
PASTORAL LEADERSHIP FOR POLICE IN CRISIS

ALEX EVANS

Abstract

Using the horrific shootings on the campus at Virginia Tech in April 2007 as a significant case study, I explore and clarify the essence of faithful pastoral leadership with police officers who have known violence and trauma, an all too frequent occurrence in our culture. This article intends to deepen theological reflection and encourage faithful pastoral ministry with these public servants who are too often underpaid, under-appreciated, and forgotten amidst the turmoil.

Introduction

In Romans 12, the apostle Paul provides a summary in how to live the faithful life following Jesus Christ: “let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor. Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, and serve the Lord. Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer” (Romans 12:9f.).¹

Like some of Paul’s other words in the New Testament, that summary offers a poetic and appealing tone. Yet, how are these words practiced, especially in the violent culture in which we live? And how might Paul’s words be applied to pastoral leadership for police officers who often find themselves in the midst of violence and heartache, hurt and loss, all related to life in law enforcement?

On April 16, 2007, a deranged student, Seung-Hui Cho, on the serene campus at Virginia Tech (later referred to VT) in Blacksburg, VA planned, plotted, and

*Alex Evans is the pastor of Second Presbyterian Church,
Richmond, Virginia*

¹ All scriptural citations are from the *New Revised Standard Version*, (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1990).

killed 32 students and faculty members. Cho also wounded 25 additional students, and then committed suicide. This violent event, which transpired mostly in a prominent classroom building in the center of campus, remains the largest mass shooting in our nation's history. While this trauma changed the lives of many people, police officers found themselves at the epicenter of this violent tragedy. In my role as a local pastor and police chaplain during that event, I sensed firsthand the physical, emotional, spiritual, and psychological toll on local police officers. These experiences of trauma leave indelible impressions on the psyche and soul. Moreover, police officers in all of our towns and cities find themselves daily in crisis, in vulnerable situations of life and death.

Using this event at VT as a case study, this article seeks to explore and clarify the essence of faithful, pastoral leadership with police officers who have known violence and trauma. I elaborate on my specific role in this incident as police chaplain and pastor in that community. I analyze data from personal conversations with police officers. I share observations and insights from this intense scene along with data from my experience of pastoral leadership with police during the ensuing months after the shootings. Finally, I advocate for a more effective model of ministry for police officers who experience trauma in the line of police work.

Because of my unique relationship to police, and my ongoing ministry among police officers, the focus of this article remains on pastoral leadership with police in crisis. However, inferences and insights could be applied to many places of ministry where God calls us to serve, to "be ardent in the Spirit,...to persevere" in faithful ministry. As agents of God's love, healing, and peace, pastoral leaders and congregations striving to "let love be genuine," can convey support in many ways. God certainly calls us to effective ministry of listening, encouragement, support, help, and hope for police officers in our communities.

A Violent and Traumatic Event

Monday, April 16, 2007 emerged as an unusually cold day in Blacksburg, VA. Clouds and even snow flurries presented a heavy gray across the sky. The wind blew a biting breeze. Students at VT, which was then the largest university in the Commonwealth of Virginia, moved toward the final days of classes for the spring semester challenged with final papers, tests, and projects. Yet this particular Monday brought unexpected darkness, violence, and trauma that shocked the entire Blacksburg community and the Commonwealth of Virginia and echoed across the whole world.

At 7:20 a.m., the police emergency call center received notice that two students, one male and one female, had been shot in West Ambler Johnston Hall on the VT campus. Within minutes, police and university personnel arrived in that campus building to proceed with a full investigation. Both students were pronounced dead at the scene as a result of gunshot wounds. No witnesses heard any gunshots or any altercation. No witnesses saw anyone in or around the area of the dormitory room. All protocols were followed. The Police Emergency Response Team (sometimes known as SWAT) was activated and investigations were implemented around the campus and town.

At 9:42 a.m., the first call of an active shooter in Norris Hall, a prominent classroom building at the center of the main campus at VT, arrived at the police call center. All police units responded, including campus and town police, as well as the SWAT team, already on campus. Within one minute, police units arrived at Norris Hall to hear shots being fired apparently from the second floor classrooms. Initially, police determined that no gunshots were hitting outside the building. This situation indicated an active shooter inside the building, not a sniper shooting outside the building. Police rallied to enter the building and found the doors chained shut from the inside. Three teams of police gained entrance at three different locations using shotguns to blow open the chain locks. Upon entering the building, officers encountered

shooting victims—wounded and dead—in the stairwells, hallways, and classrooms. At 10:08 a.m., police discovered Seung-Hui Cho, the lone assailant dead in classroom 211. The search for additional suspects continued. Additionally, police immediately began the rescue operation to assess the victims, remove the wounded, restore order to the chaos, and maintain safety.²

The following photos depict police officers at the epicenter of this tragedy.



² Details and photos from Blacksburg Police sources and national news services.

In the confusion and intensity of the morning, police officers balanced security and rescue. Many of the classrooms had numerous students and professors wounded or dead. Eventually, emergency medical technicians arrived to assist with the carnage. But initially, the scene included only two groups of people: victims and police officers. The wounded were carried, dragged, pulled from the building. Some were loaded in police cars for transport to medical care. One Blacksburg police officer spoke, months after the shootings on April 16, about the wounded students that he hauled out of the building and into his police cruiser to transfer to an ambulance away from Norris Hall. The screams of wounded students in pain, the ringing question “Am I going to die?,” and the blood stains inside his police car all became overwhelming images that seared the pain and suffering deep into this police officer’s heart and soul. Other officers shared, months later, the horror they encountered in the hallways and in the classrooms on that dark day on the VT campus.

Throughout that Monday, the campus remained on lock-down for numerous hours for fear of other suspects. Many of the victims died on the scene but others died at the hospital. In total, 32 people were killed and 25 others had gunshot and other wounds. Countless others, including people who were not even in the building, carry emotional scars and trauma because of this incident.

