



The Virginia Tech Tragedy

What do Christians say? What do Christians do when something as senseless as the shooting on the Virginia Tech campus takes place? This week, our writers reflect on what is happening from their different settings in Virginia. Co-writer Jeanne Torrence Finley is a former campus minister who lives in Blacksburg, where the campus is located. Here is some of what she has been seeing.

The Candles

Tuesday night, after a prayer service at Blacksburg United Methodist Church, worshipers walked several blocks to the Virginia Tech drill field where we joined thousands of students and community members in a candlelight vigil. After opening comments from the student government president, the crowd stood in silence.

From one side of the drill field, voices started the Hokie cheer, "Let's go!" The other side yelled in response, "Hokies!" As the call and response reverberated among the buildings, the shouts became louder as we raised our candles in rhythm with the cheers. When the cheers stopped, the Corps of Cadets and other sections of the crowd began singing "Amazing Grace."

Though brief, the candlelight vigil held powerful significance for our community. Wednesday afternoon at the Wesley Foundation at Virginia Tech, I asked student Tim Owen what that moment meant to him. "I felt hope, looking out there and seeing everyone together and cheering," he replied. "It's dark now, but there is always light."

Earlier, I had talked with the Reverend Morris Fleisher, associate pastor at Blacksburg UMC, who also spoke of how the event has symbolized a light in the darkness of this week. "I saw there an attitude of defiant compassion. We're defiant in the sense that we are standing up against this tragedy and saying this should not be so. We're compassionate in the sense that we stand in solidarity with peers and in community. It is an edgy compassion, a desire for justice tempered by mercy. We want to tell the world that the horror of this week cannot overcome the goodness of a loving God. When you stand together arm to arm sharing light with one another, it is as if we are telling the darkness that it cannot completely overwhelm us."

FAITHLINK
(Special Issue)

The Session at a Glance

As this nation mourns alongside the families of Virginia Tech, we the writers and staff of FAITHLINK provide this special issue for you. In it, two Virginians and regular writers for FAITHLINK tell what they have seen and experienced in the first few days since the tragedy.

Meet Our Writers

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Alex Joyner is pastor of Franktown United Methodist Church on Virginia's Eastern Shore.

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Just Sinking In

The candlelight vigil and the convocation that preceded it Tuesday afternoon, with more than 8,000 in attendance at Cassell Coliseum and more than 1,000 in Lane Stadium, were first steps toward moving from shock and numbness into grief. At Blacksburg UMC's Tuesday prayer service and Wednesday night dinner and hymn sing, I heard again and again the comment that the reality of these deaths has just begun to sink in.

Gatherings large and small are our fledgling steps toward healing. Virginia Tech senior and Wesley Foundation student leader Rachel VanPelt told me that on Monday she was not among the students who sat in front of computer and television screens to try to find out what was happening. She says, "When I saw the long lines of students and others waiting for hours to get into the convocation, it began to become real."

Expressing Faith Through Hospitality

As I talk with friends in and near Blacksburg UMC and the Wesley Foundation, I hear and see how faith supports us through horrific events. They say they are going through this week with the help of ordinary practices of faith, phone calls and e-mail messages telling them they are being held in prayer and being with friends in gatherings on campus, in homes, and at church. When people call and write us from distant places saying they are praying for us and for the families of the victims of these shootings, we answer, "You're already doing what we need most right now."

Morris Fleisher spoke of the challenge of pastoral ministry in the midst of this tragedy. "Everywhere I go, I hear stories of hospitality, faculty members opening their homes for gatherings of students," he said. "I hear students opening up, telling their experiences, sharing tears and laughter, telling stories. One of the best ways to minister in this situation is to facilitate opportunities for people to relate to one another. Initially the best therapy is peer interaction."

Morris spoke to the Army Corps of Cadets at 5:30 A.M. Wednesday morning when they gathered for physical training. Colonel Chris St. Jean, a member of our congregation and in charge of the Army ROTC, asked him to remind students that there is a support system for them through campus mental health services, campus ministries, and churches.

Because classes were cancelled for the rest of the week, many students went home. Colonel St. Jean wanted to know who was signing out and who was staying. He was concerned about cadets sitting alone in their rooms feeling despondent. He would check on them and maybe invite them to his house for dinner.

Core Bible Passages

When asked about Scripture passages that have sustained him during this week, Glenn Tyndall, campus minister at Virginia Tech, had this to say:

"I've been thinking of the psalmist litany that God's steadfast love endures forever [**Psalm 136**]. And I know that God's love means that as we shed tears here, God has a tear in his eye.

