

After mass shooting, Oregon town residents turn to churches

by [Jessica Mendoza](#)

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*(The Christian Science Monitor)* As the residents of Roseburg, Oregon, come to terms with their grief, pastors have been at the forefront.

People in the southern Oregon timber town—located in what’s sometimes called the state’s Bible Belt—sought solace in church services following Thursday’s deadly shooting rampage at Umpqua Community College. Local church leaders moved quickly to calm residents, provide comfort, and work with the community as it tries to heal.

Two hundred people crowded into Garden Valley Church on Sunday, where pastor Craig Schlesinger told parishioners that living the faith means countering the rampage "with acts of kindness." He spoke about making sense of survivor reports that the gunman, Christopher Sean Harper-Mercer, asked who was Christian before shooting them.

"As those brave men and women were willing to stand and take a bullet for their faith . . . so let us bravely stand this day and live our faith in Roseburg," Schlesinger said, wiping away tears.

More than 100 people also gathered at New Beginnings Church of God on Sunday to hear pastor Randy Scroggins, whose daughter Lacey survived the shooting because the gunman mistakenly thought she was dead. The pastor said he has been asked whether he can forgive Harper-Mercer, who killed ten in his shooting rampage, including himself.

"Can I be honest? I don't know. That's the worst part of my job. I don't know," Scroggins said, his voice cracking with emotion. "I don't focus on the man. I focus on the evil that was in the man."

When Jon Nutter, pastor of Hucrest Community Church of God, got a text message the day of the shooting and realized how many had been killed or injured, he

immediately formed a prayer circle at Starbucks where he was sitting.

He then rushed to open his church in Roseburg to anyone in need of counseling before driving to the Douglas County Fairgrounds, where officials were reuniting students with family members.

As bus after bus rolled into the fairgrounds on Thursday carrying students, faculty and staff, Nutter and about two dozen other local pastors held crying students, formed prayer circles, listened to eyewitnesses recount the incident, and watched tearful reunions with parents and spouses.

"They had been waiting for a long time, hoping, praying," Nutter said. "People were crying, yelling, some families were angry, others going into denial and shock."

At the same time, members of the community refused to say the killer's name, in an effort to take away the glamour that draws some individuals to desperate and cruel acts.

Douglas County Sheriff John Hanlin would not say his name: 'I will not give him the credit he probably sought prior to this horrific and cowardly act.' The *Portland Oregonian* newspaper has said it will use the name only when necessary. And on Twitter, a hashtag has sprung up: #dontsayhisname.

"The shooter is gone. It's about the people who are living and the people who were lost," resident Debra Atkinson told the *Washington Post* before a prayer service Sunday. "This community is the real survivor."

*The Christian Science Monitor's Mark Sappenfield contributed to this report, which also contains material from the Associated Press.*