However, police officers were at the epicenter. Police officers arrived first at the scene, raced toward the building during the shootings, fought their way into the classroom building, and confronted the violent crime *and* the wounded and dead as they entered. Police officers juggled fear and security and personal safety and first aid for victims. They struggled to balance response and rescue and guns and wounded victims. They were challenged with the adrenaline of entering a building with an active shooter, and the necessary compassion appropriate for bloody victims and screaming college students. Police officers were at once defending life, protecting their own lives, and stepping over those who

had already lost their lives. These kinds of moments generate lasting psychological, emotional, and theological carnage for police officers.

As one of two volunteer chaplains with Blacksburg Police, I was called to assist with this trauma scene as the second round of shootings was unfolding in Norris Hall. The department instructed me to go first to the two regional hospitals. My role was to assist with the chaos and confusion as the hospitals were overwhelmed first with numerous wounded patients and then with hundreds of students and others looking for information about victims. By late morning, as the hospital administrators rallied their own personnel, I left the hospitals to offer support to the police officers on campus, still on high alert, and in shock and disbelief about the morning's tragic events. These officers, first on the scene that morning, were beginning to move through their own shock and fear. These officers blasted open chained doors, ran into a building filled with gun-smoke, stepped over victims, slipped on blood in the hallways, and discovered classrooms full of chaos with dead and wounded and frightened college students. As the intensity of the morning settled into disbelief about how this event could have happened, as the adrenaline rush subsided, and as the body bags were being removed, the gaze on each officer's face gave only a glimpse into the depth of complications related to this traumatic reality.

Throughout the afternoon, I spent time with police in a classroom in a building adjacent to Norris Hall. This student space had been converted into a break-room for officers to find refreshment and nourishment from the day's horrific events. Police officers were lounging in the auditorium style chairs, consuming bottled water and sandwiches that had been delivered. Few words were exchanged. The shock and emotional fatigue showed clearly through the body language and facial expressions of each officer. Televisions mounted on the wall were already broadcasting the news story from this traumatized college town. Newscasters were already raising doubts about the security on campus. This incited rage among

the police officers who heard portions of this story as they tried to rest and find refreshment. They had just risked life and limb, had been exposed to horrors that people cannot imagine, and pundits were picking apart the day's events while the campus remained on "high alert."

I also spent time that afternoon in the police mobile command center, established on campus in the immediate hours following the shooting. The command staff and officers tried to guide the community from trauma to some new normal, as the "high alert" shifted to decisions about what to do next. All of these encounters for me, especially reflecting back on them, were full of mixed emotions—disbelief in the harsh realities; sadness mixed with the "high alert" and adrenaline of the cops on campus; uncertainty about what to do and how to respond with effective care; worry about individual cops who appeared particularly in shock; and concern about members of my congregation who work in Norris Hall, in my church, and more. I knew we were all moving into a long and complicated journey full of heartache, grief, confusion, and complexity.

Several months following the shootings on campus, I spent an evening riding along in a police car with one officer in the Blacksburg Police Department who seemed to be discouraged about life and police work. This particular officer was struggling with depression and finding difficulty balancing family life. As he drove through dark streets with me in the passenger seat, with the police chatter coming through the police radio and after a long pause, he turned to me and said the following:

You know, preacher, I had my doubts about the chaplain program when it first started. I was leery of preachers hanging around the department. I think of myself as a Christian, even though I only occasionally attend church. But I just wasn't sure about the "God Squad" around here. But here is the truth: on that horrible day at Norris Hall, with all the blood and fear, death and craziness,

everything was so dark for me. The screaming, the sight of dead kids everywhere—it was so terrible. And then you showed up...I saw you...And it made me realize that God was there too, which had been so far from my mind. Just your face, and you didn't even have to say anything, made me realize that God was in that terrible shit with us. Thank you, preacher.³

These words continue to be so important as I work on pastoral leadership for police in crisis. This heartfelt sentiment screams of the need to find ways to embody God's presence in the darkest places where police often find themselves. Pastoral leadership for police in crisis, how this might work, effective pastoral presence and care in those bleakest of places, remain very complex. But these are the places where God's servants are called to go, to embody God's light and hope, to convey God's care and support even without words and to pour presence and purpose into the bleakest moments.

By the early evening of April 16, 2007, and in addition to some looming pastoral duties related to my congregation, the police department asked me to partner with the police chief and others to begin to notify victims' families. Police work involves more than the required emergency courage and varied response to the morning's violence on campus. Police work demands that the police command staff be present to verify and relay the death notices from the morning's violence to the parents and loved ones of those who died. While the protocol says that the chief relays the bad news, the police chaplains are expected to carry the major weight in these difficult moments. This proximity to the pain and suffering can become a heavy burden. Chaplain work demands a willingness to confront the harsh realities of life, to dwell amidst the intensity and loss that comes with police work.

From soon after 8:00 p.m. on April 16, and for most of the next 19 hours, as the confirmation of the identities

³ Officer #1 from Blacksburg Police Department, June 2007.

of the victims was slowly conveyed from the morgue, we met with family after family to speak the news that no parent or loved one would ever want to hear—that their college student child, or their professor spouse, was murdered in a mass shooting in university classrooms on a Monday morning on an otherwise serene and unlikely campus in rural Virginia.

Again, police work involves body, mind, heart, and soul. It involves courage, discernment, compassion, and faith; and police work engages all aspects of life.⁴ As recent studies with first responders confirm, with the trauma and violence of a day like April 16, 2007, with such unspeakable sadness and death, police officers from this event will have lasting psychological, theological, and other circumstances with which to deal.⁵

Pastoral Leadership with Police—in the Short Term

Prior to the recent years, police officers who had experienced physical, psychological, and emotional trauma in the line of police work were expected to “tough it out” and “get back to work.” Violence and trauma were long considered routine parts of police work. Indeed, many police departments include long-serving officers who still hold this philosophy: emotional or psychological wounds from the job remain a sign of weakness. Moreover, according to some “old-school” officers, chaplains are not needed in police departments and mental health professionals who emerge on the scene, especially after a traumatic incident, remain viewed with suspicion. These “old-school” officers generally hold the opinion that such helping professionals have not had police training, cannot understand police work, and therefore cannot be helpful to police officers.