"I've also been thinking about how Paul tells us 'to bear one another's burdens' [**Galatians 6:2**]. The students have been doing that, ministering to each other. Not just the students involved in the Wesley Foundation, but students all over campus have been bearing each other's burdens. It's ministry even though they may not call it that." Glenn also said that others have been bearing his burdens through their prayers and messages of comfort.

At Blacksburg United Methodist Church Tuesday night, the congregation heard **Romans 8:35-39**. In that same service we heard Bishop Charlene P. Kammerer recount the story in **John 20:11-18** in which Jesus appears to Mary Magdalene on Easter morning.

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Hosting the World

For many of us here, coming to grips with this tragedy has been similar to the experience of millions around the world. We have watched familiar news reporters, located a mile or two from our homes, tell us about what is happening in Blacksburg. Sometimes it is hard to tell whether we are in our own town or watching it from a distant location.

On Wednesday, Bishop Charlene P. Kammerer and our district superintendent, Steve Hundley, drove to Blacksburg to visit with students at the Wesley Foundation and to be with us at our evening prayer. In her message of hope, Bishop Kammerer recounted the story of Mary at the tomb on Easter morning, how after Mary's initial despair Jesus became visible to her. Bishop Kammerer reminded us that in our despair the risen Christ has been with us as we have supported one another and as others have supported us with their prayers and presence.

The pastors of Blacksburg UMC have been running on adrenalin, prayers, and on the stories they encounter everywhere as they have dealt with this crisis along with the routine needs of a large congregation. Morris Fleisher told me that on Monday he was at a local hospital when he got word of a student who had already been in surgery for a long time before her family arrived. He waited with the family for another two hours. Then the surgeon came into the waiting room to share the details. There had been multiple wounds.

About ten minutes after the surgeon left the room, the telephone at the desk rang; and the student's father picked up the receiver. The caller was his daughter in the recovery room, telling him she was OK. Morris said, "It was Easter all over again. I was struck with her tenacity, faith, and character. She gave us hope. She was worried about her parents more than about herself."

The Open Doors of the Wesley Foundation

As I sat in the reception area of the Wesley Foundation talking with LaVina Tyndall, who serves as secretary and friend to students and alumni scattered across the country and around the world, the phone kept ringing. A weary student was asleep on the couch. On the wall beside LaVina's desk were hundreds of photos of children and babies, the offspring of those alumni.

LaVina said she was getting calls from all over the country. Churches were sending prayers, questions about how they could help, and money. She had received a check from an alumna of another Wesley Foundation who said her gratitude for her campus ministry experience had prompted her to send it.

Soon the Reverend Glenn Tyndall, campus minister, and Rachel VanPelt, student president, joined us, taking a moment to reflect on this harrowing week. Rachel mentioned the cartoon circulating through e-mail that expresses what is happening all over the country. The Hokie Bird, a turkey of sorts that is Virginia Tech's mascot, is sitting on the ground weeping. Around him are the mascots of other state universities, trying to comfort him. The caption reads: "Today we are all Hokies."

Glenn said, "I've received over a hundred messages from Wesley Foundation directors across the country who are saying, 'Our campus is praying for you.' I have learned the power of the United Methodist connection." He continued, "Another learning has been this: There's nothing about Blacksburg

Talking With Children

Wednesday, the NBC television network announced that they had received a package from Cho Seung-Hui, the alleged gunman in the Virginia Tech shooting. The package, mailed in the middle of Monday morning's events, contained a video with disturbing images of Cho brandishing handguns and clips of him using religious language to describe his death. "Thanks to you, I die like Jesus Christ, to inspire generations of the weak and the defenseless people."

Many children will have seen these images and those of Monday morning. They may experience great anxiety as a result. The New York University Child Study Center has compiled a list of resources for talking to children about this and other tragic events in the news. The resources can be accessed on the Web at <http://www.aboutourkids.org>.

Among the tips for addressing traumatic events are suggestions to look for opportunities to start a discussion and focus on the child's thoughts and feelings, avoiding teaching and lecturing. Listen to and address children's feelings. Reassure them.

Provide facts and information consistent with the child's age and maturity. Model open discussion, and provide a forum for the child to initiate a discussion and ask questions.

Like all people, children need to be in community with others in times of crisis. Find ways to include children in the activities planned at your church.

and Virginia Tech that would make you think something like this could happen here, but that's what tells us that it could happen in any community in the country."

