

# who are you in an emergency?



A couple of months ago, 14-year-old Jimmy Sheets pulled a .44-caliber Magnum handgun in his Red Lion, Pennsylvania, school cafeteria and shot his well-liked principal in the chest. Then he pulled out a .22-caliber handgun and shot himself in the head. The 300-plus kids in the cafeteria raced outside to safety. But for many of them, school will never be safe again.

The shock of what this quiet, well-behaved eighth-grader did was overshadowed only by the desperate grief of a community searching for answers. Friends, family, and teachers all said what people always do after a school shooting—they never saw it coming.

Red Lion Borough Police Chief Walt Hughes said, "We don't know why today. And we don't know why, period. I think it's safe to say that something was building inside of him that he couldn't control."

In the emotional chaos that followed the shootings, youth worker **Rob Tucker** was thrust into the most demanding and critical "marker moment" of his ministry. Within hours he was talking to kids who were sitting so close to Sheets that the sound of the guns was still ringing in their ears.

A little more than a week after the shootings, Rob contacted me—mostly,

he just wanted me to know his story. He wondered if other youth leaders could benefit from what he was learning about responding to kids reeling from a crisis. I told him what he had to say was important for every youth minister who's ever said, "I can't imagine that happening here."

What follows is what Rob wrote about responding to kids in crisis, just two weeks after the shootings:

**1. Respond quickly and proactively.** Don't allow the crisis to control your ministry's direction. Rather, ask yourself how your ministry can help direct the response to the crisis. God's redemptive plan for any tragedy is carried out through his people. Ask him to use your ministry and church for healing, reconciliation, or whatever is needed.

**2. Encourage your students to tell, retell, and tell again their story.** The relief that comes from being heard is hard to measure. Many students just want you to hear what they've been through. They're not looking for knee-jerk reactions to complicated situations or quick fixes for their problems. They want you to really hear them. Remedies can come later with God's help.

**3. Don't forget to reach out to parents.** Many parents were just as shaken up as their kids. Put yourself in their shoes. Empathize with their fears. Help them with their pain. If they're not well, it will take much longer for their children to find help.

**4. Offer whatever you have to the community.** Give your time, your building, your expertise, and any other valuable resource that can help in the situation. Keep offering, even when your

help is declined. It's crucial your community understands your true intentions—your church exists to meet the real needs of real people. Open a door between your community and your ministry.

**5. Change your program to meet your students' needs.** If you truly have a "relational ministry," you'll dump what you've planned to respond to what kids really need. It might mean replanning your weekend services or, in my case, a junior high retreat weekend. This isn't about your agenda—it's about meeting kids where they're at.

**6. Ask your youth staffers, parents, and other youth leaders about ways you can improve your response.** Refuse to assume your actions have

hit the mark—find out by asking.

**7. Invite God to deepen your dependence on him.** A tragedy clarifies your vision—I saw quickly how desperate I am for God's help. And it clarified my perspective on what's really important in youth ministry. A crisis puts God squarely at the center of everything—where he should be even when things are going smoothly.

**More on the Web:** I asked Rob Tucker to write a one-week journal of what happened from the moment he heard the news of the shooting.

You can read what he wrote on our Web site—[www.groupmag.com](http://www.groupmag.com). Click on the Extra box, then click on the link "Rob Tucker's Crisis Journal." ■

**Rick Lawrence** has been editor of *group Magazine* for 15 years.

#### TAKE NOTE:

If you haven't already signed up for my free e-newsletter—"Rick's Monthly Blog"—do it by going to [www.groupmag.com](http://www.groupmag.com) and clicking on my face—it's on the right side of our home page.

If you truly have a "relational ministry," you'll dump what you've planned to respond to what kids really need.