

# Those who trespass against us

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When some Amish schoolgirls were murdered, Terri Roberts was devastated to discover that her son was responsible. *Sarah Meyrick* talked to her

PA



Through a glass darkly: an Amish girl in the funeral procession for Mary Liz and Lena Miller

ON 2 OCTOBER 2006, a gunman entered a schoolhouse in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, and opened fire on ten little girls aged between six and 13, before turning the gun on himself.

This occurred just days after two other school shootings in the United States — in Colorado and Wisconsin — did nothing to lessen the horror. What made it, if possible, even more shocking was that this shooting took place in the Old Amish community, a subculture that combines devout Christian faith with a simple lifestyle that has changed little since the 16th century.

The TV pictures at the time showed Amish farmers, dressed in their traditional bonnets and aprons, straw hats and overalls, standing bewildered and disbelieving in the midst of emergency vehicles and media crews, as they struggled to make sense of the horror.

Terri Roberts, who lived near by, heard the helicopters circling overhead, and wondered what was going on, but thought no more of it until she took a phone call from her husband, Chuck, a retired police officer. He implored her to come as a matter of urgency to their son Charlie's house. On the ten-minute drive, she picked up the news of the shooting on the car radio. Charlie drove a milk tanker that served many of the Amish farms. Her first thought was that he'd been caught in the cross fire. Within moments of her arrival, her world fell apart.

"It was Charlie," Chuck told her. "He killed those girls."

TODAY, she is still bewildered by what happened. "I cannot describe my devastation, the gut-wrenching pain, the nights of anguish," she says. "My firstborn child, whom I'd cradled in my arms, overseen his first steps, taught to love and serve God, watched grow into a gentle, hard-working man, a loving husband and father — this beloved son walked into an Amish schoolhouse with an arsenal of guns."

She and Chuck had seen Charlie, the oldest of her four sons, his wife, Marie, and their three children — aged seven, five, and 18 months — only the night before. Terri had just returned from a trip to France, and wanted to tell them all about it. After dinner, Charlie went outside to play softball with his son, while she chatted with Marie. Eventually, they took themselves home. She noticed that Charlie was perhaps a little quieter than usual.

"He was an introvert by personality, and never one to talk a lot in a group situation," she says. But nothing about the evening gave the slightest hint of what was to come.

The next morning, Charlie saw his children on to the school bus before going to the one-room schoolhouse in Nickel Mines, a village in Bart township, Lancaster County. After break time, he went inside and sent away the teacher, a couple of other adults, and the boys, before tying up the girls with plastic ties. Two of the girls offered to pray with him, but he refused.

Before he opened fire, he phoned Marie, and told her that he had left notes for her and the children. In the letters, he spoke of his anger at the death of their firstborn daughter, who lived for just 20 minutes, and his hatred of God. He confessed to molesting two young relatives twenty years earlier — a claim that both the women deny. Then he opened fire.

Five of the girls died, two at the scene. Another was declared dead on arrival at hospital. Two more died the next day. Five were injured, four of whom recovered. The fifth, Rosanna King, who was six, was left with serious brain injuries. The victims came from a small number of families: they were sisters, cousins, friends.

"We're absolutely not any clearer now than we were as to why he did it," Terri says. "The answer died with Charlie. There's not anything I can put a finger on. And that is hard. There is no way a mother can fathom how a child she cradled in her arms could do something like that."

In the immediate aftermath, Terri found herself overwhelmed by anger. She and Chuck had given their sons a happy and stable childhood. They had been home-schooled, and brought up in the Christian faith. How could Charlie have become this monster? Where had God been in this? Why hadn't he intervened to stop Charlie? She was furious with her son. How could he do this to these girls, to their families? How could he inflict this on Marie and their children?

Alongside the anger was confusion and self-doubt. “What kind of a woman was I to bear a son who could perpetrate such horrible deeds?” she says. “What kind of a mother had not noticed the darkness in her own son?”

IN THE midst of the pain and confusion, something extraordinary happened. One of the first people to visit Terri and Chuck after the shooting was a neighbour, Henry Stoltzhoos, who knocked on the door, dressed in his formal black visiting attire and wide-brimmed straw hat. He had known the Roberts family for many years. Chuck had provided an occasional taxi service for the Amish, whose regular mode of transport is a horse and buggy. Mr Stoltzhoos walked over to Chuck and said: “Roberts, we love you. This was not your doing. You must not blame yourself.”

