

Jesus Wept

Photos by Tom Price unless otherwise noted
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PASTORS AND CHAPLAINS COMFORT THE HURTING

Therefore, when Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who came with her weeping, He groaned in the spirit and was troubled. And He said, "Where have you laid him?" They said to Him, "Lord, come and see." Jesus wept.

John 11:33-35

Sunlight and somberness permeated the Virginia Tech campus, the Drillfield strewn with flowers and memorials to the 32 students killed in the shooting there on April 16. At the scene a week later, a small crowd stood silently huddled behind yellow police tape. They were staring at the gaping, empty doorway and busted-out windows of Norris Hall as if they were waiting for something. Some had come to pay their respects; many were trying to process what had happened.

Down the hill, Freshman Correy Taylor read notes to victims on message boards under tents. His eyes flitted from one to the next, reading and looking at photos and letters. He shuffled around, his brown-haired head bent in distraction, when a man held out his hand and introduced himself as a chaplain named Kory Wells. They smiled and remarked on having similar names, and the man began chatting with him.

"How are you holding up?" the chaplain asked.

"I don't know what to think," Correy said. They talked some more, and he added, "I'm upset. Why did this happen? It didn't need to happen. I feel like it should have been prevented—but how?"

Kory asked if he had a faith to lean on. Though the student identified himself with a Christian denomination, he wasn't in fellowship anywhere. As they talked, Correy mentioned that he had met another student named Jake who had been talking to him at Campus Crusade for Christ.

"There's something about Jake; it's nice to talk to him," Correy said, adding that Jake spent time talking to him but wouldn't go with him to parties with alcohol.

Kory responded, "It sounds like Jake is a Christian and God was using him to help you through tough times this week."

Correy nodded, and they began discussing how to have a personal relationship with Jesus Christ.

"Maybe I'll do that when I'm out of college," Correy said. The chaplain encouraged him to give his life to Jesus now so that he could walk with Christ through college, having fellowship and encouragement with other Christian students. He added that the world—the party scene, the drinking—would only bring him down.

"Do you want that personal relationship we talked about? Do you want to be forgiven and free?" the chaplain asked. Correy nodded, and they prayed together. After they finished, the young man hugged him for a long time, and tears welled up in their eyes.

"I didn't know why I was coming down here. Now I know," Correy said. "I'm so glad we met."

Kory nodded, giving the student his email and encouraging him to call his friend Jake right away to let him know that he accepted Christ and to plug in to Campus Crusade for fellowship.

Later, Kory observed, "God had used Jake to plant the seed, then He used me to introduce Correy to Jesus Christ."

An elder at CC Vineland, NJ, Kory Wells is one of several CC chaplains who ministered at Virginia Tech the first few days after the shooting. Having received crisis training previously at CC Philadelphia,



Grief is poured out during a candlelight vigil the evening after the tragic murder of 32 students and faculty.

"God ... used me to introduce Correy to Jesus Christ."

Kory Wells



Chaplain Kory Wells, CC Vineland, NJ, talks to students struggling with grief.



Daniel Vasquez of CC Vineland lays his hand on a VA Tech police officer as Bill Parks and Bruce Gerstle, right, of CC Philadelphia pray. The men are chaplains with the Billy Graham Rapid Response Team.

many of the chaplains have also ministered to victims of 9/11 and Hurricane Katrina.

"Because we're Calvary Chapel, we have a reputation for being able to get there quickly without all the red tape," said Chaplain Bill Ammon of CC Stroudsburg, PA. CC Chaplains have worked with the Billy Graham Rapid Response Team in previous disasters, he added.



Students grieve at a memorial on the Drillfield.

Kory led two other students and a visiting police officer to Christ as well, he recalled. He encouraged and prayed with dozens more people during the week he was there.

That week, the small group of CC chaplains from New Jersey and Pennsylvania were able to talk to hundreds of people and pray with several to receive Christ on the campus crowded with mourners, said Bill, who also has a grief counseling ministry.

Pastor Frank Ippolito of CC Vineland, NJ, had also ministered to victims of Hurricane Katrina in 2005. He recounted, "This was entirely different from Katrina. We have run into so many Christians there on the campus—hundreds. It has been a shock, but also a wake-up call to the Christian community. We have been able to encourage many ... to come out of their shells, to share Christ on their campus."

Frank met a graduate student named Mark sitting under a tree near Norris Hall. Mark said he often taught classes to undergrads in one of the same classrooms where students were killed. "It was a shock to him that this happened in a place so familiar," Frank recalled. Mark told Frank that the tragedy woke him up spiritually, and he realized that there are many on campus who need to be reminded of the hope of Jesus Christ.

"We prayed together. It was good. He said I am the first person he's been able to talk to about it," Frank said of their conversation which occurred six days after the shooting.