⁴ Kate Braestrup, *Here If You Need Me: A True Story* (New York: Little, Brown and Co, 2007)

⁵ Hampton Hides, “First Responders, Rescuers, Come Forward with PTSD,” NPR, under “Hampton Hides and PTSD,” <http://www.npr.org/2010/12/30/132476507/first-responders-rescuers-face-ptsd-struggles> (accessed Dec. 30, 2010).

However, across the recent decades, police departments have learned from sociologists and psychologists about the effects of stress and trauma on human beings. These learnings have increasingly encouraged police departments to implement regular “*debriefings*” for all officers involved in critical incidents in the line of duty. Debriefings ordinarily include trained officers, not just chaplains or mental health professionals, but sworn officers, trained in debriefings, along with mental health professionals with experience in law enforcement, arriving from other police departments to lead group conversations for those involved in critical incidents. This protocol has become common practice as police departments and others have learned the value of having officers talk through what he or she experienced, to express feelings, to be aware that stressful and critical incidents in police work can affect all aspects of a person’s life such as, sleep, diet, relationships, depression, and more.

While no officer can be forced to talk or share, and while these moments do not always provide clarity and insight into the souls and psyche of officers, nor do they guarantee a road toward health, these debriefings have become commonplace in police departments. As chaplain to the Blacksburg Police, I had been invited to and participated in these debriefings with officers in incidents prior to April 16, 2007.

In the days immediately following the shootings at VT, numerous officers and agencies volunteered support and leadership to Blacksburg. Because hundreds of officers from various departments around the campus were involved in the emergency and response, many debriefings were offered and even required of all police involved. In the days immediately following Monday, April 16, 2007, I attended three debriefing sessions. Various law enforcement personnel, including those from North and South Carolina, led these sessions. These sessions invited officers from Blacksburg to discuss the events of April 16 and answer the following questions: 1) Where were you and what was your assignment? 2) What

were you thinking and feeling at the time? 3) How are you doing and feeling now?

Through the recent years, police department personnel have become familiar with this protocol. For some officers, this remains a helpful endeavor. For others, it is a duty, even a burden that detracts from the more important work of patrolling the streets and keeping the town safe. Indeed, in the days immediately following the mass shootings on campus, these debriefings were held even as the campus and community were center-stage for the world news, hosting the President of the United States at a major convocation, planning funerals for dead victims, recovering from the chaos, discerning how a university community could move forward in its intended work and goals with classes, exams, other activities, and more.

In those initial days following the campus shootings, all of the region's police departments were simply striving to cope in the best ways possible with the complexity and magnitude of the incident. While the debriefings took place and the protocol was followed, hindsight confirms that the appropriate care, compassion, and support for these officers fell far short. Officers were visibly exhausted, required to work extra hours, dealing with the world press on the scene, hosting the President of the United States and the Governor of Virginia, processing the crime, and providing safety to a community in turmoil. While the debriefings went as scheduled, the community's needs and the continuing and major demands on the police department to provide safety and security took priority above the care and support of these civil servants. This example only reiterates the important need for pastoral leadership for police in crisis. During difficult times, police continue to work instead of getting help. During crises, officers keep putting on their uniforms and answering the call of duty, often at the expense of their emotional, psychological, and spiritual health.

Moreover, in my role as volunteer chaplain, though I was checking on various officers and spending time at the

police department, the demands of my own congregation proved overwhelming. My church was hosting two funerals for shooting victims. My church members were traumatized in various ways. Numerous calls and requests for interviews came to me from international and national news agencies. Worship and sermon plans for the most important Sunday service provided great stress. Too many demands and too little time shaped the week and weeks following the tragedy. Clearly, communities, congregations, and pastors can never adequately prepare for incidents such as this one.

In those long days, struggling to balance the demands of the police, the needs of my congregation, my own fatigue and stress, family and personal life, the “volunteer” in my role as chaplain lost all of its meaning. I received great support from minister friends who knew I was in the middle of the storm. They called, wrote emails, added expressions of care and support. I also spent countless hours with my chaplain colleague and close friend, Tommy, who was doing all that I was doing. We tried to support one another. My family rallied to support me. My colleagues in ministry, the Associate Pastor and staff at my church, were particularly intentional at tending to specific needs so I could serve the police and the community. Tragedy of this magnitude calls forth extra energy from everyone, especially care for the caregivers.

Pastoral Leadership with Police—the Long Term

The scriptural mandate from the Apostle Paul, which urges us to “love one another with mutual affection, outdo one another in showing honor,...to be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord,” calls us to consider long-term support for police officers who carry around the horrific wounds of police work. Several officers’ comments convey how deeply the memories and moments from April 16 affect hearts, souls, and psyche.

I cannot rid my mind of the pool of blood that I saw in that first stairwell. You have never seen so much blood. It was everywhere. I slipped in it. And

that was a professor who left his office on the third floor to help students on the second floor. What a sacrifice. He died in the stairwell.⁶

Imagine a classroom full of college kids. Then think about them dead. That is not right, man. And some of them were shot in the head—executed. I have seen a lot of shit as a cop, but that haunts me, big-time.⁷

All these and other comments from police officers remain confidential and emerged in private pastoral moments or from the secure setting of chaplain work. They reflect the depth of pain, the intensity of emotional and psychological scars that go with police work:

You know what? There is not a single person in our department who lets his cell phone ring. It does not matter what ring you have set on your phone. All of us who were in Norris Hall that day, who heard all those phones of those kids ringing, it does not matter where you are or what you are doing, every time you hear a cell phone ring—that is what we think about—the phones of those kids ringing in those rooms that morning. We were trying to help them, and those phones just kept ringing. Try to get that crap out of your head. It's hell.⁸

When we got up to the second floor, there was this haze of smoke that like dropped down from the ceiling to chest height. It was weird. He had fired so many shots in such a short time that smoke filled the whole floor. Then there was the smell of blood everywhere. It took me several days before I

⁶ Officer #1 from Post Critical Incident Seminar, July 2007.

