. Their spirits were heavy. They were spiritually drained. They needed someone to understand and to offer them encouragement. Some needed assurance that the bad guy had not won. Others just needed assurance, period. So, they came to their chaplains. It has been my experience that not a lot of officers do that. It was one of the great affirmations of my life that so many of them did. Somewhere along the way, a bond of trust had apparently formed, and, for that trust, we chaplains were extremely grateful.

The Need for Care

How do you care for the spirits of the wounded warriors when so many run for cover upon hearing the word *spiritual*? It is indeed a dilemma. For us, the chance to do so came only after having spent many years walking in the shadows of these

warriors. Rather than being the "cop's preachers," we have tried to simply be a presence. We never get worked up if a cop cusses. So what? We are not in the judgment business. We are in the helping business. We have tried to be there when death or sickness came calling or when marriages or relationships were coming apart. When a word from God was appropriate, helpful, and desired, we have tried to offer it. But, we always have extended support, friendship, humor, and a presence—a spiritual presence—for wounded spirits. Is that enough? No, but it is a start. And, with all my heart and soul, I believe God moves through those who will make their lives an avenue upon which the gifts of hope and healing can travel. And, I *know* even the strongest and the bravest warriors have wounds that *must* be healed if those warriors are to remain strong and fit for battle.

Too many of our warriors in blue give in to cynicism, alcoholism, and depression without ever reaching out for another's help. Some give up completely. When they do, we all lose. One officer who commits suicide is not only one too many but is one less warrior to respond when evil descends upon our streets or our classrooms.

How do we repair these wounded spirits? Much work needs to be done before we can fully answer that question. But, the work *must* be done. Virginia Tech was not and will not be the last place where law enforcement officers will walk amidst the wounds. Every time they do, a part of the spirit cracks. And, after all, even the hardest stone can crumble if the cracks become too deep. ♦

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Readers interested in discussing and furthering this crucial issue can contact the author at pastor@blacksburgbaptist.org.
