



CONCORDIA THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY, FORT WAYNE  
**For the Life of the World**

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## Care In the Wake of Tragedy

James B. Robinson



Photo courtesy Lutheran Church Charities

I am the campus ministry pastor at Martin Luther Chapel (MLC) in East Lansing, home of Michigan State University (MSU). On February 13, our community was rocked by a sudden violent attack on our students at MSU. Late in the evening, I was alerted about a shooting in East Lansing, but this one was on the campus, which is only two blocks from my church. The shooter shot and killed three students and injured five more.

That same night, the Religious Advisors Association, a group of religious leaders in the area who act in a supportive role for the students, was alerted to an opportunity to be present at a safe haven set up by the East Lansing police and campus police, where students could gather and be

with religious leaders while they waited for family to come collect them. The students were terrified that their peaceful community had experienced a shooting, and that they could have been a victim. Some of these students had seen their classmates shot; some climbed out of

windows and ran to seek safety.

The next day, Pastor Curt Dwyer, MLC's lead pastor, and I organized a Prayer Vigil, choosing a time during the day when most everyone in the community, especially students, staff, and faculty of MSU, would be able to attend. We wanted to hold a meaningful service that expressed compassion and the love of Christ while ensuring that those attending, including the many who would be walking to the chapel, would feel safe. Other Lutheran pastors in the area heard of the atrocities and our service and offered assistance. One pastor made arrangements to have the Lutheran Church Charities K-9 Comfort Dogs at our service.

The value of these dogs may not be apparent to all, but they clearly provided a valuable service in our community. Nearly everyone who visited the chapel also visited with the comfort dogs. Some students were hesitant to connect with others before the service, but the dogs seemed to melt their inhibitions, allowing them to truly grieve while being comforted. The canine friends sat quietly with each person, like Job's friends did in his time of need. The dogs also provided that peaceful comfort, free of judgement and attempts to take the pain away with words that had little use. The dogs, and their handlers, were able to provide unique care for the people who came to visit them, and they helped us pastors do our job of comforting people with the Word of God.

In the days and weeks that followed, I spent many hours at "listening stations" where students, faculty, and staff members could talk to counselors and religious leaders, all of whom volunteered time to provide care for those in need. Many students decided to go home and spend time with family, but those who remained received support as needed. Some congregants of MLC are faculty or staff, and they also needed care. Some asked me how they could be supportive of their students and fellow employees. One of the best pieces of advice is to listen and let the person say whatever is on their heart. Most people we cared for were not interested in platitudes. They really needed someone to hear them and acknowledge that their

pain was valid. I was also invited into the classroom by teachers to provide additional and intentional counseling to the students who had returned to classes.

The "care for all" continued in various ways. I reached out to neighboring congregations and made connections across the country as people contacted us and asked how they could help. I spoke at a ministry conference just days after the shooting, asking attendees to write their name and hometown on one side of an index card and words of encouragement on the other.

One church provided us with around 40 grief kits, each with a blanket, tissue, hot chocolate packet, and a card, which we shared with students. Volunteers distributed additional food donations, along with completed index cards, on campus, while others maintained a station in front of the chapel along the main street to reach other students and community members.

All these actions and more allowed us, with the help of God, to support the community, reach the lost, and care as Christ instructed us to do. There are many ways to care in the aftermath of any tragedy. Asking, "What do you need me to do?" and being present are some of the best ways to care for those suffering. These actions will show Christ's love and do more than most of our words can do. 🙏

*The Rev. James B. Robinson is associate pastor at Martin Luther Chapel in East Lansing, Michigan.*



The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod (LCMS) offers a variety of disaster response resources, including a Gospel proclamation (with resources for a Service of the Word), Quick Reference Guide for Disasters and Pandemics, and coping strategies for spiritual, emotional, mental, and physical well-being. To access these resources, scan the QR code.



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