

# Pandemic restrictions should not limit Nova Scotia's grieving

Health restrictions preventing anything beyond small gatherings should not keep people from grieving a loss, particularly for an event as terrible as the mass slaughter of 22 innocents in Nova Scotia, say grief counsellors.

It's become the norm for complete strangers to express their condolences publicly for victims of incidents like the April 18-19 rampage that saw a crazed gunman take the lives of 22 in the Portapique, N.S., area north of Halifax before he himself was gunned down by police in the nearby town of Enfield.

But in a time of pandemic, when even funerals are among restricted activities, public memorials are near impossible with regulations in place to keep the general populace safe from the coronavirus.

However, it doesn't mean grieving is restricted, said Florence Loh, manager of programs and services with Catholic Family Services Toronto.

"It's really important that people recognize their own sense of loss and find rituals that are comforting," said Loh.

Within a week of the shootings, a province still reeling from the tragedy began coming together to pay its respect to the victims. The funeral for Lisa McCully was live-streamed on April 26 and other families are also holding online funerals.

The local community on its Colchester – Supporting our Communities Facebook page has been sharing photos of hearts, candles, blue lights, Nova Scotia flags, poetry and songs, while a final route tribute was held April 26 along the roads slain nurses Heather O'Brien and Kristen Beaton were travelling to work that day.

For the vast majority of Canadians, the dead are unknown to them, yet the senselessness of the crime touches all. Tragedy has a way of uniting people, said Loh. And at a time when everyone is already united by the coronavirus threat and subsequent lockdown, people are experiencing a "tragic on tragic" situation.

"These kind of shocking, traumatic, out of the blue kind of loss is very, very close to home. It really brings out people's own sense of previous losses and there's a universality in understanding the sense of loss," she said.

It's been a tough time for the Royal Canadian Mounted Police, which lost Const. Heidi Stevenson who was killed by the gunman and saw Const. Chad Morrison

injured.

Rev. Jim Mockler, rector at St. Peter's Cathedral Basilica in London, Ont., is a chaplain for Canada's national police force and said he's had only limited contact with officers affected by the shootings.

"If times were 'normal' I would be visiting our local detachment and headquarters offices in person," he said.

Mockler expects there to be a "backlog of grief" around the country for those who have died during the pandemic, including the Nova Scotia victims. He sees people not having visitations or any kind of gathering, and they may not when the pandemic restrictions are lifted.

"Some are rethinking this and realizing getting together to mourn at the time of death – not weeks later – provides a wave of support that can't be minimized," he said. "It seems we have been robbed of our final contact with our loved ones."

It's been difficult for priests "to not be able to do what we normally are called to do, be present for people," said Mockler. But he and others have found alternatives.

"I assure them that all the supports available from me, our pastoral team or bereavement groups along with our ongoing prayer are still intact. They may just have to be assessed differently," he said.

Patricia Cosgrove is the founder of Channel of Peace, a Christ-centred counselling service in Halifax. People are feeling pain and need to be allowed to "get in touch with that pain" and then to let it go. It will be a process, she said, but bit by bit they need to let it out.

"If there isn't any channel to do that then it just eats you up and stays inside of you and turns you into something that isn't going to be a pretty site," said Cosgrove.

She's been happy to see people are speaking about their pain, glad they are sharing it with other Canadians, who in turn have been showing their sorrow through events like the Nova Scotia Remembers vigil for the victims that was broadcast and live-streamed nationally on April 24.

"This is bringing out a sense of community and caring," said Cosgrove. "People do care what happens to me."

Even with churches closed and no memorial Masses, there has been much prayer. Cosgrove said many may not want to hear anything about God in these circumstances, and that's OK.

But she believes there needs to be a spiritual component in all this. People

need something to draw upon and the pain they're feeling can then be turned over to a greater power.

"That pain you are suffering ... it's God who is holding it," she said.