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Faith Today

The survivors include...

By Joe Michael Feist
NC News Service

On the evening of Oct. 15, 1982, Janet Ennis' three teen-age children left their suburban Pittsburgh home for a pizza. William Ennis, 18, his sister Robin, 17, and brother Brian, 15, never returned. They were killed instantly in a car crash.

Stunned as she was by the tragedy, Mrs. Ennis remembers how inadequate was the response from most people. In such a situation, she said, people don't know what to say or how to act. Instead of moving closer to the survivor, they move away.

Mark Dressel was president of the youth group at Sacred Heart Parish in the Shadyside section of Pittsburgh. He was "a real good kid, an all-American boy," said a friend, Father Albert J. Leonard, associate pastor of the parish.

Last January, halfway through his freshman year at college, Mark Dressel was killed in an automobile accident. He was 18.

"One of the things that impressed me was the hundreds and hundreds of cards the family received," recalled Father Leonard. "All of them said the same thing — 'Words can't express, words cannot describe...' And I thought that is just wrong.

"Is Christianity silenced by tragedy?" Father Leonard asked. "If it is we've met our match. If not, we have something to say."

Last April, Father Leonard, Mrs. Ennis and others decided it was time for the church to become involved in a ministry to families of people who died tragically, either through murder, suicide or accident. The program they launched is called "We Are Remembered" and its purpose goes to the heart of the Christian response to violence.

Organized under the Diocese of Pittsburgh's Family Life Office, the program has two main objectives, Mrs. Ennis said. The first is to remember the dead while helping families cope and live with the loss. The second is to help educate people — priests and laity —

Does Christianity have anything to say in the face of violent and untimely death? Joe Michael Feist writes about a Pittsburgh group who believe it does. They have started a ministry — called "We Are Remembered" — to families of people who have died tragically.

on how to relate to survivors.

"People need to remember loved ones who died violently," Father Leonard said. "We relegate them to nothingness if we don't remember them."

Mrs. Ennis agreed. To parents, brothers and sisters and other family members, she said, the deceased person, though gone, remains very real. The need to remember their personalities, their contributions, their good and bad points, is great, she added.

A major problem, she continued, is that people seem to be paralyzed by tragedy.

"People have no idea what to say," explained Mrs. Ennis.

"They're frightened because they don't know what to say and because they feel vulnerable, that it might happen to them. They're so afraid that they just stay away. Then you lose your friends as well as your loved one."

Asked what friends can do in such cases, Mrs. Ennis said "the main thing is to be there" with the survivors.

"What I remember (about the death of my children) is who was there, who said I love you, who said I'll pray for you," she said.

Father Leonard said there is a

need "to move in closer to the survivor, do a lot of listening, be supportive and try to help them express themselves."

What should be avoided, the priest emphasized, are pious sayings designed to justify what has happened. "It was God's will" or "He's in a better place" or "You're fortunate you have other children" fall into this category.

In the case of murder or assault, another factor faces the Christian victim or survivor — forgiveness.

While acknowledging the healing power of forgiveness, Father Leonard said frankly that "some people are never going to forgive." Those people must be cared for as well, he added.

"That should not be our only goal — to make victims forgive," said Father Leonard.

"It's simplistic to think that if you forgive, then you're back on the road to recovery. It's much more complex than that. (Survivors) must know that all hope is not gone, that they can laugh again and live again."

Both Father Leonard and Mrs. Ennis stressed that the thrust of their ministry is spiritual.

"That does not mean that we accept tragedy," said Father Leonard. "We have to work to make the world a safer place. We have to be in courtrooms and legislatures speaking out against injustices that make life unlivable or unsafe."

But legislation, such as stiffer penalties against drunk drivers, is not the primary goal of "We Are Remembered."

"Jesus Christ was an innocent victim," said the Pittsburgh priest. "We can speak to such situations because we know that redemption was accomplished in the midst of tragedy."

(Feist is associate editor of Faith Today.)



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