

Faith leaders provide hope, solace amidst Humboldt tragedy



Fr. Joseph Salihu supplied

Father Joseph Salihu grew up in northern Nigeria, where he's witnessed terrorist attacks.

However, nothing could prepare the Roman Catholic pastor – or his parish community in Humboldt, Sask. – for the shock and grief after 15 people died when a truck collided with the bus carrying their town's Broncos junior hockey team to a playoff game.

"I was shocked," said Salihu, who moved from Spruce Grove two years ago to become pastor of St. Augustine's in Humboldt. "I've seen terrorist attacks in which three or four people died, with lots of people injured, but not 15 people [killed] at the same time."

The 15 dead included 10 hockey players between the ages of 16 and 21, the team coach, a radio broadcaster, the bus driver, and other team personnel. The tragedy occurred early in the evening April 6 near the town of Tisdale, Sask. Fourteen others on the Broncos' bus were injured.

Police are investigating and have not provided any details about the cause of the collision. The bus was travelling north through a highway intersection which had stop signs for traffic travelling east and west. No charges have been laid.

Salihu and other faith leaders of the Humboldt Ministerial Association had gathered for a children's choir concert on April 6 at the town's Uniplex – which includes the Elgar Petersen Arena, the home of the Broncos – when news of the crash started to trickle in.

The ministerial leaders rushed to the arena to meet families of the victims, who were already there grieving and at loss with so little confirmed information about the crash.

“They were there, just waiting for answers. But there weren't any. There was nothing else that they could do,” said Salihu, who personally spoke and prayed with three families of the crash victims. “No one knew what had happened at that point.”

As they waited for information to trickle in, Salihu did all he could to comfort the families.

“It was more being present for them, to listen them talk and to let them know that they were not alone,” Salihu said. “We were there to share in their desolation, that's shared grief. And afterwards, we said a prayer together.”

Crying, hugging, and trembling with grief, more than 2,000 people attended an interfaith prayer service April 8, which was live-streamed and watched across the province, including at St. Augustine's Parish near the arena.



Bishop Mark Hagemoen

“There's profound pain over the devastating impact,” Saskatoon Bishop Mark Hagemoen – whose diocese includes Humboldt – said in an interview with Grandin Media. “But in the midst of the sense of tragedy there was light – not hope yet – because there are so many caring people holding other members of the

community.”

Bishop Hagemoen added: “I can’t help but think, we’re at the beginning of the Easter season which invites us to Easter joy amidst hopeless situations. There have been a number of reflections like that.”

Bishop Hagemoen, who gave the final blessing at the prayer service, said organizers didn’t expect such larger turnout. He also noted that families of the victims are trying to some time for privacy.

The prayer service was attended by Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, Saskatchewan Premier Scott Moe, as well as *Hockey Night in Canada* personalities Don Cherry and Ron Maclean. Large photos of the team brought tears. Grief and crisis counsellors, including grief dogs, roamed the arena.

For those close to the Broncos team, the grief was almost too much to bear.

“I don’t want to be here, but it’s good that we are,” said Sean Brandow, the team chaplain and pastor of Humboldt Bible Church, who had gone to the accident site shortly after the collision.

“I walked up on a scene I never want to see again, to sounds I never want to hear again,” he said. “To hear groaning and panic and fear and confusion and pain ... all I saw [that night] was darkness and I had nothing. Nothing.

“I’m a pastor. I’m supposed to have something. I’ve received thousands of texts and even Scripture,” he said. “But I needed to hear from God.”

Condolences have also poured into Humboldt from across Canada and around the world, including a message from Pope Francis.

Archbishop Richard Smith called the crash a “terrible accident beyond words” and offered the prayers of the Archdiocese of Edmonton to the victims and their families.

In light of the immense tragedy, Father Salihu said he expects families and community members will ask “Where is God?”, especially as the funerals get closer, but at the moment most were in a “state of shock.”

“The Holy Spirit does not erase our wounds; he applies the grace of God to them. With their wounds transformed, they became aware of how much they needed each other and were able to share what belonged to them,” Father Salihu told parishioners in his homily on April 8 – Divine Mercy Sunday – a day after the crash.

“Our current tragedy, painful as it is, gives us a great opportunity to bond as a community.”

A Go-Fund-Me page was set up to collect donations for families. Organizers hoped to raise \$10,000 but in less than 48 hours donations exceeded \$6 million.

The dead players have been identified as Adam Herold, 16, of Lethbridge, Alta.; Conner Lukan, 21, of Slave Lake, Alta.; Evan Thomas, 18, of Saskatoon; Jacob Leicht, 19, of Humboldt; Jaxon Joseph, 20, of Edmonton; Logan Boulet, 21, of Lethbridge, Alta.; Logan Hunter, 18, of St. Albert, Alta.; Logan Schatz, 20, of Allan, Sask.; Stephen Wack, 21, of St. Albert, Alta., and Parker Tobin, 18, of Stony Plain, Alta.

Other victims were head coach Darcy Haugan, team statistician Brody Hinz, assistant coach Mark Cross, Bolt FM broadcaster Tyler Bieber, and bus driver Glen Doerksen.

– *With files from Canadian Catholic News*