Encouraging the Peacekeepers

Frank and other chaplains also ministered to campus law enforcement. "They knew some of the kids," Frank explained. Chaplains talked to officers who had helped pull bodies from the building and

were still working 12-hour shifts nearly a week later.

"One officer told me he wouldn't be able to stand through any of this without Jesus Christ," said Daniel Vasquez of CC Vineland. Chaplains brought 40 Bibles designed for law enforcement officers. With an invitation from the chief, they brought the Bibles to headquarters and discovered there were exactly 40 officers on the force.



Students write notes communicating the loss that they feel.

"We have been able to encourage many ... to share Christ on their campus."

Pastor Frank Ippolito

Daniel testified, "They were so happy to have them."

Daniel recalled, "One of the troopers I talked to, he had walked in and seen everything. He was hurting. He said there is a 'presence of evil inside that place like no other.' I was able to encourage him to hold on to God's strength." CC chaplains ministered at Virginia Tech for several weeks.

A Legacy of Faith

At least two students among the 32 that were gunned down left a legacy of faith in

Christ so strong that fellow classmates and friends acknowledged it after their passing.

"The purpose and love of my life is Jesus Christ," wrote victim Lauren McCain, 20, on her MySpace page before her death. Chaplains met several students who knew Lauren and confirmed that she was a strong believer who openly spoke about her relationship with Jesus Christ. The freshman from Hampton, VA, also wrote, "I don't have to argue religion, philosophy, or historical evidence because I KNOW Him. He is just as real, if not more so, as my 'earthly' father."

Civil engineering student Brian Bluhm, 25, was a regular at Bible study at Virginia Tech's Baptist Student Union, peers said. Outside Burrus Hall was a hand-written poster to Brian which said, "Have fun walking with Jesus." Inside the engineering building, a small memorial to eight victims from that department included t-shirts for people to sign. On Brian's shirt was the remark, "Keep swinging for the fences in heaven." He was known as an avid baseball fan, but even more so, friends told reporters, he was a strong Christian whose faith held first priority in his life.

Returning to Faith

Some Christian students also shared their faith and encouraged their peers after the tragedy, said CC chaplains and pastors. Pastor Brian Phillips of CC Roanoke and other believers from his fellowship have made regular visits to the campus—nearly 45 minutes away from Roanoke—since the day after the shooting to encourage and pray with students.

"I think God is using this to turn some Christians back to Himself," said the local CC pastor. He recalled approaching two girls who were sitting separately on a wall



An impromptu memorial of flowers, cards, notes, and photographs adorned the Drillfield in front of the administration building.

"One officer told me he wouldn't be able to stand through any of this without Jesus Christ."

Daniel Vasquez



Chaplain Bill Ammon of CC Stroudsburg, PA, comforts a local family that came to pay their respects.



Close to Norris Hall, fellow students had placed notes to Brian Bluhm, who was known on campus as a Christian.



Pastor Brian Phillips, left, of CC Roanoke, VA, ministered to countless students on campus after the murders. Above, he talks about the peace of God with a Christian working with the Billy Graham Association.



Students mourn as they read notes and displays set on the memorial stones in front of the administration building.

at the end of the Drillfield. He talked first to one girl and then the other. Soon, the three of them were talking together about the incident. He asked them if they knew about Jesus Christ.

“The [second] girl said that she was a Christian but had gotten away from the Lord. When this happened, she asked God to help her and to fill her with His peace. ‘This brought me back to the Lord,’ she said,” Brian recalled. “The other girl, who was not a Christian, was able to hear her testimony as a fellow student. I just stood

back and let her share. Then the three of us prayed together.”

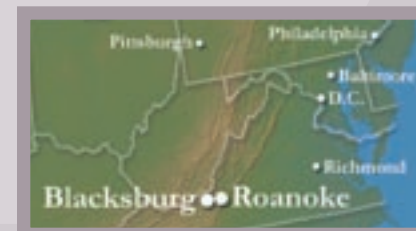
Believers from the CC Roanoke fellowship have been visiting the open campus regularly, though the church has no special program to do so. He added, “I send out a regular email update on who went down and what the Lord did; people read that and realize they can go and be a part of it.”

He said, “We’re hoping to make some long-term connections, and to help the believers there be strengthened and encouraged through the Word.”

after the murders. Above, he talks about the peace of God with a Christian working with the Billy Graham Association.

“She asked God to help her and to fill her with His peace.”

Pastor Brian Phillips



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CC Philadelphia participates in training CC chaplains for the Billy Graham Rapid Response Team.

www.bgea.org/rrt



Pastor Frank Ippolito of CC Vineland encourages a graduate student in front of Norris Hall, where many students were murdered. Through his grief, the Christian young man was prompted to take a stronger stand for the Gospel.