

Churches respond after deadly Georgia school shooting

WINDER, Ga. (BP) – Area churches canceled or altered normal Wednesday activities after a shooting at Apalachee High School left four dead and nine others taken to area hospitals with injuries on Sept. 4.

In a press conference Wednesday afternoon, Georgia Bureau of Investigation Director Chris Hosey confirmed that the deceased were two students and two teachers. Later in the evening those names were released:

- Richard Aspinwall, a teacher and assistant football coach
- Christina Irimie, math teacher
- Christian Angulo, 14
- Mason Schermerhorn, 14

Law enforcement arrived on the scene within minutes of alerts of an active shooter sent at 10:20 a.m. by a school resource officer. Joined by another resource officer, the group encountered the shooter moments later.

Hosey said AHS student Colt Gray, 14, immediately surrendered and will be tried as an adult and charged with murder. Gray was investigated last year related to threats over a school shooting. Barrow County Sheriff Jud Smith added later in the press conference that all nine of the injured were shot “in some capacity.”

Bethlehem Church sits three miles from the shooting and has numerous members connected to Apalachee High including students, teachers and coaches.

Pastor Jason Britt confirmed with Baptist Press that there

were members harmed in the shooting but could not provide any further information. Bethlehem canceled student services Wednesday night and opened its main campus for a night of prayer, worship, counseling and gathering with the community. Other churches in the area did the same.

"We're just all responding the best way we know," he said.

Barrow County School System Superintendent Dallas LeDuff, an attendee at Bethlehem Church, said schools would be closed for the week. The system's central office will remain open and offer resources for counseling.

This moment is where those placing their hope in Christ are reminded to weep with those who weep, Britt said.

"God is close to the brokenhearted and we want to communicate that. We live in a world of evil and brokenness. This is a sober reminder that we see it up close. But our hope is in the Gospel, which we believe is a rescue from pain."

Stephen Crane, Next Gen pastor at nearby River Hills Church, said one of his students was just a few doors from where the shooting occurred. His church is among those that canceled services to join with others Wednesday tonight.

"River Hills is connected to a counseling ministry, so we'll be providing that for teachers and students," he said. "There's a long road with trauma. We understand the reality of good and evil in the world, but have to focus on the good rather than the evil."

First Baptist Winder has several students who attend AHS. None were directly harmed in the shooting.

The church was among those opening its sanctuary for community prayer with counselors available.

"This is a reminder that we think we have control, but ultimately we don't know how long we have," said Lead Pastor

Chad Mantooth. "Ultimately, our hope is in a relationship with Jesus Christ. Life is fragile, but our hope with Jesus is secure."

The church still held separate events with students Wednesday night.

"We're focusing on loving our kids and our community," said First Winder Minister of Students Mitch Norman. "We will have our doors open as much as possible and will stay as late as needed. We were able to put together some resources for our leaders while we think and pray through what to offer in the days and weeks to come. Tonight, we have 'all hands on deck' with leaders ready to listen and love on our kids."

That preparation will be challenging as students process, he added.

"It's going to be hard, and I don't think we'll ever be the same," said Norman. "It's like our entire outlook changed in a matter of minutes as a church and community."

"It hurts. All our plans over the next year will probably be altered or changed entirely. And that's OK; that's what God calls us to do so we are just taking it a minute at a time right now and just listening and grieving with our people."