⁷ Officer #2 from Post Critical Incident Seminar, July 2007

⁸ Officer #3 from Post Critical Incident Seminar, June 2010.

felt like I was not breathing gun-smoke and blood. It was awful. You don't forget that stuff, ever!⁹

These comments demonstrate police officers longing for help and support. These are bright, well trained officers, who carry just below their clean appearance and crisp uniforms, the darkness that most of us cannot even imagine:

When I went into those rooms, it was the dead college kids lying all over the place! That is what I cannot forget. These kids were hiding behind desks, looking for cover under their textbooks. They had no defense.¹⁰

We went flying across campus to Norris Hall when we got the call of the shots being fired. And guess what, I had the shotgun. I had to blow the fucking chain off the doors. And then because I had the shotgun, I had to lead the “V” formation into the building. I was so scared. I was at the front going in,...figured I was going to be the one shot. But then I figured, well, at least I'm going to die doing something useful,...and we went in.¹¹

In his reflections on pastoral care, theologian Eugene Peterson notes that “pastoral work is a decision to deal, on the most personal and intimate terms, with suffering.”¹² The words above embody sincere suffering—suffering of police officers involved in the line of duty. Peterson confirms that pastoral work

does not try to find ways to minimize suffering or ways to avoid it. It is not particularly interested in finding explanations for it. It is not a search after the cure of suffering. Pastoral work *engages*

⁹ Officer #4 from Post Critical Incident Seminar, July 2009.

¹⁰ Officer #5 from Post Critical Incident Seminar, July 2008.

¹¹ Officer #6 from Post Critical Incident Seminary, July 2007.

¹² Eugene Peterson, *Five Smooth Stones for Pastoral Work* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1980), 93.

suffering. It is a conscious, deliberate plunge into the experience of suffering. The decision has its origin and maintains its integrity in the scriptures which shape pastoral ministry.¹³

Peterson continues, “where the sufferer is, God is.”¹⁴ Moreover, where God is, God’s people and God’s servants are called to be too. Police officers need and deserve compassion and care along with support and solidarity in their suffering, especially when the memories, images, and burdens can be so overwhelming. Peterson explicates this beautifully:

When private grief is integrated into communal lament, several things take place. For one thing the act of suffering develops significance. If others weep with me, there must be more to the suffering than my own petty weakness or selfish sense of loss. When others join the sufferer, there is ‘consensual validation’ that the suffering MEANS something. The community votes with its tears that there is suffering that is worth weeping over.¹⁵

Police officers are notorious for “stuffing” their feelings, getting on with the job, and assuming that the trauma is part of life. But the act of sharing, or lamenting the difficulties, or speaking to the deep pain, proves redemptive. It is especially redemptive when police can support one another by sharing the pain and hurt that only they know and understand.

The weeks after the shootings on campus brought meager and uncertain efforts to provide pastoral leadership to the police department. Along with the other volunteer chaplain, and all the while juggling intense pastoral duties with our congregations, I tried to make regular appearances at the police department, participate in “ride-alongs” with cops, and inquired of the command staff about what would be most helpful. Many officers seemed to be functioning well, although nearly every

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid., 94.

¹⁵ Ibid., 115.

conversation around town and with the police circled its way back to the horrific day of the mass shootings and the current state of the campus community. While the world is quick to move on to the next hot story in the news, the campus and town of Blacksburg remained in a state of grief. Though the school year ended, and students departed for summer break, wounds were slow to heal. Ribbons adorned the town. News reports replayed the shooting and offered updates about various victims' families. More and more people realized how traumatic the event was for the entire community. Then an invitation came to the Blacksburg Police Department.

Post Critical Incident Seminar

Among the legions of police and support personnel who arrived in Blacksburg on April 16, 2007 was Eric Skidmore, a Presbyterian minister, my seminary classmate and friend, and the Chaplain/Director of the South Carolina Law Enforcement Assistance Program—a state agency that offers counsel and support to several law enforcement agencies in South Carolina. Skidmore has devoted much energy, counsel, and compassion to law enforcement personnel. His work has earned him recognition and credibility in the region among police departments. Through his leadership, an entity called “Post Critical Incident Seminar” (PCIS) has provided care for police in crisis. By the afternoon of April 16, 2007, law enforcement leadership in the Blacksburg area had invited Eric Skidmore to come to Blacksburg with his team of counselors and support personnel to assist with the major critical incident on campus at VT. Skidmore helped with debriefings and applied his experience and wisdom in the immediate aftermath of the tragedy.

As the weeks passed from April 16, Skidmore encouraged the leadership of the Blacksburg Police Department to bring any affected officers to South Carolina for the July meeting of the PCIS. This July event was one of several gatherings each year of police officers in South Carolina who had been involved in critical

incidents. Involving a combination of peer team support and teachings about the effects of trauma on the body and spirit, PCIS includes therapy, small group conversations with other affected police officers, and a retreat setting that builds trust for healing. The real success of PCIS lies in police officers helping police officers with the challenges and trauma that only police officers understand.

Every police officer comes to the PCIS with a story: the specific details of a traumatic event that turned quickly dangerous, even deadly. Each of these stories begins with the routine work of police, like a random call to a domestic dispute, but then the shooting started; or a traffic stop that led to some major violence; or a car crash that proved to be particularly grotesque; or any number of traumatic events involving images and intensity that have seared themselves into the psyche of police officers. At the PCIS, participants tell their stories in a confidential setting surrounded only by law enforcement officials and others with skills and credibility to offer help and healing. The common stories and the setting create a close community unlike anything else. Police officers remain notoriously suspicious of psychologists and chaplains, but they will share deeply with one another. The mutual respect and sharing of pains and loss and the peer support provide a fertile ground for healing and movement beyond the trauma.