This was the first sign of a startling experience of forgiveness by the very people whom Terri believed had most reason to hate her family. Other Amish visitors followed.

The next hurdle was Charlie’s funeral. The police had assured the family that they would provide a cordon around the cemetery to ensure that they could lay Charlie to rest in peace. But, as they arrived for the funeral, they were faced with a horde of news crews and spectators.

Then another extraordinary thing happened. A group of 30 or so Amish stepped forward and formed a solid wall of black around the family, shielding them from the onlookers. The group included some of the parents whose children had died in the attack.

“This will be for ever a picture in my mind,” Terri says. “I see those faces — the purity of their love and compassion. There are not words to describe it.”

Afterwards, one by one, the Amish expressed their condolences. Among them were Chris and Rachel Miller, who had lost two daughters, Lena and Mary Liz. They told Chuck and Terri: “We are so sorry for your loss.”

“It was a moment of sudden, healing clarity for me. Forgiveness is a choice,” Terri says. “These sweet parents were still as grief-stricken as I was, their hearts broken like mine over the loss of their children. But they had chosen to forgive instead of hating, to reach out in compassion instead of anger.”

She realised that, although she would not stop feeling anger, hurt, and bewilderment if she did not choose to forgive Charlie, she would be left with the same hole in her heart that her son had allowed to fill with bitterness and rage in his.

“Why do we find this so hard?” she says. “As [Christian] communities, we should just be able to see it. The Church talks about forgiveness all the time; but it’s so hard to live. We need to emulate that example.”

The journey towards healing has continued. Before long, Terri and Chuck began to visit the families at Nickel Mines. The Amish families visited in return. They formed friendships. In particular, Terri found herself drawn to the family of Rosanna, who was left profoundly disabled by the shooting, and in need of round-the-clock care. Terri recognised that family mealtimes had become almost impossible, and offered to help by taking over Rosanna’s care one evening a week. At first, it proved distressing and difficult; but, in time, it became second nature to her.

“I look forward to my time with Rosanna,” she says. “I have come to love this little girl as my own granddaughter.”

THIS extraordinary story of forgiveness and healing has led to any number of speaking invitations, for Terri and for members of the Amish community. Terri had delayed writing her own account out of concern for privacy, but now believes that the time is right. "I have always journalled, and I thought I might be able to share how God is working here," she says. "I never wanted to expose the Amish or my grandchildren. But now my daughter-in-law Marie has written a book, and there's been a film. The Amish were saying, 'When are you going to write a book?'"

There's another, more urgent reason: she has been diagnosed with stage-four cancer.

"Now the story will be out there, whether or not I am. It feels like God's timing."

The family are doing well, she says. Charlie's children are now 16, 13, and ten. "They are all doing excellently. God has provided for them a wonderful mother, and a new Daddy, too." (Marie remarried just a few months after the shootings.)

"As for healing, I'm not sure we ever get to the end, but we are all on a positive path." She and Chuck have travelled at different rates, she says. "I'm very open, and he's just not. It's about allowing each other to grow at our own pace. I've been saying 'Hurry up', while he's been saying 'Slow down.' But you can't expect it to be the same. Allowing God to work — that's where the rubber hits the road. The hardships in our marriage have made us stronger than ever."

Her illness means that she has had to let go of her weekly care of Rosanna, but she remains the note-taker when the team of medical specialists visit quarterly to discuss Rosanna's care. "It's an incredible relationship, with the Amish," she says. "That they would allow it . . . it's nothing short of amazing."

I ASK Terri about her views on gun control, but she will not be drawn. "It is such a divisive issue in our country right now, and one I will choose not to take a stand on, since I think it would discourage one side or the other from hearing the true message of forgiveness and hope — the message I have felt called to share," she says.

Rather, she hopes that readers of her book will hear a message of hope for the future. "No matter what our darkest day, God loves you as much as he loves me. Seek until you find him. We try to complicate things.

"Just say 'Yes, Lord. Show me the next step.'"

*Terri Roberts is the author of Forgiven: The Amish school shooting, a mother's love, and a story of remarkable grace, published by Bethany House at £9.99 (Church Times Bookshop £9).*