



## Lutheran Social Services of Illinois



## Lutheran Child and Family Services of Illinois

**Strength for today and bright hope for tomorrow:  
Pastoral Care among those affected by the Northern Illinois University  
tragedy.**

The senseless tragedy at Northern Illinois University on 2/14/08 has created a tempest of emotions. Shock, rage, fear, and trembling grief have gripped us. For many, a crippling feeling of helplessness has also felt near. While nothing now can undo the tragedy that happened, we can respond in meaningful ways to support our communities and keep present a hope that will sustain us now and bring healing in days to come.

We know that the tragedy at NIU is not restricted to DeKalb and the immediate environs of the campus. Most students have left for home and family, so the need for congregational and pastoral response is widespread. Many congregational members throughout Illinois have been indirectly but powerfully affected.

Pastors and other leaders in the church have a unique ability and role to care for their communities through pastoral care. The members of our congregations and persons from the wider community often turn to religious leaders for help when coping with trauma and tragedy.

Some pastors wonder, "Shouldn't some expert be the one that should respond to these emergencies?" Certainly some people will need and benefit from the help of other professionals such as mental health care providers, but all people can benefit from the spiritual support that only someone trusted in the community can give. Trauma is a spiritual experience. It turns upside down everything that we previously thought about how the world is supposed to work. It changes forever our world and how we see our place in

it. Talking to someone we trust, like a pastor, and sharing our struggles and fears can help us heal and grow after we experience a traumatic event.

We believe that in one way or another, most pastors in Illinois will provide pastoral care among persons affected by the Northern Illinois University tragedy. As a way to prepare ourselves for this crucial and on-going role, we are sharing some practical tips and background on providing pastoral care in trauma. The following guidance has been compiled and reviewed by a number of pastoral care providers, including pastors who have served in the immediate aftermath of the tragedy.

One thing to keep in mind is that the Northern Illinois tragedy may be more than one experience depending on where someone was and what someone saw or heard. You may think you know what happened, but for each person turning to you for pastoral care, you really don't know what happened to them. Be especially sensitive to the needs of persons you know were affected and especially watchful for providing support to them.

Consider the many different experiences that persons had during and after this tragedy. You may be in ministry with loved ones, family and friends of those who lost their lives. You may be in ministry with people who were themselves victims of injury. You may be in ministry with people who responded to the tragedy such as police, EMT, firefighters, medical professionals, and other first responders. You may be in ministry with people who are acquaintances of persons killed or injured. You may be in ministry with people who witnessed the attack, having seen or heard things associated with the tragedy. You may be in ministry with people who never knew what was happening at the time, but were close by on campus or in town. You may be in ministry with people who are former students or staff of Northern Illinois University and feel loss over what has happened. All of these experiences, and others, may affect persons deeply.

Additionally, there is no "wrong" way for someone to react to what they experienced. Some people who had an intensely close experience of the tragedy may not be deeply affected by the tragedy. Other persons with a seemingly tangential connection to the event may present extremely powerful reactions. Sometimes, news of a terrible tragedy can bring to the fore grief for other losses. We never really completely finish grieving for the loss of the deepest relationships of our lives. We can have profound grief reactions then when we hear news of tragedy. This is called "re-grief."

Again, there is no “wrong” way for someone to react. Each person’s own reaction is genuine for themselves. Pastoral care that accompanies and supports through these times is an essential element for helping someone on the journey of healing.

When providing pastoral care among persons affected by trauma try:

- Listening to the story of what they experienced, sometimes over and over.
- Accompanying persons, often as a silent but consistent presence, can help persons feel connected to others as the natural process of healing begins.
- Making resources on facing grief and consolation available to people can better understand what they are experiencing.

Persons affected by trauma often manifest powerful emotions. It can be uncomfortable to be in the presence of persons expressing rage and profound grief, but your enduring presence can help persons express these feelings, an essential part of healing.

Trauma to our spirit is much like trauma to our body. It disrupts the normal way of life, but the body has incredible power to heal from even critical injury. The role of a nurse or doctor is often to support the body while the natural process of physical healing proceeds. The role of a pastor is often to support the soul while the natural process of spiritual healing proceeds. Pastoral care is a supportive process that uplifts the soul while it continues on the sometime slow, but sure process of healing from trauma. Just as healing from a trauma to our body can take multiple treatments and an extraordinary amount of work by the patient, so to may recovery from a trauma to our spirit require a regular pastoral attention and effort by the individual being helped.

