

# LIFE AFTER

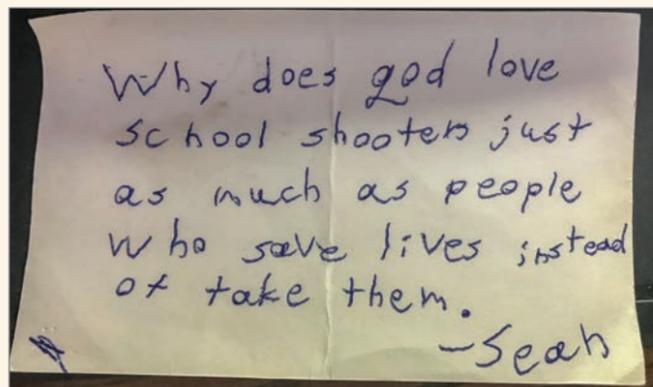
# TRAGEDY

Story by Christmas Beeler

**As believers shared God’s love, comfort, and the Gospel, many have come to Christ in the wake of the tragic Valentine’s Day school shooting in South Florida. Calvary Chapel Fort Lauderdale has become a refuge to treat the spiritually wounded and share the hope of Christ.**

### God’s Love & Forgiveness

A Westglades Middle School student, Sean’s mind was grappling with anger. Though it had been several days since a former student had shot and killed 17 students and staff and injured more than a dozen others at the high school next door, the grief and shock were still raw. Middle schoolers had also heard shots fired, gone into lockdown, and later watched videos of the nightmare that had erupted on Valentine’s Day. For days, Sean’s young mind had been wrestling with overpowering emotions and painful questions. So this morning, early, he had come to the First Priority Christian Club—a club he had visited a few times earlier in the year and mocked leaders. But today he was serious; he wanted some answers. He sat staring at the blank card given for students to write their questions about God. Trying to put his anger into words, he wrote, “Why does god love school shooters just as much as people who save lives instead of take them?”



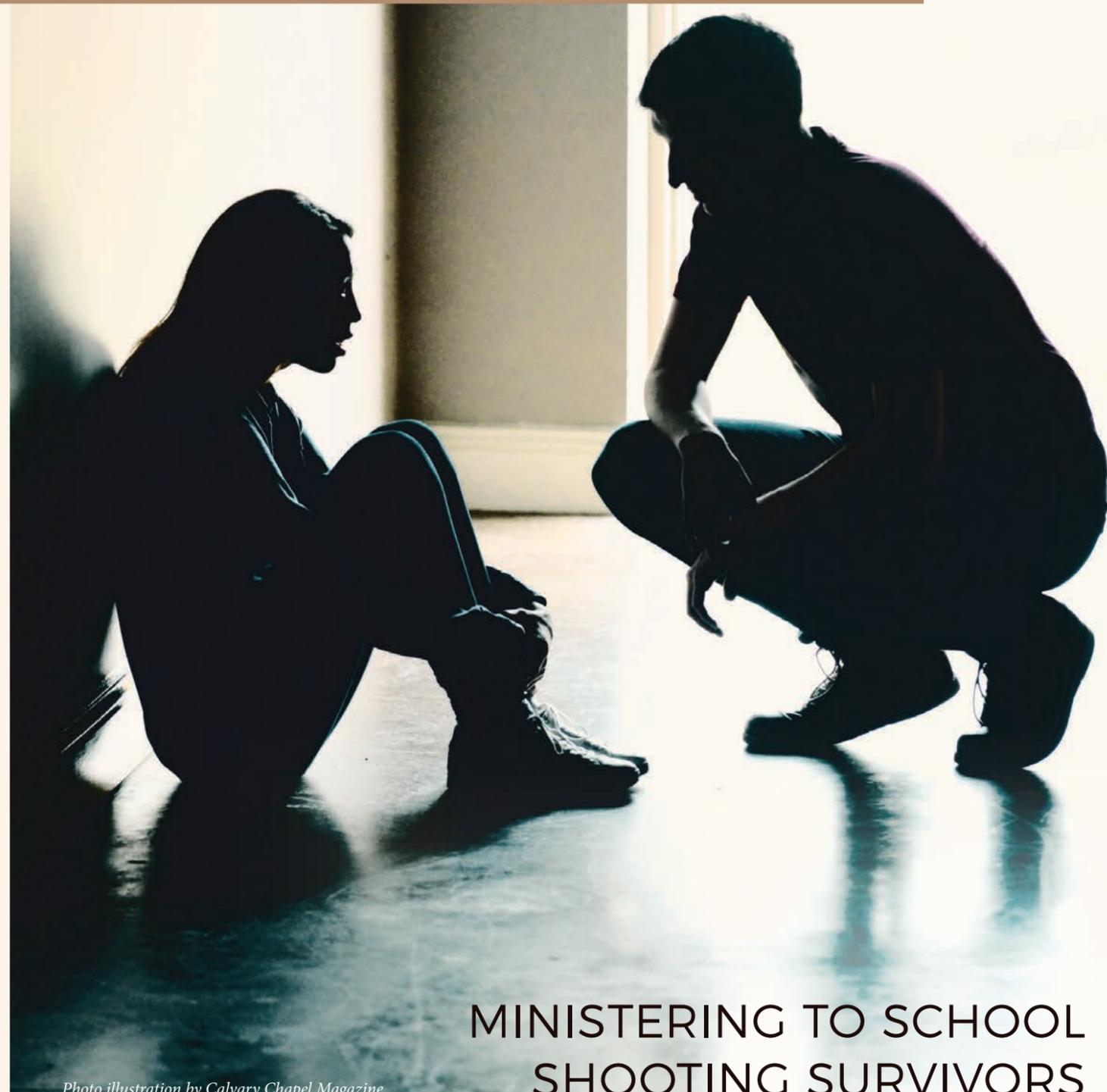
Pastor Stefan Bomberger stood before that group of nearly 40 attentive, young faces—a bigger crowd than usual. He knew many wanted justice, yet they needed Christ’s hope. He shared about the two thieves crucified beside Christ. “Those men were both guilty, paying for their crimes. But one mocked Jesus while the other said, *“Lord, remember me when You come into Your kingdom.”* And Jesus said to him, *“Assuredly, I say to you, today you will be with Me in paradise”* (Luke 23:42b-43). So Jesus forgave him and gave him eternal life.” He added, “If we call on Jesus, we too can have forgiveness. But God is just, so if we don’t turn to Christ, we will suffer for our sins in hell.”