The PCIS involves psychotherapy-Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing (EMDR), which helps with people who have been exposed to extreme trauma. In moments of real intensity, when the body is on high alert, like a shooting or an accident, the visual images of those moments gain overwhelming prominence in the memory and on the brain. This psychotherapy works to re-process those moments so these horrific images that tend to “flashback,” or dominate, can move along in the memory and eventually lose their prominence. EMDR therapy has proven effective in facilitating help and healing for traumatized officers.

In July, 2007, six police officers from Blacksburg Police, along with the two chaplains, and several others from nearby departments including VT Police and Virginia State Police, were invited to attend the PCIS event in South Carolina. All these individuals from Virginia had been among the first officers into Norris Hall or at the epicenter of the tragedy that April 16. Each came with variations on the same story—the mass shootings on the campus of VT. Each shared with the larger group of police officers, all of whom came with their own stories of shootings, car wrecks, knife fights, and accidents, haunting images of police work and more.

The first day of the PCIS always feels heavy. Police officers prefer guns, cop cars, and uniforms, to seminars and conversations about critical incidents. Moreover, all the officers present for the occasion know they have come to put their critical incident behind them and to return to work and life without the burdens that they have been carrying. Most of these officers feel that they should not need this kind of help. They would prefer to “tough it out.” But each year the group grows in number and credibility. Following some introductions and overview of plans for the seminar, each police officer is invited to tell his or her story, in detail and in full confidence, to a room of people who have similar stories, including peer team members. Each officer explains the critical incident: “I went to this house,” or “I ran into the building” with all the details of actions, responses, shots fired, or shots taken, feelings of fear, explanation of how life has gone since that incident, and anything else that might be pertinent. The telling of each story, in vivid detail, creates a sacred canopy over the seminar. These are stories of life and death, of courage and fear, with tears and anger and other emotions. These are shared memories and explanations best understood by police officers and shared in confidence, basically only to police officers. With so many officers participating, and with the desire to listen and share fairly, this telling of the stories of the critical incidents takes the entire first day. And it is such a litany of horror and heartache, story after story,

that one person described listening and participating in the day as “drinking from a fire-hose of suffering.” All those who hear these stories are transported into each horrific police scene, one after another, of crime and violence, of fear and pain, and of adrenaline and suffering.

Throughout the PCIS, as the seminar unfolds, participants are invited into small groups where police with similar issues and challenges can discuss and share with other police officers. For example, those police officers who were involved in car crashes get together; those who were shot form a group; those who have been shooters unite; and those with deep-seated emotional scars related to family matters might get together. This emphasizes mutual caring and support. Police officers and peers from the leadership team with similar experiences to those in the small group facilitate the discussion. The commitment remains on police officers feeling safe, talking, and finding support from other police officers.

Throughout the seminar’s final two days, practitioners offer psychotherapy-Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing (EMDR). Those officers who appear to be good candidates for this therapy—ones who shared the vivid memories of particular images seared on their brains, ones who keep referring to specific and difficult aspects of their incidents—are recruited for EMDR. Again, in moments of real intensity, when the body is on high alert, certain visual images of those moments gain overwhelming prominence in the memory and on the brain. The PCIS has employed psychologist Dr. Roger Solomon, one of the premier teachers and proponents of EMDR, who works with traumatized police officers and police departments throughout the USA and Europe.

Officers at PCIS have verified EMDR therapy’s impact on their lives. “I have been given my life back,” commented one officer who had been so overcome by a critical incident. Another officer reflected: “I did not want to come to this seminar. But I feel like I have lost 100 pounds of burden and doubt.” One more added,

“EMDR seems crazy. But it has changed my life. I feel like I can be myself again with no more flashbacks. No more haunting thoughts in the night.”

We all know police officers are human beings. Human beings need help with trauma. Paul urges us to “let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor. Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, and serve the Lord.” PCIS remains a stellar attempt to respond to this faithful call for ministry with police officers in crisis.

In July, 2007, at the PCIS in South Carolina with numerous police officers from the VT tragedy, encouragement and hope emerged for all involved. Several of these officers were strongly “expected” to attend because command staff had sensed some change or reason for concern. Several volunteered to attend in hopes that the fellowship and time away would provide needed refreshment. All who went found genuine healing.

For example, the officer with the shotgun, who blew the chained doors off of Norris Hall and led the “V” formation into the building, attended with his wife. Her presence at the seminar and the shock on her face illustrated how these traumatic events reach well beyond the officers, affecting marriage and family life. The chance to talk and listen, to claim the pain and participate in the sharing of the larger group and small groups, proved most beneficial to both officers and spouses. Two other officers who were first in the building as part of the SWAT team found the fellowship and support transforming and agreed to be part of future peer teams. Another officer, who was responsible for processing so many details of the crime scene and could name every body in every room, and whose life had been consumed by this major crime, had a chance to vent and find the support and care he needed.

Another example of the seminar’s effectiveness, and EMDR’s importance, relates back to my colleague chaplain from Blacksburg, who attended this PCIS and

experienced profound transformation. He initially agreed to go with sincere hopes that certain officers would also attend and find the help and strength they needed. Yet at the seminar, and with the offer of EMDR therapy, my colleague, Tommy, experienced relief like he had not anticipated. Ever since the week of April 16, Tommy, who had been involved in all aspects of chaplain ministry with me, had been having flashbacks. While driving in his car, and looking in his rearview mirror, or in other moments, perhaps in the night, the vivid image of the face of one of the murdered college students would jump into his view. He kept seeing, at unexpected moments, the same image of this familiar and beloved girl who attended his church, whom he had last seen lying on a gurney in the back room of the funeral home. Tommy had been called to the funeral home to meet with the girl's family. She had been shot in the face, and that view of her face from the gurney kept flashing unexpectedly in his face. This made Tommy a perfect candidate for EMDR therapy. That unfortunate image had been seared into his mind, heart, soul, and psyche. That image needed re-processing.

It was my privilege to observe and participate with Tommy in this therapy. The therapist had Tommy revisit that image, with increasing intensity, to recall what he saw and how he felt. As he moved his eyes rapidly, as he re-imagined that horrific day, recalled that terrible scene, it became fresh again, with all the emotion and angst. Yet in that setting, with a therapist and friend helping him, with rational conversation and increasing clarity, that image was released. Since that moment, Tommy has had no more flashbacks or sudden images in his face as before.