Like the clergy at Blacksburg UMC, LaVina said that she has been telling people who want to come to Blacksburg to help, "The needs here now are very different from the ones later on. Like a flood, the waters haven't gone away yet. Some people would like to come and put up dry wall, but we don't yet know what the damage is. That will come later. What's most important now is to hear the words, 'We're praying for you.'"

Uncountable numbers of postings on the Internet assure this community of their prayers and support. E-mail messages, phone calls, and letters tell us that we are being held in prayer. We hear from churches everywhere that are holding prayer services for us.

Yesterday, my family received a phone call from friends in England. Today, my husband received an e-mail from a long-lost fraternity brother on the West Coast. It is the story that I am hearing from students, faculty, and the whole community. All of that is exactly what we need.

Meanwhile, across the state, Alex Joyner, another former campus minister, is serving a church with many ties to the Virginia Tech community.

The World Needs You

The images from the candlelight vigil on the Virginia Tech drill field reverberated around the world. Watching and listening to the coverage from my vantage on the eastern edge of the state, I felt a stirring of hope represented in all those candles. The radio played a clip of that moment when the Hokie cheer mixed with the strains of "Amazing Grace." Both seemed to represent an affirmation that for all that had been lost, a powerful connection remained.

Earlier in the day, Virginia governor, Timothy M. Kaine, had referenced the biblical story of Job as he addressed a convocation in the university's basketball coliseum. "As you wrestle with despair," he said, "do not lose hold of that spirit of community you have." Kaine reminded the gathering of how important it was that they mourn in a way to help those watching from afar. "The world needs you to."

A Lot of Candles

On Monday, as the news of the tragedy started to unfold, churches and campus ministries throughout the country began planning prayer services for those who had died.

In my congregation, we sent word by e-mail, prayer chain, and radio to let people know there would be a gathering that evening. I busied myself pulling together scattered pieces of liturgy to form something to frame the evening. As I struggled to find 33 candles to place on the altar, the magnitude of the deaths became clearer. That is a lot of candles; but, oh, God, that is a lot of people.

That night, we went about the task of checking on all of our students. I called the families of those who had students at Virginia Tech. Fortunately all were accounted for and safe. However, each of the families expressed how much they felt for the parents who did not have such assurance. *It could have been us, they were thinking.*

Victims of the Tragedy

Please pray for the families and friends of those killed in the Virginia Tech tragedy:

- Ross Abdallah Alameddine
- Christopher James Bishop
- Brian Bluhm
- Ryan Clark
- Austin Cloyd
- Jocelyne Couture-Nowak
- Daniel Perez Cueva
- Kevin Granata
- Matthew G. Gwaltney
- Caitlin Hammaren
- Jeremy Herbstritt
- Rachael Hill
- Emily Jane Hilscher
- Jarrett L. Lane
- Matthew J. La Porte
- Henry J. Lee
- Liviu Librescu
- G.V. Loganathan
- Partahi Lombantoruan
- Lauren McCain
- Daniel O'Neil
- Juan Ramon Ortiz
- Minal Panchal
- Erin Peterson
- Michael Pohle
- Julia Pryde
- Mary Karen Read
- Reema J. Samaha
- Waleed Mohammed Shaalan
- Leslie Sherman
- Maxine Turner
- Nicole White

Knowing that I would have more success by Internet than by phone, I sat down with the computer Monday night to try and contact all of our college students. Hillary Custis, a Virginia Tech student, wrote back quickly. "I think we are all still numb and in shock. I can't believe that it is happening here or that it has happened at all." Then she expressed the spirit I heard from Tech students all week: "As a community, we are strong. We will make it through together. Thanks for the prayers and continued prayers, as I'm sure you realize the healing process will be a long one. Words cannot begin to express our appreciation, knowing that so many are praying for us."

We're All Hokies Today

The e-mails with students continued all week, and they were just a tiny portion of the communication happening over the Web. On the social networking site Facebook, new groups sprang up overnight filled with notes of support for the Virginia Tech community. Students at the University of Virginia, Tech's traditional instate rival, created sites such as "UVA Supports VT," which contain messages of consolation and photos of Virginia Tech memorials in the University of Virginia community.

