

## Research Findings

### **Amish Forgiveness and the Nickel Mines Shooting**

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#### **The Research**

Following the October 2, 2006 shooting that killed five Amish girls and wounded five others, the three investigators explored why and how the Amish expressed forgiveness in the wake of the shooting. The research methods involved face-to-face interviews with Amish people to probe their practice of forgiveness. In addition the researchers pursued Amish writings on forgiveness as well as historical examples when Amish people forgave those who wronged them. The investigators also reviewed hundreds of media stories and editorials on Amish forgiveness at Nickel Mines. Finally, the investigation compared Amish practices of forgiveness with broader studies of forgiveness in American society. The research was conducted from November 1, 2006 through April 1, 2007. The results have been released in *Amish Grace: How Forgiveness Transcended Tragedy* (Jossey-Bass, 2007). Visit [www.amishgrace.com](http://www.amishgrace.com)

#### **The Findings**

- Numerous Amish people expressed forgiveness to the killer's widow, her parents, and the killer's parents.
- The expressions of forgiveness were spontaneous. There were no meetings within the Amish community to decide when and how to express forgiveness. Amish leaders did not offer formal expressions of forgiveness on behalf of the Amish community.
- Amish forgiveness involved not only words, but behavior—giving food, flowers, and money to the widow and her family, attending the burial of the killer, and participating in reconciliation events with the family of the killer.
- The tragedy spawned several community events that strengthened the bonds of friendship and trust between the Amish and their neighbors.
- The parents of Amish children killed or wounded in the killing received remarkable support from their extended families and neighbors (both Amish and non-Amish). The support continues.
- The investigators found no instances of rage, revenge, or retaliation toward the killer's family. Feelings of anger were muted by cultural and religious restraints.
- The parents of the murdered girls experienced deep grief, but they were aided in processing their grief by distinctive Amish rituals of grieving.
- Amish families reached out to professional counselors to assist them in processing their grief.

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- Forgiveness for the Amish is a religious imperative based on the teachings of Jesus. They frequently cited Bible verses, including verses in and immediately following the Lord's Prayer, that underscore their belief that, "if we don't forgive we won't be forgiven."
- Forgiveness among the Amish is encouraged by communal practices (e.g., twice-yearly worship services that emphasize forgiveness and reconciliation) and sustained by communal memory (e.g., reciting stories of sixteenth-century Christian martyrs who readily forgave their persecutors).
- The researchers discovered that the acts of forgiveness at Nickel Mines were not an aberration, but a long standing practice in the Amish community. Dozens of historical examples show Amish forgiveness in the face of tragedy.
- The immediate decision to forgive, inspired by their religious faith, started an emotional and spiritual process of forgiving that remains ongoing.
- The investigators found that the Amish practice of shunning excommunicated members is related to, but distinct from, their understanding of forgiveness. For the Amish, shunning does not imply a refusal to forgive, but reflects a sincere attempt to hold wayward members accountable to their baptismal vows.
- For the Amish, forgiveness means letting go of grudges and ill will toward those who wrong them. It does not mean, condoning, pardoning, or forgoing punishment. They support imprisonment for those determined guilty of crimes by the American judicial system.
- The forgiveness set the ground work for many on-going reconciliation activities between the Amish families and the killer's widow, his parents, and his parents-in-law, all of whom live near Nickel Mines.

For a full report of the research see *Amish Grace: How Forgiveness Transcended Tragedy* (Jossey-Bass, 2007). Jossey-Bass (2007) ISBN 978-078799761-8, Hardcover, 254 pages.

For more information visit [www.amishgrace.com](http://www.amishgrace.com).

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