



JARED SOARES | The Roanoke Times

Haiyan Cheng, who was teaching in Norris Hall on Monday morning, prays at Grace Covenant Presbyterian Church in Blacksburg on Monday night.

“We’ve been praying all day,” said one student who had visited an injured friend. Prayer unites shaken town

By Jared Turner
and Ruth Tisdale
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BLACKSBURG — There were hugs and handshakes.

There were bowed heads. There were tears.

Mourners gathered at various community vigils Monday night in search of hope on a day rocked by tragedy.

Two shooting incidents Monday morning at Virginia Tech had left at least 33 people dead and many as 15 injured.

A crowd of 200 attended a community prayer vigil at Blacksburg Presbyterian Church.

“We gather in this place in a very, very dark day in our community,” said the Rev. Susan Verbrugge, an associate pastor at Blacksburg Presbyterian. “We gather in this place to surround one another in God’s love — God’s love that knows no end. We gather in this place to proclaim light in the darkest of days.”

Facing a table of lighted candles at the front of the sanctuary and a banner with the words “He is Risen!” emblazoned in gold, mourners took turns praying out loud for friends

and families of the victims, the wounded and the family of the killer. Some offered prayers of strength for police officers, doctors and administrators working to find answers and help victims, even as sirens still blared outside the church windows.

“We gather for worship here tonight because it’s all we can do when our community is so shattered,” said the Rev. Alex Evans, pastor at Blacksburg Presbyterian.

Evans and Verbrugge were two of five clergy members who read Scripture and offered words of encouragement to a grieving congregation that included Tech students, senior citizens and children.

A group of students filled two rows near the front of the sanctuary.

“I’m a rather religious person,” said Tech freshman Kelly Rae Wassum. “As soon as something bad happens I’m at church or reading my Bible. This is the first place I wanted to come.”

Wassum, sophomore John Helveston and others said they came straight to the church from Montgomery Regional Hospital in Blacksburg, where friend and fellow student Heidi Miller was being treated for a leg wound suffered in the shooting.

“We’ve been praying all day,” Helveston said.

A few blocks away at Henderson Lawn on the Tech campus, students linked arms in the cold to remember those killed and show unity.

“I just thought it was important for me to be here,” said fifth-year senior Rachel Rizk. “So many people’s college experience has been changed by what happened. When they look back, this is what they will remember. I don’t want to live in fear for the rest of my life.”

Some students became frustrated as the vigil was interrupted by reporters seeking interviews and information. A few students said they wished to mourn privately.

“We just wanted to come together and unite as a family,” said fifth-year senior Raksha Vasudevan. “This is a time for us to grieve; [the media] won’t allow us to do that.”

Vasudevan was in class in another building during the shooting and was later evacuated to the basement of the building for two hours.

“I don’t want to leave school,” Vasudevan said. “We have to show our support. We are all connected at Tech. Somebody knows someone who was affected.”

Sanda Chelliah, who spent four years living on campus, said she wanted to show support for the resident advisers.

“People just don’t know how dangerous a job being a resident adviser is,” Chelliah said. “We just wanted show our support to the families and victims.”

Chelliah said students must become more vigilant in keeping track of their neighbors.

“We have to start looking at the person who is sitting next to us in class and get to know them better than just the surface level,” Chelliah said. “We have to be able to tell when someone is going through something and help them. We have to ask ourselves, ‘How well do we know our neighbor?’”

Back at Blacksburg Presbyterian, Tech sophomore Ryan Gimmy stood in the church aisle after the vigil and talked of hope.

“We’re recovering,” he said. “We’re going to try to put this behind us and go on with our lives — as difficult as that’s going to be.”

Several more vigils are being planned for the days ahead, campus pastors said, with details yet to be worked out.

jared.turner@roanoke.com | 381-1643
ruth.tisdale@roanoke.com | 981-3340

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