

# Questions of Faith in the Face of Fear Ministering with and for young people in the wake of tragedy

“How can we talk with our youth about the school shootings that have taken place recently?” “How do we talk with parents about the very real issues of adolescence so that they might be more aware of the impact these events have on their kids?” The questions are coming in to our office via voicemail, email and even in person. Young people can be profoundly impacted by events that happen to other young people. Particularly in settings, such as school, where the day to day schedules occur. As the body of Christ we are called to accompany our young people in the places where they dwell. In family, school, community, friendship and faith. Accompanying young people involves acute observation, empathy, presence and patience. The following is a list of responses common to young people in experiences of crisis and trauma.

## What you might see and hear from adolescents:

- **Who is to blame?**  
The unknown is unfathomable to most young people. In this time of reality television, intricate investigation and relentless scrutiny by media and the world around them - young people will as well, want to attach the deeds to the doer as quickly as possible. Knowing who means a shortcut to the uncertain and fearful possibility of "when again?"
- **Who are people saying is to blame - what am I hearing?**  
Although famous for their push toward autonomy and moving away from parents and adult authority figures - the spoken word and doctrine of adults around them is still a very powerful presence in their perception and often time in their verbal response. The "tapes" that young people hear from adults (particularly parents) whether political, religious, societal based - are often incorporated internally by young people.
- **Strong Allegiance vs. Misplaced Allegiance**  
Young people are on an almost constant search for identity - a place to stand, to plant their opinions, to grasp and proclaim and use their energy. A crisis, whether personal, national, family based or peer based - offers a number of places for a young person to place themselves, their ideas and their sense of action.
- **Removal vs. Reality (this could happen to me - that won't happen to me)**  
Following the events of September 11<sup>th</sup>, there were reports of young people skateboarding near the site of the destroyed Trade Center Towers. Entertainment venues, stores and malls, near the schools who've experienced a shooting or violent occasion, are packed with teenagers. "How can they be so casual and removed" was the question that came to me this afternoon. Because they are removed! For many young people if it doesn't happen to them - it doesn't concern them. Life goes on. In some ways this can be a defense mechanism in others it is

simple reflection of the ego-centric body at work. In the same breath there are young people who just by seeing the images on the television will feel profoundly impacted. I have heard of young people breaking down into tears, expressing extreme anxiety of parents going to work. The fears, normal to us all, of loss, separation, "it could happen to me" are apparently very common. The simple lesson - what we see among young people is not likely to look like one particular thing. Whatever upcoming gathering you have planned, for your young people, whether it is the family meal, youth group, choir, small group, church school, peer group, bible study, do take time to pray for those affected by the violence displayed. Pray for the young people, the aggressor, those impacted, those killed. Pray for those who are called to give care to the community affected. Pray. Asking for God's guidance for YOUR young people, your community, to find ways to care for all young people. Those on the fringe. Those who are depressed. Those who are angry, violent. Those who are cruel. Encourage your young people to see with eyes of faith, mercy and Christ like clarity.

- **Blame of an institution (religious / race/ culture) rather than an individual**  
With the greatest of hope in a generation that has grown up in the most religious and culturally plural society of ANY American generation - we pray that this experience and this exposure will help young people close their ears and avert their eyes from the horrifying images of racism and defamation that have been running across news broadcasts. Research tells us, however, that young people, particularly in a time of crisis, are as vulnerable to truth as they are to drama and to misplaced accusation and rage. Young people need a sense of the big picture right now. They need some help navigating through the tricky waters of anger, history, politics and human behavior. Unpacking an event such as what has happened this week will take some time, probably some research on the part of parents and youth leaders. Help young people explore the road of peacemaking - looking for God's transforming presence in this process and in this aftermath.
- **Extreme courage and a need to "do something"**  
While prayer is possibly the most important thing we can do as a church - for many youth and young adults this is likely to seem passive. Tangible acts of prayer, remembrance, duty and liturgy will be helpful in giving young people a sense of connection to the community around them, to the victims of the tragedy, to far away places but a situation put "in their face."

**Other behaviors you are likely to see:**

- Misplaced humor
- Fear
- A need to talk / sometimes to express how much an issue is NOT affecting them
- A slow, "seeping" out of reactions, emotions, questions and experiences.

*Prepared by Gina Yeager, Associate for Youth Ministry, Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)*