Sean’s heart blistered at his words. He realized that not only was the school shooter a sinner, but so was he. Amazed, he wondered, *Would God really forgive anyone? Was His love that big?* When Stefan asked students to bow their heads and raise their hands to accept Christ, Sean and five others did so. Now he’s a regular at the club.

Pam Aks’ daughter, Taylor, 13, was badly shaken by the gunshots. After First Priority, “She came home with a smile on her face—her first smile since. Now she’s going every week and inviting her friends. It’s such a comfort.”

**Left: A student at Westglades Middle School wrote this question at a First Priority Christian club, then accepted Christ. WMS is next to Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School, where 17 died in February.**

**Right: Believers shared Christ’s hope.**



MINISTERING TO SCHOOL SHOOTING SURVIVORS

Photo illustration by Calvary Chapel Magazine

# “HEARING A PARENT LOSE THEIR CHILD IN SUCH AN AWFUL WAY—IT WAS JUST HEARTBREAKING.” JOEL SONNENBERG

## Place of Sorrow

A few hours after the shooting, Joel Sonnenberg and Reuben Ramsaran, pastors at CC Fort Lauderdale, walked to the hotel where parents were waiting to hear if their son or daughter had survived. Reuben and Joel prayed with people. “I’ll never forget the looks on their faces,” Joel said, “hopeful that their children made it, but having that impending doom knowing that it wasn’t good they had been called there. I also won’t forget hearing their cries when they found out. Hearing a parent lose their child in such an awful way—it was just heartbreaking.”

As ministers of Christ, Joel reflected, “Sometimes we, the Church, are too comfortable. We need to share in the suffering of people. We need to be there for people in serious grief. That’s what Christ did for us; He shared in our sufferings. He didn’t just stay up in heaven; He came down as a man to experience what we do.” Later at church, a 9th grader shared with Joel and another staff member that she had almost died, but the shooter’s gun had jammed. Joel added, “We listened and prayed together. It’s good for them to get it out, to share with someone they trust.” ***He heals the brokenhearted and binds up their wounds*** (Psalm 147:3).