So you might be thinking, “What do I say?” or “What should I do?” Really, providing support to persons affected by trauma is just about being yourself. You’re the right persons to provide care to persons in your community because of the trust that people have in you. Say the things that come naturally to you, keeping in mind that often a silent, but consistent, listening presence is often a way that can help people heal in powerful ways.

Keep in mind that many people will come to you, to share their stories and feelings instead of, or before, they will turn to a mental health professional.

Unfortunately, some people assign a sense of stigma or shame to talking to a mental health professional and unfortunately some pastors feel a sense of failure if they refer someone to see another counselor. This is not at all the case. Pastoral care is a distinctly different avenue of care from mental health care. Mental illnesses such as depression and Post Traumatic Stress Disorder are physiological conditions that respond well to medication and mental health therapy from mental health professionals. There is no competition inherent with referring persons to receive this kind of care when they need it. Remember, persons that you refer to a mental health professional will continue to need your pastoral care to attend to aspects of their lives relating to their faith, hope and connection to the community of faith that can sustain them during difficult times.

Some symptoms or behaviors to be on the lookout for include

- A flat expressionless affect of face or voice
- Thinking or talking about hurting oneself or others
- Uncontrollable outbursts of emotion long after the trauma
- Persistent nightmares long after the trauma

Your encouragement to someone to see a mental health professional can be important to unveil the sense of failure or shame that may hold someone back from getting help that can be life-saving when struggling with mental illness. Refer liberally whenever you think someone could benefit from this care. Get to know mental health providers in your area so that you can know to whom you are referring. Many mental health providers have learned the essential role that spirituality plays in healing and will appreciate knowing someone from the faith community that they can refer their clients to who need to talk about spirituality.

It is also very important to keep in mind that when you find yourself providing care amongst people in trauma, you will be absorbing that pain into your own body and soul. Because of your empathy and connection to the community, you will be vulnerable to being deeply affected by the hurt and pain of the community and of those with which you are ministering.

Therefore it is important that you, as a caregiver, take very good care of yourself. The role of providing pastoral care among persons in trauma can be exhausting and overwhelming. Some tips on attending to your own self-care include

- Pace yourself, these issues are going to be around for a long time

- Find whatever helps you relax, prayer, meditation, exercise, time alone, time with others; whatever helps you relax is important for you to do regularly
- Find some one you can confide in to share your feelings and experiences

Becoming overwhelmed by this difficult role doesn't mean that you aren't the right person for the job, it means you are a human being. Share your burdens with others. Ask questions or seek advice whenever you feel that another perspective would be helpful. You have many colleagues with a variety of experiences that can help, just as they will seek you for your unique gifts to help them.

Finally, know that you are not alone. Your president/bishop, your district/synod staff, and your sisters and brothers are praying for you, and supporting you and thinking about you always. We will bring a message of hope and peace and love to these times of tragedy.

This document was originally developed by Lutheran Disaster Response in response to the tragic shootings at Virginia Tech. It was written by:

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## Helpful Resources

### **Available through Augsburg Fortress:**

*A Book of Comfort: When You are Suffering* by Alvin Rogness

*Good Grief* by Granger E. Westberg

*Seasons of Grief and Healing* by James E. Miller

*What Can I do?: Ideas to Help Those Who Have Experienced Loss* by Barbara A. Glanz

The Lutheran Handbook (pg. 120 – “How to Console Someone” and pg. 121 “How to Cope with Loss and Grief”)

*Prepared to Care*

<http://www.augsburgfortress.org/store/searchresults.jsp?searchType=all&searchstring=prepared+to+care&classificationID=-1&x=12&y=16>

### **Available from Thrivent:**

*A Time to Mourn, A Time to Dance: Help for Losses in Life*

### **Available Online:**

<http://vasynod.org/index.cfm/fa/content.view/menuID/1250.htm> – From The Virginia Synod, ELCA

[www.st-michael-lutheran-church.org/vt-april-16.html](http://www.st-michael-lutheran-church.org/vt-april-16.html) – From St. Michael Lutheran Church, Blacksburg

<http://www.lmlc.org/lmlchome.php> – From Luther Memorial Lutheran Church, Blacksburg

[www.samhsa.gov/trauma/index.aspx](http://www.samhsa.gov/trauma/index.aspx) – Information on Coping with Traumatic Events

Light our Way: A Guide for Spiritual Care in Times of Disaster

[http://www.nvoad.org/articles/Light\\_Our\\_Way\\_LINKS.pdf](http://www.nvoad.org/articles/Light_Our_Way_LINKS.pdf)