

# Students turn to Chi Alpha in wake of shootings

BY DEANN ALFORD IN BLACKSBURG, VA.

"These students are fragile. Students are making the decisions of their lifetime right now. When something like this comes up, they realize they need more than just what the American dream can give them. They need Christ."

— Jon Rice

Jon Rice could hardly imagine a better weekend, capped April 15 when he baptized three Chi Alpha students. Parents joined the group that Sunday at Virginia Tech's War Memorial Pool.

On Monday morning as Rice drove his wife, Jenny, to the nearby town of Radford, he received a call on his cell from a Chi Alpha regular. A shooter had started firing on campus.

That news sounded eerily familiar at Virginia Tech. The school year had been marked by similar events, beginning the first week when a gunman had been on campus. Then came two bomb threats within days of each other.

This proved to be something entirely different.

"This was terrible," Rice says, "But I didn't know it would be this bad."

He returned to Blacksburg, booted up his computer, and prayed at the Chi Alpha Fellowship house. Chi Alpha is the Assemblies of God presence and outreach on the campus of Virginia Tech and 251 other colleges and universities. The massacre unfolded in Norris Hall, a few hundred yards from the chapel that just the day before had been Chi Alpha's place of jubilation.

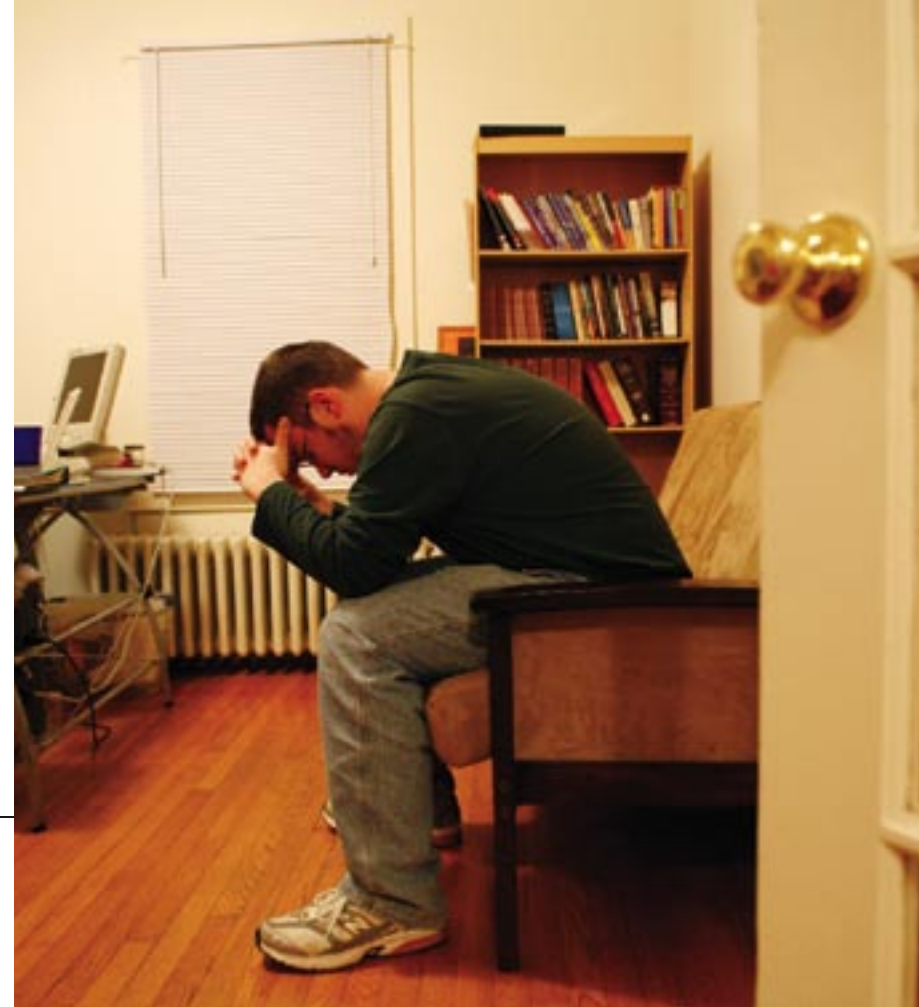
Rice turned on the television while he simultaneously instant messaged 10 students, learning details from his student network well ahead of national news networks.

Within a few hours Rice accounted for all of Virginia Tech's 50 Chi Alpha regulars. None numbered among the 32 murdered or 28 injured. But as the victim list grew, Chi Alpha members found they had indeed been affected.



Impromptu memorials sprang up near Norris Hall, where 31 people died.

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Junior Tom Wampler prays in the Chi Alpha house in Blacksburg on the night of the shootings.

Virginia Tech Chi Alpha's president Kenny Smith Jr. unwittingly had been at the chapel between the shootings that morning to fill out paperwork to reserve the chapel for weekly services next semester. He had planned afterward to head to work in a building next to Norris Hall. For reasons he can't explain, Smith changed his mind and went home to work instead.

One Chi Alpha student lost seven friends among those killed. Another serves as resident adviser in East Ambler Johnston dormitory. Murdered RA Ryan Clark worked in the west part of the same building.

