

Remembering Virginia Tech Tragedy Five Years Later

Arriving to work in Christiansburg, Va., Neal Turner didn't have any reason to believe that April 16, 2007, would be different or special or stand out from any other Monday. One phone call changed all that.

As emergency services coordinator for Montgomery County, Turner took a call from Matt Johnson, captain of the Virginia Tech Rescue Squad. A shooting was being reported at Norris Hall, a three-story engineering classroom building on the sprawling 2,600-acre campus in Blacksburg.

Turner jumped into action and raced the 8 miles to campus to set up his operations in the "hot zone," adjacent to where the Virginia Tech Rescue Squad was stationed.

"I arrived just prior to the last shot being fired," Turner now says.

When the rampage was over—the deadliest mass shooting in U.S. history—five faculty members and 25 students had been gunned down. The gunman shot himself and died at the scene of the second-floor massacre. Seventeen others were wounded in the shootings, some of them as they leapt to safety from the windows of their classrooms. The same shooter killed two other students three hours before in West Ambler Johnston, a coeducational residence hall on the opposite end of campus.

With temperatures hovering in the 30s, and as 40 mile-per-hour winds whipped up snow, victims were rushed to LewisGale Hospital-Montgomery on South Main Street in Blacksburg.

"I'm so thankful that I'm a believer in Jesus Christ because I could not have faced this horrific situation alone," Turner reflects five years later. "I wanted to cry but couldn't. That

was not an emotion I was allowed to have for a long period of time.”

As dark hours turned into dark days, Turner said he experienced a “train wreck” of emotions. “I’ve never seen war up close, but on April 16, I realized what war was all about,” he says.

Eventually, Turner needed to talk with a fellow believer. A friend recommended that he connect with the Billy Graham Rapid Response Team chaplains. They had been dispatched to the campus and to the greater Blacksburg community to visit with people shaken by the tragedy and to share the love and comfort of Jesus Christ.

God put RRT chaplains Jack and Becca Dowling on Turner’s path. “Man, they threw theirs arms around me and hugged me and loved on me and let me know that I had somebody who would be there, who would pray with me and for me,” Turner says, looking back.

The Dowlings, along with RRT director Jack Munday, exhibited the compassion of Christ when Turner felt he was at a breaking point.

“God used the Rapid Response Team to help save my life at such a critical time,” explains Turner, who has since received RRT training at the Billy Graham Training Center at The Cove in Asheville, N.C. “They taught me that God is love and that I could find His love even in the worst of circumstances.”

As a result, Turner says he’s now a better pastor. Since 2001, he has led Cedar Springs Union Church, which Turner describes as a “little country church” of about 65 people. “The Lord used the Billy Graham chaplains to show me how I can love people with greater Christlike compassion and demonstrate I genuinely care,” he says. He adds that Jack and Becca have recently visited him and his wife, Carolyn, to encourage them.

“A major part of the ministry at Virginia Tech, as it is in

all deployments, was coming alongside established churches and Christian ministries and standing with them as they reach out for Christ in the midst of the disaster,” explains Jack Dowling.

“While we were there on campus, especially on the university’s Drillfield, we saw so many grief-stricken people who poured out so much emotion,” Jack says. “You could have caught buckets and buckets of tears that flowed out on that ground.”

Jack adds it’s been a privilege for him and Becca to invest into Neal Turner’s life and ministry. “We’ve had an ongoing relationship with him, and we’re thankful to the Lord that He’s allowed us to see first-hand the lasting impact of sowing love and compassion into someone’s life,” Jack says.

During their seven-week deployment, Rapid Response Team chaplains—73 throughout that span—prayed one-on-one with almost 2,000 people, 114 of whom made spiritual commitments to Christ.

The university also expresses its thanks to the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association for sending its chaplains five years ago and for the lasting difference they made.

“A day does not go by that I do not remember the families who were affected by this tragedy,” says Dr. John Dooley, chief operating officer of the Virginia Tech Foundation. “I knew some of the victims personally. They were friends. The outpouring that we received from the global faith community was remarkable, impressive and heart-stirring.”

Himself a Christian and a member of Blacksburg Baptist Church—one of many congregations that responded—Dr. Dooley said he drew tremendous solace from knowing there were people willing to share in the pain of those suffering and to come and extend the compassion of Jesus.

“The Billy Graham chaplains were willing to listen, to pray

and to bring hope,” Dooley says. “They constantly asked me how I was doing, and that only confirmed that they were not here to fulfill their own agenda, but to help meet the spiritual needs of our community.”

Virginia Tech will not be defined by this tragic incident, Dr. Dooley says. “Unfortunately, it is a part of our legacy and we recognize that, but we will never forget those we lost and we will continue to endure,” the administrator notes.

Also touched by the influence of the RRT chaplains was Pastor Dick Gilbert. He was pressed into duty that fateful Monday as a volunteer chaplain at LewisGale Hospital-Montgomery.

The next day, RRT’s managing director of training Michael Beresford found Pastor Gilbert. Putting his arm around Gilbert’s shoulder, Beresford asked, “Dick, how are you holding up?” Gilbert broke down. He felt like a man who had jumped into ice-cold water, initially losing his breath and barely able to keep his nose above the surface.

“I feel like I don’t know what I’m doing,” Gilbert admitted to Beresford. “I’m just a volunteer. I don’t have any resources.”

After listening patiently and praying silently, Beresford responded: “You have to remember something, Dick. You’re the guy God put here for such a time as this.”

That answer stunned Gilbert, like a wake-up slap. And God used it to reenergize the hospital chaplain, who also is the longtime pastor of Slusser’s Chapel Church of God in Blacksburg. Gilbert realized that he wasn’t “caught in something but had been sent to something.”

“That exchange with Mike changed everything,” Gilbert recalls. “Mike pointed me back to Christ, and I was able to once again draw on Him and His strength to reach out and minister to people, including our hospital staff.”

The impact of the Rapid Response Team chaplains in his life was profound, Gilbert says. "I appreciate the chaplain training I've since received at The Cove, and Mike and his wife recently stayed with us for a weekend," Gilbert says. "Their continued friendship means so much."

A university-wide commemoration and candlelight vigil will be held on the Drillfield at 7:30 p.m. Monday. Virginia Tech students will coordinate the event, and the program will recognize the 32 students and faculty who lost their lives on April 16, 2007.

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