Others from the VT shootings shared their burdens and tears and their sadness and fears. Other officers spoke of other incidents—car crashes that involved terrible deaths, gun violence, even where officers accidentally wounded or killed partners, or failed their departments, or were dragged along the highway. All these critical incidents were discussed, processed, and

released. This is the trauma of police work. This is evidence of how trauma stays with those who have been close to it. These experiences certainly relate to soldiers on the battlefield, first responders in other moments who deal with highly tense situations, violence and gruesome sights. As it would be for all those bonded by the brutalities of life, this is the sacred fellowship and care where officers can find help and wholeness.

In a small group setting, with one particular officer who was “encouraged” to attend the PCIS (the command staff knew that an order for this officer to attend the seminar might back-fire, so “encouraged” was used; and those involved understood fully the variables on all sides), this officer finally shared how he had been a cop for six years. He loved his job. He appreciated his fellow officers. He had support from his wife and was proud of his family, which included two small boys. But ever since that morning in April when he ran into Norris Hall, confronting the blood, screams, smells, and smoke, he was beginning to doubt everything about his life. At first he admitted that he was just mad. He was mad that “some mental case college student” could go so far off base and murder so many with such abandon. He said he was mad “at the fucking stupid world” that we live in. He was mad that he had to work all those extra hours through that week. He could not go home to take care of his kids. But before he realized it, as the weeks unfolded, the anger turned to despair. He wondered why he was a cop. He wondered why he was married. He started caring less about his job, even acting like a jerk to fellow officers. He said he was “encouraged” to attend the PCIS because his department knew he was not acting right, not acting like himself. Without even realizing it, he had lost his bearings. He had been overtaken by the horrors of a particular day on the job. That critical incident had been the catalyst for implosion in his life.

Across the weeks, this officer had become impatient and irritable. He had seen his marriage falling apart. He had even come to the brink of being fired by his department. When he was nudged toward the mental

health professional affiliated with the department, he had refused to go, insisting that he was “fine.” When he kept calling in sick, and his fellow officers knew his personal life was moving toward a crash, the command staff “encouraged” him to go to the PCIS.

In the secure setting of other officers, after all the stories, the sharing of pain and the small group connections, this officer finally realized how the horror and fear in Norris Hall, on the VT campus on April 16, 2007, had shattered so much about him. He admitted how full of fear he had been on that day running into the building. He admitted how vulnerable he felt admitting his fear. He confessed how unsettled he was seeing so many dead and wounded kids, especially as a parent of young boys. He realized how he wished he “could have killed the mother fucker, Cho.” Instead, Cho was dead, the victim of his own gun. But that left him feeling more sad and angry and confused. Too many people died and suffered, including this troubled cop. He realized how much of his life was snatched away on that day. He remained ashamed that his joy, his marriage, his focus, and his sense of commitment as a cop had been taken away in that critical incident.

It was a beautiful scene to see the other cops in this small group rally as peers and comrades. The group assured him that his feelings were quite normal. To run into a building where people are getting shot pushes the limits of fear. To encounter blood and death in such magnitude can wreak havoc on normal life. Real trauma can become so destructive to so many aspects of life. And while this officer was just beginning to name and deal with some of the issues facing him and his journey, he was on the road to finding a way forward toward purpose, help, and healing. The words of Peterson again confirm the significance of such communal moments:

Community participation insures a human environment. The threat of dehumanization to which all pain exposes us—of being reduced to the level of ‘beasts that perish’—is countered by the presence of other persons whose humanity is

unmistakable. The person who, through stubbornness or piety, insists on grieving privately not only depersonalizes him or herself but robs the community of participation in what necessarily expands its distinctiveness as a human community as over against the mob.¹⁶

This particular officer continues to deal with the ramifications on his life of the mass shootings on the VT campus. But he has remained with the police department, found some stability with his fellow officers, and come to grips with the power of fear and trauma at unsettling all aspects of life. This officer has not only regained his bearings but also has been promoted within the department. This all testifies to the extreme weight of crises in police work and the extreme importance of leadership, care, and support that pours help and hope into the lives of police officers.

By the end of three gut-wrenching and emotional days at the PCIS, of listening and sharing or struggling with hard realities and the promise of hope, police officers form a powerful community. It is a community forged in police work and more specifically forged in suffering. The sharing of difficult police stories and the discovery of healing and hope empower these officers. And the mere presence of the VT officers provided solace and comfort for the other officers who admitted that a particular shooting in a certain South Carolina locale found its proper perspective in comparison to the major trauma of VT.

The following comments confirm, in sincere words from police officers who participated, the value of the PCIS model:

Coming to this seminar, I didn't know what to expect. Going around the room hearing everyone's story is a great way to start the day. Hearing the different instructor's stories and how they have worked through situations proved most helpful...I came into this with the attitude I don't need help.

¹⁶ Ibid., 115.

After this week I realized I am now a better person and the whole time I was begging for help. Thanks to all the staff. I hope I can attend in the future, and will make it known that this is a much needed class.¹⁷

This seminar was exhilarating for me. The group clearly has created a structured seminar to facilitate a positive transition for those who have been in a critical incident.¹⁸

I believe this course is necessary for anyone who has gone through a critical incident, has a family member, friend who has gone through one or who has been affected by it in some other way. I can definitely see that it has helped a great deal of officers in the class today.¹⁹

I have a new outlook on my relationship with my job and my family. I learned that I can cope with the stress and not let it control life.²⁰

This course allowed me to explore myself during a negative time of my life. I have been humbled by the transformation that took place within me. It has allowed me to focus on being alive and honoring my support system. It has truly been the most beneficial law enforcement training I have experienced.²¹

You are not less of a man or cop to seek help.²²

¹⁷ Officer #7 from Post Critical Incident Seminar, July 2007.

