

Outpouring after tragedies helps communities heal

When the unthinkable happens, people of faith are called to respond.

In the Archdiocese of Baltimore, that response has proven to be swift and compassionate in the wake of three recent tragedies, with individuals offering prayers, schools activating crisis management plans and parishes reaching out to families.

On Aug. 31, 13-year-old Loyola Blakefield, Towson, student Michael Destino and his father, David Destino, were killed in a collision as the family headed to the beach. On Sept. 14, Jeffrey Jacobsen, who was estranged from his wife, Jessica, a longtime parishioner of Immaculate Conception, Towson, where their oldest child attends school, killed his wife and then himself. A couple, Ronald and Charlotte Nodine, whose daughter had graduated from the Institute of Notre Dame, Baltimore, in 2005, was killed in a car accident.

When incidents like these happen, they leave families and communities torn and grieving, and those who survive are called to help and comfort as best they can.

Susie Connelly, a spokeswoman for Immaculate Conception's school and parish, said the response, and the outpouring of prayer and thoughts for the Jacobsen family, has been overwhelming.

"Our phones have not stopped ringing," she said. "It's amazing how strong our community is, and they really rally around the family. We've been getting call after call from people wanting to help."

Upon learning of the tragedy, Monsignor F. Dennis Tinder, pastor of Immaculate Conception, immediately went to the home of surviving family members to offer Mass. Meanwhile crisis counselors from the archdiocese were called to meet with the faculty, where the concern was for the Jacobsens' child, a second-grader.

"Our focus is what we can do for their son and how we can support him," Ms.

Connelly said.

At Church of the Resurrection, Ellicott City, the home parish of the Destino family, pastor Monsignor James O. McGovern held a prayer service the day after the accident, which was attended by nearly 400 people.

He, too, was grieving, since David Destino had worked closely with him throughout the construction of a new multipurpose building that doubled the school's space, and Mr. Destino's wife, Mary, who survived the accident, is a resource teacher at the school.

His parish also was overwhelmed with people wanting to help. Those sincere offers made it possible to accommodate the large crowds for the viewing and the funeral. The parish was in the process of putting on the play "Godspell." In the middle of its run, an army of volunteers dismantled the sets to accommodate the reception after the packed funeral and then reconstructed them in time for the next performance.

A bereavement committee at the parish handled the details of providing lunch and orchestrating the reception.

"Whatever the family wants, we will have," Monsignor McGovern said quietly.

Gail Kujawa, principal of the middle school at Loyola Blakefield, said that in recent years Father Thomas Pesci, S.J., Loyola's president, had been instrumental in creating an emergency crisis plan.

"When I heard, I immediately implemented it," she said.

Six counselors from the high school and Loyola College in Maryland, Baltimore, were called in to meet with teachers at 7 a.m. Because the accident happened over Labor Day weekend, some teachers hadn't yet heard.

At 8 a.m., Father Joseph Mechini, S.J., guided the middle-school students in an age-appropriate meditation.

Counselors spoke with the boys, "and we had counselors in the building for the next four days," Ms. Kujawa said. Parents attended a prayer service in the evening and children and their families wrote letters to the family.

“It was also difficult for the mothers because they didn’t know how their boys should grieve, and they were calling me,” said Ms. Kujawa, who noted that children grieve differently than adults, for example, giggling because they’re nervous.

At IND, principal Ann Seeley said the school responded when friends of Katie Nodine, who had graduated in 2005, called campus minister Vanessa Williams. Ms. Williams immediately went to be with Katie during the difficult time of making arrangements for her parents’ funeral. Ms. Seeley attended the reception for friends held in honor of the Nodines.

She notes that IND also has a crisis management plan in place for anything affecting students, but it’s a little harder to keep track of graduates who need support once they’re out of school.

It wasn’t the first time IND found itself comforting college students. Last year, an IND grad was the resident advisor in the dorm at Virginia Tech where the shooting began; she was called to the scene and discovered the bodies. She was one of two IND grads attending Virginia Tech.

Ms. Seeley said first she called both parents to make sure the girls were OK, and then the school sent flowers. The alumni association sent both students care packages.

When these events destroy families and communities and leave everyone asking why, there simply are no answers.

“We never understand,” Monsignor McGovern said. “We put up with the questions and that’s where faith comes in.”