## Church Becomes a Refuge

Hundreds of community members have come to Christ at Calvary Chapel Fort Lauderdale in the wake of the shooting. The next Saturday and Sunday, special guest Crystal Miller, a survivor of the 1999 Columbine shooting, shared her story and the love of Jesus with a group of students and families in the youth building and with the larger congregation in the sanctuary. “We probably had about 20,000 people come,” said Stephanie Gunderson, director of outreach at CC Fort Lauderdale. “Nearly 200 people came forward for prayer. A lot were dealing with fear, anxiety. If they had deeper challenges, we would walk them over to a grief counselor. About 25 needed grief counseling.” Chaplains came from the Billy Graham Rapid Response Team. One woman whom Stephanie prayed for is a Christian employee at Westglades Middle School.

“She said, ‘I didn’t come for myself; I came for prayer for the families.’ We also prayed for her, that God would sustain her and give her peace.” Less than a month after the shooting, special evangelist Nick Vujicic (who was born without limbs) shared about God’s hope, healing, and the Gospel—and more than 700 gave their hearts to Christ.

Stephanie reflected on how important it was for CC Fort Lauderdale prayer teams to respond immediately to the tragedy. She stated, “We had been told the roads were blocked and we wouldn’t be able to get in.” But as believers went out to minister to the hurting, God miraculously opened avenues for them to assist. She added, “Being on the front lines means not letting anything deter you from what God has called you to do. God opened a lot of doors; we were able to listen, comfort, and pray with so many students and parents.”

## Comfort in Christ

A believer at CC Fort Lauderdale, Chris Lane is the executive director of First Priority of South Florida, a Christian club in public schools. He affirmed, “We’re going to continue loving on these kids and encouraging them in their faith so they can go back and influence their friends with the love and truth of the Gospel.”

One of those murdered at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School had been a regular at First Priority: Helena Ramsay, 17. “The first Wednesday after, school was still canceled, but we knew we needed to be there with the kids. So we met at the park,” Chris recalled. The nearby Pine Trails Park has 17 white crosses for the victims, each with mementos and photos from mourners. “We tied a First Priority T-shirt to her cross,” Chris recounted. “Students shared memories about her, what she was like—kind and funny. It was a celebration of her life.” He told the group of students, “Because Helena believed in Jesus Christ, we know she is in heaven now. She would not want us to be sad and moping because she is in the presence of Jesus. She would want you to go and spread the Gospel so that more people would hear the Good News.”



## Joy for Anger

Pastor Duane Roberts of CC Fort Lauderdale’s Boynton Beach campus sought out hurting students. The day after the shooting, he and another pastor visited where students were gathered near the school. They talked to three Stoneman Douglas students. One boy, Greg, angrily fumed that he wished that police had killed the shooter. The pastors listened to their stories—during the shooting the three teens had fled to the Walmart parking lot around the corner. The pastors offered to pray but were suddenly interrupted by a British news crew. As Duane listened to the students being interviewed, he felt a strong leading to invite them to Christ.

When the news crew stepped away, Duane asked, “Have you ever fully put your trust in Christ?” The angriest boy, Greg, said his father was a pastor who lived in another state, but he (Greg) himself had never received Christ. Duane shared that Christ was the only One Who could get them through this season: “There is a God in heaven

Who loves you; He is the hope of the world. You need to put your trust and faith in Jesus and have a relationship with Him.” All three readily agreed to pray to receive Christ despite the crowds and cameras. After they prayed, Greg’s countenance changed from anger to joy, Duane recalled, adding, “They seemed to have a genuine peace.”

## Showing Love

Ulises and Toni Frallicciardi, co-founders of Christian Skaters International, are Calvary Chapel believers who have been showing Christ’s love in a tangible way. A few hours after the shooting, Toni met a grief-stricken senior named Tyra Hemans, holding two signs for her deceased friends and talking to a flock of camera crews. “I could tell how much she was hurting,” Toni recalled. After the press stepped away, Toni walked up to Tyra, introduced herself, and gave her a hug. For the next three days, Toni would see Tyra at the memorial sites and vigils. “I would sit next to her, bring her food, just listen.” Through reaching out in love, Toni became a trusted friend to Tyra and several

Top: Hundreds of students and community members pray together, led by Pastor Doug Sauder of CC Fort Lauderdale and others at a memorial gathering a day after the nearby school shooting. Photo by Justus Martin

other students—meeting them for coffee, even having a few students for dinner in their home. “I know that God has me in her life for the long term, to help her through this time, to encourage her. If every student had a believer who adopted them and walked through this time with them, imagine the impact we could make,” said Toni.