Joe Lenow, a United Methodist student at the University of Virginia with a brother at Virginia Tech, says the tragedy has brought the two schools closer together. "The rivalry is only able to exist because we are so connected." That connection has been strengthened by the faith community's response, which has included gatherings and vigils sponsored by Christian fellowships. "The only place to turn is prayer," Lenow says. "It's really been a comfort. People don't know what to say and what to feel. I've seen us Christians take this opportunity to step up and say who we are, to pray for the perpetrator as well as the victims, to pray for the healing of everyone."

Congregational Support

Back in my congregation we were praying as well. The Monday night gathering began with a prayer of concern for a family friend who had not yet been heard from. He was last seen in the building where the deadliest shooting occurred. During prayers, a cell phone buzzed. It was the report coming in that the missing student had been heard from. He was OK.

Small groups meeting through the week shared stories of what they had seen and heard about local students. There was anger, there were tears, there was silence, and there were hugs.

On Wednesday, I gathered up what we knew and e-mailed the congregation. I encouraged them to remember our Virginia Tech students and other college students and to write notes of support. I named our campus minister at the Wesley Foundation, and I passed along resources for talking about the incident with children.

It was hard to know what words to offer; but like so many other pastors across the country whose posts I was reading on e-mail, I looked to the Resurrection story we had just celebrated. I said, "These are times that challenge us to remember the Easter message that Christ has defeated all enemies, including death, and events such as this one do not have the last word. . . . Since Monday the message from students and speakers has been, 'We will not let this evil define who we are. Virginia Tech is more than the place where an unspeakable crime has taken place. It is a place where hope and life will continue.'"

Open Space

It seems so little: prayer. Surely we can do more for those who are suffering. There is a role for financial contributions to support campus ministries. Cards and expressions of concern for Virginia Tech will be sent.

However, it seems that in the actions of churches across the country, the slogan of The United Methodist Church is being lived out: "Our minds, our hearts, and our doors are open." This week, it is prayer that leaves us open; open to an understanding that eludes us now of what this tragedy means; and open to what God will yet do with us.

Five minutes before I went to church Monday evening, I received a call from a seminary classmate who now lives in Scotland. We only talked for a brief minute. He had heard the news and just wanted to call to say that he was thinking of me, my church, and my state. It was enough to carry me through the service. Somehow knowing that there are bonds not diminished by oceans led me to trust the words that say they cannot be diminished by death either.

The Virginia Tech Tragedy

Finding support from faith in tough times

CREATE Your Teaching Plan

Due to the emotional nature of the moment, it may be best to spend your time together as an open forum for people to share feelings and ask questions; however, answers may not come.

The activities below provide just a few options to guide your time together and help your group process the week's events with support from our Christian faith.

OPEN With Worship

A. Sing a Hymn and Reflect (15 minutes)

You may want to consider using a number of hymns in your session today. Jeanne Torrence Finley, co-writer of this study, reports that her congregation at Blacksburg United Methodist Church had a powerful time of singing on the Wednesday evening following the service. Students responded positively to this type of service, she said, because it "connected them to other faith communities in other places and times saying there is a life beyond this one."

The following songs were sung at their church: "This Is My Song" (*The United Methodist Hymnal*, 437); "Here I Am, Lord" (593); "Be Still, My Soul" (534); "In Unity We Lift Our Song" (*The Faith We Sing*, 2221); and "A Prayer for Our Children" by Carolyn Winfrey Gillette (found at <http://www.umcworship.org>).

Another song with a powerful text by former archbishop Desmond Tutu is "Goodness Is Stronger than Evil" (*TFWS*, 2219).

CONTINUE by Exploring

B. The Power of Prayer (15 minutes)

Ask: What do we believe about prayer? In what ways have you experienced God's presence in times of tragedy through prayer? What sorts of things should we offer to God in our prayers?

C. Study the Scriptures (15 minutes)

Read "Core Bible Passages" (page 2). Several passages are mentioned that were used by people and churches in Blacksburg this week.

Ask: What do these passages tell us about the character of God? What do they affirm about life? What other passages help sustain you through troubled times?

CLOSE With Song and Prayer

D. Pray for the Victims (15 minutes)

Allow extra time for the closing prayer today. Joe Lenow, the student quoted on page 5, noted that one of the powerful witnesses he felt Christians could make in a time such as this was to pray for not only the victims of the shooting but also for the gunman and his family. This may be challenging for some in your group, but remind them of God's grace and challenge to love even those who would harm us.

Pray for the Virginia Tech community, for campus ministries and churches in the Blacksburg area, for families who are grieving, for students still recovering from wounds, for first responders and hospital staffs, and for college and university students everywhere.