

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE:

Anglican Priest Ministers to Victims of Train Wreck

Thousand Oaks, CA – Sept. 15, 2008 – Donald M. Ashman was commuting to his home in Thousand Oaks Friday aboard a Metrolink train from his job teaching high school history and Latin when the train collided with a Union Pacific freight train. Although dazed and injured, he retrieved his cell phone, still connected to his wife with whom he had been talking, and reassured her that his back was hurt but he was “okay.”

Fr. Ashman is also a priest in the Anglican Province of Christ the King and rector of the Church of Our Savior and Holy Apostles in Los Angeles, so he quickly began ministering to the injured and deceased around him. This is his story in his words as he wrote to his parishioners.

My dear parish family and friends,

It has been two days since the Metrolink crash and I wanted to let you know what happened and how I am. This is what I remember of Friday, September 12, 2008, beginning around 4:15 p.m.

I was riding in the front of the mid-level section of the third (or last) of the three coaches, sitting backwards (that is, with my back to the front of the train), talking to my wife on my cell phone when I heard a thud, felt myself pushed back HARD into my seat and watched bodies fly through the air. It was all simultaneous and I knew my own back had been severely jolted. Then there was stillness; then moans (my own included); and then the gradual realization that there had been an accident, a terrible accident. I looked around and saw people scattered all around in the seats and on the floor. It was obvious (although it seemed to be unfolding in slow motion) that we had been in a serious wreck and that many people were bleeding and badly hurt. At my feet was a man who had been thrown down the stairs from the upper level; next to him was a young wheel chair-bound girl who had been thrown up the stairs from the lower level. I searched for my phone and backpack; I looked around; still trying to make sense out of what happened. I eventually found my cell phone and told Ellen that my back was hurt but I was O K but not before she heard the moans and cries! Out a window (whose glass had been blown outward) I saw that two Union Pacific Locomotives had collided with our train. Our Metrolink locomotive was not immediately visible as I did not yet understand that it had been pushed into the first coach car. There was a fire near the locomotives.

I remember at some point comforting the man at my feet who (I think) got up and went to a seat; then I spent time trying to comfort the girl in the wheel chair who could not move at all. Those of us who could move realized that we needed to get out and the best way to get out was to force open the doors to the second coach in front of us. I was still dazed but watched gratefully as the doors were forced open. By that time the uninjured or slightly injured (and there were a lot of unsung heroes that afternoon) began to help others to move to safety. There was no panic! It was strangely quiet! We left the third coach via the rear doors of the second coach. Once on the ground I saw that the first coach had been almost totally demolished but did not yet realize that the

Metrolink engine was actually rammed into and inside of the first coach. I walked slowly around the back of the train where there were a number of people already out and lying on the ground, many badly hurt. One lady and I spent probably a half an hour with a woman whose forehead was lacerated by a terrible gash. We helped keep her alert and kept pressure on her wound. I also happily saw the wheel-chair girl taken off the train with what appeared to be slight injuries. At some point during this time (and time was vague - I knew I was in shock), I talked on my cell phone to Kathy Angers, my colleague from Hoover High, and to my family who were coming to get me. I also visited other of the wounded and will never forget their fortitude, cheerfulness and courage.

By the end of the first half hour, there were police and firemen everywhere and, as they checked on us, I learned that there were indeed deceased who had been removed from the train on the other side of the tracks. I told the police and fire department personnel that I was a priest and asked if I could give last rites to the dead. I'm not sure they believed me until I started praying over the first of the deceased; then there was no doubt and the officials were only too eager to help me and some prayed with me. In all that suffering it was a sublime spiritual moment. Three of my students and one fellow teacher have e-mailed me that one of the news choppers (Channel 5) filmed me and reported that I was ministering to the deceased. I must have been engaged with the deceased in this way for maybe an hour as they were slowly taken from the first coach. The hardest moment came when a fireman came and told me that the engineer was deceased as well and I went back to the other side to bless his poor remains only partly exposed (the rest of him was under the engine). I don't remember the words I said, but I became acutely aware that prayer doesn't always consist of words. I was soon joined by other firemen and a fire-chaplain and I was deeply moved by their faith and strength. So, with the arrival of the fire-chaplain and my own exhaustion setting in, I knew then it was time for me to leave. From what I have been told, it was during this time that my son and daughter were both interviewed on T.V.

The fire-chaplain showed me the way out and I slowly (still in a daze) walked myself about three or four blocks to a police check point. At the checkpoint, a police officer asked who I was. I told him that I had been on the train and he seemed surprised. He then asked me to sit down on a curb while he took my identification and had a paramedic check me over. The paramedic was very kind and advised me to go to a hospital emergency room as my back seemed to be injured, especially on the lower right side. So I got up and began the three block walk. I quickly realized that the adrenalin rush was gone and I needed help. So I told another police officer that I needed a ride to an intersection where my family could pick me up. He procured a squad car and so I was reunited with my family. I remember making the officers laugh by remarking that the hard, plastic seat reserved for "special passengers" felt so good on my hurting back.

My family drove me to Los Robles Hospital in Thousand Oaks where I waited for about two hours before I was able to be seen. During that time I had a comforting conversation with Archbishop Provenca and got some dinner. I was the fourth or fifth walk-in from the Metrolink train crash to come to Los Robles and was told they were

calling in more staff because they expected many more walk-ins throughout the night. I had ex-rays taken which confirmed that my back muscles were pretty well scrambled. Then I was given a shot and pain medication which sent me into never-never land and sent home. I got to bed about 1:00 a.m. and pretty much slept until Sunday morning.

As difficult experience as this was, I know that I was where God intended me to be and for that I am grateful. Still, I wish that it would not have happened and I ask you to pray for the suffering and the dead.

Donald M. Ashman +

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