¹⁸ Officer #8 from Post Critical Incident Seminar, July 2007.

¹⁹ Officer #9 from Post Critical Incident Seminar, July 2007.

²⁰ Officer #10 from Post Critical Incident Seminar, July 2008.

²¹ Officer #11 from Post Critical Incident Seminar, July 2009.

²² Officer #12 from Post Critical Incident Seminar, June 2010.

This has been one of the most intense seminars that I have attended in my 17 years of law enforcement. It's always helpful to talk things out and to be able to relate to others than have been through similar situations.²³

The famous Holocaust survivor, Elie Weisel, puts his pastoral admonition on the lips of a character in his novel, *Gates of the Forest*:

It is inhuman to wall yourself up in pain and memories as if in prison. Suffering must open us to others. It must not cause us to reject them. The Talmud tells us that God suffers with man. Why? In order to strengthen the bonds between creation and Creator; God chooses to suffer in order to better understand man and be better understood by him. But you, you insist upon suffering alone. Such suffering shrinks you, diminishes you. Friend, that is almost cruel.²⁴

Certainly the Christian gospel affirms that God suffers with us. The Apostle Paul says it clearly: "He who did not withhold his own Son, but gave him up for all of us, will he not with him also give us everything else?...Nothing will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Romans 8:32, 39). And in another letter, Paul also offers encouragement: "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and the God of all consolation, who consoles us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to console those who are in any affliction with the consolation with which we ourselves are consoled by God" (II Corinthians 1:3-4). Clearly, week in and week out, in our violent culture, in our cities and towns, police officers deserve our consolation and care. They deserve our efforts to connect them to God, to wholeness, and to hope.

²³ Officer #13 from Post Critical Incident Seminar, June 2010.

²⁴ Elie Weisel, *Gates of the Forest* quoted in Eugene Peterson, *Five Smooth Stones for Pastoral Work*, (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1980), 116.

Pastoral Leadership for Police in Crisis

In the face of violence and death, what does faithful, pastoral ministry look like with police officers?

Communities, congregations, and pastors need to take seriously the commitment to care for and support police officers, especially in crisis. Yet given the complexity of relationships involved, and the importance of credibility between police department personnel and possible caregivers, there exists no simple formula for effective ministry with police in crisis. However, several avenues might strengthen the possibilities for effective ministry.

First, faithful ministry of compassion and care is always rooted in sincere relationships. My own relationship to the Blacksburg Police Department emerged from their invitation to serve as a volunteer chaplain. The Blacksburg community had experienced some difficult moments that greatly challenged the police department and the command staff determined that volunteer chaplains might add strength and support. The Blacksburg Police then approached me and my Session to inquire about my interest and availability.

In the early years of this relationship, my role as volunteer chaplain seemed mostly ceremonial. Neither I as the Chaplain, nor the police department, were quite sure of the breadth and depth of this new relationship. In an effort to get to know the people and culture of the department, I did “ride-alongs” with various officers on duty. I dropped by the police department to chat with office staff. I attended some staff gatherings, like roll-call for the various shifts, and staff celebrations. In these early days, I felt very much like a visitor, like an outsider. Yet as the experiences and time increased in this role, in many ways like an unfolding pastorate, the relationship developed; unfortunately, difficult critical incidents in and around the department proved most significant in deepening the relationship. A shooting in the town, the rape of a police officer’s spouse, a car wreck, the injury of an officer, and other events all increased my presence and activity, my connections with officers and my

credibility with the department. By the time of the violent shootings on campus, I was known, recognized, trusted, and with credibility among the police officers in Blacksburg.

This experience only verifies the centrality of credibility and relationships for effective ministry with police in crisis. Communities, congregations, and pastors can understand the needs and complexities and then explore ways to build relationships, open doors for effective ministry, and provide care and support for officers. As with pastoral ministry, effective pastoral relationships with police officers must be nurtured over time, with patience along with sincere understandings about the reservations cops might have regarding ministers. Moreover, the goal in these relationships is not conversion to the Christian faith or getting members of the police department into membership at the pastor's church. The sole goal is care and support for police in crisis.

Second, because the sole goal in this ministry is the care and support of police, especially police in crisis, this ministry remains dependent on the ethos, personality, and openness of police departments. Police departments might be encouraged to consider how pastoral leadership can be helpful and effective with police officers in crisis. Police departments might be coaxed into thinking about new ways to support their police officers. But faithful, effective ministry with police departments will only emerge through patience, caring perseverance, and support that highlights only the health and wellbeing of the department. Most of us are particularly leery of those who come up with the best ideas and intentions for us. Undoubtedly, police departments would be especially skeptical of those who want to sell them on the next best idea, even pastoral care. Instead, caring ministry for police can only happen as the departments open the doors and hearts to credible, compassionate leaders with something significant to offer officers, especially those in crisis.

Communities, churches, and pastors can work closely and carefully with police departments to make available the empathy, support, and care. Communities and pastors can convey in various ways the support for those servants who work the long shifts, who sacrifice, who do difficult duty with low pay, and who remain forgotten or undervalued by our society. Churches can have “an Officer Appreciation Sunday,” can rally church members in expressing affection for police devotion, can raise the congregation’s awareness of police officer needs, and can do other things to embody support and care. Following the tragedy at VT, and at my urging, congregations took turns providing refreshments for police on break. On the anniversary of the shootings, some congregations showered the department with cookies and other expressions of care. These efforts begin to raise awareness and help the community remember what is so often forgotten: police are human; police often work long, unappreciated hours; police carry emotional baggage. These efforts would connect the congregation to community needs, awaken the department to the sincerity of support of the community, and build bridges toward effective ministry with and for police officers.

Third, as the PCIS model proves increasingly effective, communities, congregations, and pastors can offer financial and spiritual support to this event. When traumatized police officers come together to share their stories and find healing, they can greatly benefit from the compassion and care of the community.

