

Victims of the Massacre

By Jamie Buckingham

At the exact hour on April 28 that the new board of directors was wrestling with how to salvage the mess at PTL, I was conducting a funeral for a 67-year old grandmother who had been brutally gunned down in what is now known as the Palm Bay Massacre.

Five days earlier, 59-year old William Cruse, a retired librarian, spent the day as usual—drinking. That afternoon, when two neighborhood children ran across his yard, he became furious. On several occasions in the past he had threatened the children. Twice he had brought a gun from his house and fired it into the air. Many in the neighborhood feared him.

Neighbors said Cruse hated people. A recluse, he had hid in the back of libraries. But after he retired, he was unable to face society. When his wife contracted Parkinson's disease, he grew even angrier at the world. That Thursday afternoon when the children once again pestered him, something apparently snapped in his mind.

Media reports graphically informed us that armed with three guns—a semi-automatic machine-pistol, a .357 magnum police pistol, and a 20-gauge shotgun—Cruse stormed out of the house and began firing at the children. He missed, but his shots hit a teenager bouncing a basketball in a nearby driveway. The boy was badly wounded.

Carrying a canvas bag full of high-powered ammunition, he jumped in his car and raced to a nearby shopping center. Rush hour traffic was streaming past as he walked to the front of a grocery store. The first man he saw was Lester Watson, 52, the father of four children who was emerging from the store carrying a bag of groceries. Cruse shot him. As Watson lay convulsing on the sidewalk, Cruse stood over him and pumped another ten bullets into his body.

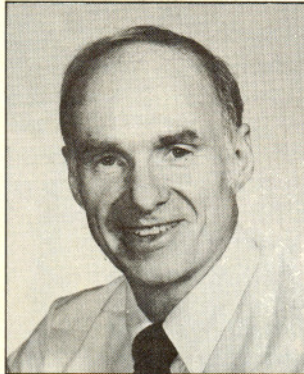
Next he turned and spotted Ruth Greene, a member of the church I pastor. Quiet, smiling, Ruth had stopped by the store to pick up some lettuce to feed a small pet. Cruse leveled his gun at her windshield and almost blew her head off.

He then killed two college students from Kuwait who were running, trying to get away. By then the shopping center was in chaos. Cruse was shooting at everything that moved. He critically wounded a mother and her small child. People were screaming, running in all directions.

Cruse got in his car and sped across the street. There he shot and killed two young policemen who tried to apprehend him. The first officer was shot before he could leave his car. The second, who was wounded, lay on the ground trying to reload his gun. Cruse walked up and shot him five times.

Then Cruse ran into a grocery store where he held 21-year-old Robin Brown hostage—all the time firing at frightened people who fled across the parking lot. He shot holes in the ambulances which came to pick up the wounded in the parking lot—some of whom lay bleeding for hours. More than 300 police officers were on the scene.

Finally, at 2 a.m., Cruse released his hostage. The police



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then stormed the building with tear gas and percussion grenades. Cruse meekly surrendered.

When it was all over, six people were dead, 14 wounded.

Our little community of 42,500 people went into mourning. Flags dropped to half-mast. I never believed it could happen here—just three miles from my quiet, semi-rural home. I had read the stories in 1984 of a deranged man who killed 21 people in a McDonald's in San Ysidro, California. And last year I watched media reports of a postal worker who shot to death 14 fellow workers in a post office in Edmond, Oklahoma. But I had thought this kind of tragedy only happened in other places to other people.

Not in Palm Bay, Florida.

And not to Ruth Greene—that wonderful, quiet little saint who volunteered each Sunday morning to work in our children's church.

All day Friday after the shootings I was in shock. What was going on?

"Out there" the PTL scandal was shaking the Kingdom to its roots. For a month I had been caught up in the swirl. For some reason I had become the one all the parties were talking to. The day of the massacre, CBS had started putting pressure on me to appear the following Sunday morning on "Face the Nation." They wanted me to interview Jerry Falwell and Jimmy Swaggart.

Then the massacre happened, and I realized that real ministry never takes place on TV. It takes place one-on-one. Everything else is plastic. I didn't want to face the nation. I wanted to be in church with my friends who were hurting.

I asked myself: Did it really matter whether or not Jerry Falwell would step down as chairman of PTL (as people were speculating at the time)? Or that John Ankerburg had conducted his own verbal massacre on the "Larry King Live" show, shooting more deadly accusations at Jim Bakker?

When viewed from Ruth Greene's perspective, it all seemed a bit vain. That weekend we had more important things to do than worry about talking heads on TV. My little town, my church, my friends were hurting—and the televangelists had nothing to offer.

So that Tuesday afternoon, as Christian celebrities met in Charlotte to preside over PTL, our town turned off its TV sets. We were tired, all of us, of hearing of those who had been unfaithful over much.

"They do not represent Jesus," I told the crowd gathered at the funeral. "If you want a picture of Jesus, look at Ruth Greene who was never on TV in her life. On TV we see those who are unfaithful over much. Here is one who was faithful over little—now master over much."

That afternoon, with my arms around a hurting family, I once again tasted life as we grappled with death. I imagine it will be a long time before I need to watch TV again. ■