Many Chi Alpha students were connected to professors and advisers among the slain. Those who had never had class in Norris Hall or lived in Ambler Johnston walked past them en route elsewhere on campus and had friends with connections there.

As news spread, Rice's phone rang incessantly. Calls came from national news media that descended at once on the Virginia Tech campus. Other calls came from parents and friends asking how to help.

Students needed Chi Alpha more than ever, but for Rice and the campus ministry's student leaders this was uncharted territory. Jon and Jenny Rice had more experience helping male students deal with pornography problems and counseling female students struggling with eating disorders and sexual abuse. How could they handle the country's worst mass shooting in history, with casualties eclipsing 1999's Columbine High School and the 1966 University of Texas massacres combined?

It was time to pray. Rice called an evening meeting at the Chi Alpha house, three blocks from the Virginia Tech campus.

Thirty distraught students

showed up, broken and weeping, heads down. No one made eye contact.

"They didn't know what to do," Rice says. He played a worship music compact disc, formed a prayer circle, and led prayer for the victims' families and the injured in the hospital.

"I don't have any answers," he told the group. "Tonight this isn't about answers. This is about grieving. This is about seeking God. It's OK if you ask questions like, *Why would God allow this to happen?* Just lay your emotions before God."

Rice asked the student who had lost seven friends to lead worship. The student led the assembled in "Blessed Be Your Name," a song that talks about "the road marked with suffering," a song many Christian groups in Blacksburg made their anthem in the days following the massacre.

"Lord, we don't understand," Rice prayed as the students expressed their grief, "but You are more good than this is bad."

The prayer session lasted more than 90 minutes before breaking for fellowship.

Students hadn't eaten all day. Rice asked a small-group leader who worked at a local pizzeria to buy pizza for everyone, but the store's manager donated the food. As the evening wound down, Rice realized how powerfully God had moved in the gathering.

"At the beginning, it was awkward; it was bleak," Rice says. "They were bawling, holding each other. But by the end of the meeting, God had changed the whole thing. It was an atmosphere of hope. I was clueless when I got here. God made that happen."

For Virginia Tech's Chi Alpha students, Monday's move of the Holy Spirit marked the turning point. Residents experienced glimpses of hope that God would

bring them through the crisis.

Rice announced the Chi Alpha house, located three blocks from campus, would be open the entire week. People hung out at the facility until midnight nearly every night. One student's parents cooked breakfast for all. Assemblies of God chaplains Dennis Nissley, Gary Evans, Jim Uhey, Ray Northern and Jerry Peters came to help Jon and Jenny Rice counsel grieving students.

On Tuesday Chi Alpha students assembled candles in plastic cups to hold in the campus candlelight vigil in memory of the dead. The War Memorial Chapel, filled with flowers sent from across the country, had been open 24 hours since the massacre. Chi Alpha had the chapel reserved every Wednesday evening for the semester for worship. Now, many who never had attended stepped inside. Southeast Chi Alpha

Director Mario Solari spoke at the Wednesday night meeting.

Others assisting Jon and Jenny Rice in counseling grieving students included Ron Barnard, former Virginia Tech Chi Alpha director; Appalachian District Chi Alpha representative John Mark Jones; Appalachian District Superintendent Marvin Dennis; and Aaron and Jen Hall, Chi Alpha directors at Radford University, only 15 miles away.

As Chi Alpha students healed, they reached out to those needing the comfort only Jesus can provide. One Vietnamese Chi Alpha member called the Virginia Tech international student center, which gave her permission to reach out to Korean students feeling ostracized because of shooter Seung-Hui Cho's South Korean heritage.

For Virginia Tech Chi Alpha student leader Kenny Smith Jr., the tragedy shows the need to befriend



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Jon Rice is praying for a move of God at Virginia Tech.

those in need. "I feel horrible for the families and friends of those who were killed," Smith says. "People will make new friends and build new relationships as they look to each other for support."

Rice says the catastrophe highlights the strategic need on each of America's 4,000 college and university campuses for a Spirit-filled witness and outreach.

"The university is the most forsaken place as far as ministry," he says. "These students are fragile. Students are making the decisions of their lifetime right now. When something like this comes up, they realize they need more than just what the American dream can give them. They need Christ. They know there will be hope because they saw some Christians rise up and say this is not the end, that God is still in control, that there will be a future beyond this." **tpe**

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E-mail your comments to [tpe@ag.org](mailto:tpe@ag.org).



Hundreds of people wrote notes on message boards in tribute to slain students and faculty on the Virginia Tech campus.

## A Cry for Help

The majority of Assemblies of God students attend a secular campus.

Help

\*The majority of international students in the world study on U.S. campuses.

Help

\*\*The majority of all college students do not attend church.

Help

\*\*\*There are more than 4,000 colleges and universities in the U.S.

Help

Students need Jesus Christ. Chi Alpha can reach them.

Will you help?

Will you give?

**Chi Alpha Christian Fellowship, USA  
serves 252 campuses nationwide.**

Send your gift of help to:  
Chi Alpha Christian Fellowship Acct #702-051 SC:17  
1445 N. Boonville Avenue  
Springfield, MO 65802