“From the moment we met, we just connected,” recalled Tyra. “I know she loves me. She shines with love. ... She’s been helping me through probably the most traumatic experience of my life, to find a positive way to get back to my new reality.”

Toni and Tyra joined with Linsey Cottrell of the Christian-owned Island Water Sports to come up with a plan to honor the 17 victims by having a memorial paddle out at nearby Deerfield Beach. Toni’s husband Ulises “Uli”

shared Scripture and prayed with the crowd before more than 200 people paddled out on surfboards. More than 20 students from Stoneman Douglas attended, making a tighter inner-circle in the center and sharing memories of their departed friends. Nearly 2,000 people watched from the pier and the beach.

“I’m a surfer, so that paddle out—for me, as a Christian—was probably the most impactful thing I’ve been a part of since this all began. I’m so grateful,” Tyra recalled. She knew three of the victims and was especially close to Joaquin Oliver, affectionately called ‘Guac’ by his friends. She last saw him when they parted ways in the hallway. A few moments later, Joaquin was shot in the head. “He was such a genuine guy, a good friend. If you were sad, he would cheer you up. He loved bringing happiness to people. ... I’m really going to miss my friends.”



## A COMMUNITY GRIEVES

Left: CC believers helped organize a local paddle out at Deerfield Beach. More than 200 rode out on boards, including 20 students from Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School. Photo by Ceebz Gerard

Calvary Chapel Fort Lauderdale, FL  
[calvaryftl.org](http://calvaryftl.org)

# SHOOTING SURVIVOR URGES OTHERS TO SEEK GOD

Christle Vidor, 17, knew several of the victims: Peter Wang, Carmen Schentrup, Coach Fies, and Helena Ramsay—one of her closest friends. Christle was able to run off campus as the bloodshed began. She often attends CC Fort Lauderdale.

by Christle Vidor



I don’t know why God allowed this tragedy to happen, but I know that He can bring good out of any situation. I’m a student leader at our First Priority Christian Club, and we have new people coming. I think they are spiritually hungry; they want answers, hope. They want to know what happens after we die, if there’s a heaven. We as believers need to not retreat into ourselves but reach out to others. We need to give them every opportunity to know Jesus. I want people to hear the Gospel at every meeting. Even if they aren’t ready immediately, they’ll know what they need to do. We just need to introduce them to Jesus.

God has been a comfort for me. He’s the only One who understands me completely, who knows where I’ve been, what I’m going through, all my struggles at the moment.

One of my favorite verses is Jeremiah 29:11-13: *For I know the thoughts that I think toward you, says the LORD, thoughts of peace and not of evil, to give you a future and a hope. Then you will call upon Me and go and pray to Me, and I will listen to you. And you will seek Me and find Me when you search for Me with all your heart.* This gives me hope because God is thinking of me; His plans are good, not evil. He has something good stored up for me in the future. It reminds me not to give up.

To other teens, I encourage you to seek God. Forget what you’ve heard about Christianity—thinking you’ll have to give up this or that. Just go after God. Being a Christian isn’t about restrictions; it’s about how Christ frees us. Realize God sent His only Son to die for *you*. Despite our imperfections, God sent Jesus to make us perfect in God’s eyes. God doesn’t judge you for [the bad] you’ve done once you [repent and] surrender your heart to Jesus. He forgets about your sin.

Have a faith of your own. Don’t compare yourself to others or conform to them. Don’t piggyback off your parents’ faith, thinking you’re a Christian because you go to church with them. Seek God for yourself; know who He is. Read your Bible and pray every day. Tell Him what’s on your heart. To have that abundant life, you must seek God and read the Bible, even a few minutes a day. Then you’ll come to a point where God begins to change you. His Holy Spirit will be alive in you. But until then, keep pursuing God. He won’t be hiding; God won’t make it hard for you to reach Him. Just open your heart to Him.

Jesus Himself makes you whole. You won’t need other people to comfort you because God will. He’ll make your struggles livable; He’ll make you stronger. We all struggle with our faith at times, but God is faithful. It may feel hard, but it’s so freeing when we finally decide to trust in the Lord God.

“WE AS BELIEVERS NEED TO NOT RETREAT INTO OURSELVES BUT REACH OUT TO OTHERS.” CHRISTLE VIDOR

Leaders & pastors in Parkland ask believers to pray:

- For countless students and staff who still suffer from post-traumatic stress
- For opportunities to share the hope of Christ with students, families, and first responders
- For God’s protection and wisdom for leaders at schools across the country