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## Hokie football players embrace team's 1st chaplain

**Johnny Shelton, who commutes from Greensboro, N.C., offers Bible study and counseling to the players and staff members.**

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Not many Virginia Tech football fans have heard of Johnny Shelton.

But he's with the team the night before a game and usually the morning of a game.

Not all the players greeted Shelton enthusiastically when he arrived Aug. 1; only 12 players showed up the first Friday night he held a "shared time" for team members to unload and discuss personal issues.

Near the end of the season, 54 players and some of the staff were attending the weekly gatherings.

Shelton, director of the Eastern Triad for the Fellowship of Christian Athletes, is the Virginia Tech football team's first chaplain. He commutes from Greensboro, N.C., to Blacksburg.

Only a handful of colleges have chaplains for their football teams, according to Bo Bolinsky, who introduced Shelton to members of the Civitan Club of Roanoke.

Bolinsky, of Roanoke, said said efforts are under way to raise money to make Shelton's job full time at Tech.

Shelton spoke Jan. 28 as Civitan members held their 47th annual Clergy Appreciation Luncheon.

After thanking Roanoke-area church leaders for the work they do, Shelton said he didn't think he was worthy to address the group.

Shelton spoke about his journey to the FCA and then Tech. He played college ball and was recruited for Murray State University by a staffer there, Frank Beamer. But he opted to attend school elsewhere, then played professional ball and worked in business before joining the FCA 3  $\frac{1}{2}$  years ago.

Although some Tech players initially rejected his offers of shared time and one-on-one sessions, many of them are attending Bible study with him, changing their lives and those of other students and the Tech community, he said.

Shelton said he once told some players, "You are not here to play football; you happen to be talented players, and God has you here because of the influence you can have.

"What if there was a chaplain in place when Michael Vick was here? ... Where would Mike be today?" Shelton asked rhetorically. After the luncheon though, several Civitans posed the question to one another.

Shelton urged his fellow clergy to continue fulfilling their ministries and making themselves available to those in need.

Shelton said he has always felt God wanted him to affect the lives of young people.

"Their ears are itching to hear ... their flesh is crawling to do," he said, adding that ministries such as the Tech chaplain program and the FCA can provide guidelines to help young people do the right things.

Shelton said he prays for and with the team members and tries to provide a relaxed atmosphere in which they don't feel threatened -- "where for an hour they are not Virginia Tech football players, and people are constantly grabbing at them ... where they can likely be what they want to be."

Shelton's sense of humor was evident in his talk. "It's been awesome what God has done through text messaging," he said.

Football players, like others in that age group, tend not to answer their telephones, he said. They respond almost immediately to text messages, which kept making him use up his limit.

He now has unlimited text messaging service and is known to contact a student at 2 a.m. if the player is on his mind.

The players are usually surprised that he's up at that hour, Shelton said.

Civitan International celebrated Clergy Appreciation Week near Feb. 3, Four Chaplains Day, a holiday memorializing four heroes of World War II.

After a troop transport was torpedoed and sank off Greenland on Feb. 3, 1943, chaplains Alexander D. Goode, John P. Washington, George L. Fox and Clark V. Poling drowned because they gave their life jackets to soldiers.

The Albuquerque Breakfast Civitan Club in New Mexico held the first recognition of these soldiers in 1960. The Roanoke club holds the recognition because "so many times people forget words of thanks to the clergy who spend their lives serving us and our communities through their ministry," according to a program at the luncheon.