The Commonwealth of Virginia has hosted three PCIS events in the past three years with great success. Building on the South Carolina model, and with help and even personnel offered from South Carolina, these three successful PCIS events have actually “saved the life” of many Virginia officers. Yet funding and state support for these events remain a low priority in a season of economic downturns, falling state revenues, and budget cutbacks. This opens the door for communities, congregations, and pastors to advocate, even raise funds for effective programs, including PCIS, that directly

nurture hurting police officers and provide pastoral leadership for police in crisis.

Unlike the state of South Carolina, the Commonwealth of Virginia does not have anything similar to a statewide law enforcement assistance program. Each police department remains generally on their own to provide for the care and support of traumatized officers. This too opens the way for communities, congregations, and pastors to explore various means, both financial and otherwise, to assist law enforcement agencies. My own goal, already emerging with official certification and legal information, is the Virginia Law Enforcement Assistance Program (VALEAP)—a new 501c (3) program. The recent success of three PCIS events in Virginia provides significant momentum for such a venture. My own congregation has committed funds for this project. We have also won support from foundations and individuals, and received words of sincere appreciation from various law enforcement agencies. I will continue to solicit funds and recruit others for pastoral leadership for police officers in crisis.

Fourth, as communities, congregations, and pastors strive to give leadership to police in crisis, the desire to assist police officers also means being willing to join the police in the ugly, horrific moments of police work. Once credibility and relationships have some footing, and police departments open the door for chaplains and support for officers, those chaplains must be willing to carry Christ's light and presence into the dark and bleak places of police work. This is a particular and even peculiar calling. Not everyone can handle the challenges that come with pastoral leadership with police in crisis. This peculiar calling in the Lord's work is not for the faint of heart or the squeamish.

As my time with the Blacksburg police department continued, I was called increasingly to the scene of critical incidents. My ministry was no longer ceremonial; it was real and included the breadth and depth of police work. I was called into the emergency room many times

to assist with difficult and delicate issues, like identifying comatose students with carbon monoxide poisoning, sitting with an officer in the middle of the night whose wife had been in an accident, counseling another officer who was having dire emotional problems, advising the chief of police on personnel issues, and more. I was also called to the most horrific scene of a car crash of a 17 year-old student, who had consumed too much alcohol and tried to drive home, only to be decapitated when her car flipped on the guardrail. The officer first on the scene of that accident was a newly sworn policeman. The car ended upside down far down an embankment. The girl's body parts were strewn along the highway. The police called me in the darkness of the early morning to help with this accident. Chaplains who provide sincere leadership and care for police departments must be willing to see what police officers see, feel the heartache and sense the emotional pains in order to best support police amidst such trauma. To stand with officers beside the destroyed vehicle, to watch the emergency medical technicians claw her body from the car and pick up pieces along the road, all create vivid and harsh images that are not easily forgotten. Yet this is the context for important ministry with and for police officers.

That same morning of the horrific car crash, I went with the police lieutenant to inform the girl's mother that her child had been killed. Again, to hear the screams, to sit in an unfamiliar home, with someone heretofore unknown, to attempt to offer care and support in the most ungodly moments, challenges all of us. The police officer left for more police work while I remained with the traumatized mother to make arrangements and plans, to offer comfort and care as she dealt with the shocking news of the horrific death of her daughter. This too is the context for ministry with police in crisis.

Then as that morning unfolded, I went back to the police station to attend the debriefing for that incident, to offer care and support to the officer first on the scene, who handled the horrible crash scene with aplomb despite his short time as an officer. Following all the

heartache and other challenges of the morning, in that debriefing, this young officer could not seem to remove his hands from his face. He was hiding his pain and tears and confirming the trauma that police work can sear onto heart, souls, and psyche of police officers. Pastoral leadership with police in crisis is not for the squeamish; it is too gruesome for many and cannot be for everyone. Yet this remains exactly where God calls us as agents of healing and hope to go, to do God's work, into the darkest places of life, into people's deep pain. We go there to convey that God goes with us and that nothing separates us from God's love in Christ Jesus our Lord.

It would be kinder and safer to avoid such turmoil of the heart. But God calls us to shed light in the darkest places, to convey God's care in all moments, which means the most horrible. While this type of ministry remains most difficult, any effective ministry with police in crisis means getting into the crisis with them. Pastoral leadership with police in crisis demands pastors be ready, as the moments come, as the police departments open the way, for ministry in crisis.

Conclusion

The author and Nobel Laureate Elie Wiesel has written much about suffering and its toll on human life. Wiesel had a conversation with a renowned rabbi and asked the rabbi the question that had long haunted his heart, "Rabbi, how can you believe in God after Auschwitz?" The rabbi did not answer immediately, but remained silent for a long time. Then, in a barely audible voice, replied, "How can you not believe in God after Auschwitz?" We too often see and know the evils of the world. They happen every day for police officers. Some days can be absolutely overwhelming. Some events, like the shootings on the VT campus, approach the mega-evils of Auschwitz. Yet Weisel offered this response to

the rabbi: “Apart from God, what was there in a world darkened by Auschwitz?”²⁵

The good news of the gospel affirms that while evil is real and powerful, God prevails. While people commit horrific crimes that cause major suffering, while guns kill people, and violence can overtake even a serene college campus, God redeems the world in Jesus Christ. The suffering and evil that we know are defeated. There will come a time when trauma and violence come to an abrupt end.

In the meantime, communities, congregations, and pastors can give leadership to the healing of the world. Among those who need focused attention are police officers, those who serve with commitment and care, who deal daily with potentially violent and traumatic situations, who continue to serve though often overworked, and under-paid. With sincere planning and intentionality, with compassion and purpose, we can offer to police officers and police departments some glimpse of Christ’s healing love and light.

As servants of God, as followers of Jesus, we seek to “let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor. Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, and serve the Lord.” We also trust that nothing is irredeemable in God’s good time and intentions. Our calling is to strive for redemption and hope for those in our community, police officers, who have sworn to keep us safe and secure. May God guide us in useful and effective ways of offering pastoral leadership for police in crisis.

²⁵ Elie Weisel quoted in Phillip Yancy, *What Good is God?* (New York: FaithWords, 2010), 30.