

WE ARE MARSHALL a film review by Brandon Dennison, SPC Assistant for Youth
Editor's note: On November 14, 1970 a plane crash killed 75 members of Marshall University's football team coaching staff and fans. Brandon, a devoted fan of Marshall's Thundering Herd, attended the premier of the film in Huntington, WV. SPC member Will Sutherland worked on the set of the movie.

I'm obviously not very objective a critic on the film but I gotta tell ya—this is one hell of a movie. I have never seen a sports film like it. Actually, I would not label this a sports film at all. The movie is about grief—how grief feels, what grief causes, ways to deal with grief, and ways to find hope in times of grief, and ultimately ways to triumph over grief. Actual football action only accounted for about 20 minutes of the 2-hour film.

On my way home I was reflecting on *We Are Marshall* and I couldn't stop thinking about SPC. The past year has produced large amounts of grief and sorrow for our congregation. I think of Lucy and Gordon [Gay on the death of their son Kevin], Debbie, Andy, and Sarah [Hammond on the death of their husband and father]. I think of the stories I have heard of the man who shot himself in the office [Martin Burr, a homeless man whom we took in during a cold, snowy winter, on Ash Wednesday 2003], of Jerry and Vicky Thomas' daughter [Alicia]. I could go on and on. The ultimate theme that emerges from the movie is that the best way to honor the fallen is to keep living, to keep working, to push forward. Not to ever forget them but to do our best to honor them. I could not help but think of Debbie, Andy, and Sarah insisting on taking that family cruise even with the great pain they must have felt. I think of Gordon and Lucy still faithfully serving SPC in so many ways. These are only two examples—I know there are so many others in the congregation. There is a scene in the Marshall University chapel when Head Coach Jack Lengyl (Matthew McConaughey) is talking to assistant coach Red Dawson (Matthew Fox). "It's not all about winning, Red, it's that we play the game. Now, winning will come. Maybe not tomorrow, maybe not this year, and maybe not the year after that, but it will come. And one day winning will again be all that matters, and that's when we'll honor them."

The movie is different from most in that the ending is not entirely happy. MU lost more games in the 70s than any other program in America. But they kept the program alive and MU rose to unthinkable heights. In the 90s they won more games than any other program in the nation. They won two 1AA national championships, and then rose to 1A where they won five conference championships and finished in the preseason top 25 three times. In 1999, they went undefeated and finished 10th in the nation. They defeated such powerhouses as South Carolina, Clemson, BYU, Louisville, Kansas St. and came within three of upsetting Ohio State and within seven of upsetting Tennessee. From the ashes, Marshall University rose.

All of this success was dedicated to those 75 sons of Marshall who died in the crash. Every time a championship was won, the Herd faithful would rush the field, tear down the goal posts and then carry them through Huntington to the Memorial Fountain in honor of those who died. The crowd would fall silent and weep together as they lay the goal post against the fountain in remembrance.

I was not alive when the crash happened but it is a part of who I am. I know many who were affected and every year I can, I attend the memorial service held at the exact hour of the crash on November 14. Huntington is a perfect example of how you honor the dead. You never forget them, but you work your ass off to honor them. Often it takes time. For MU it took 25 years before they ever had a winning season. But you never give up, you keep on livin'. Just like so many in this church.

At the end of the showing they had all members of the Young Thundering Herd (the team of freshmen and transfers and the three players left behind who played in 1971 after the crash) stand up. It was a powerful, powerful moment. Tears streamed down their faces and it was clear that the movie had provided a moment of healing. Coach Red Dawson, an assistant coach who was supposed to be on the plane but at the last moment

went on a recruiting trip instead, for the first time attended a memorial service this year. Through the film he has healed and forgiven himself. He and Matt Fox (the actor who portrayed him) have become very close friends. At the end of the film Coach Dawson took the microphone and said simply, "I am honored" and then began to cry.

This film is powerful because it's true. Anyone who has ever dealt with pain and suffering can relate to it and I think God is present in the film in a deep and non-obvious kind of way. It is a deep and reflective film, which is not necessarily what I expected.

One other point. When they said a movie would be made, people said it would never be shot in Huntington, but it in fact was shot mostly in Huntington. When it was shot in Huntington, people said it could never be a very good film, but it is a great film. When it was announced the premier date would be December 22, everyone said they would never premier a Warner Brothers' film in Huntington, WV, but it did premier in Huntington, WV. It was one of the largest premiers outside of NY or LA ever. Ten thousand people lined the green (not red this time) carpet to show support for their beloved Herd [Marshall's colors are green and white] and for the actors who had told our story so well. Huntington put on a great party—one many thought never possible. Good things can and DO happen in WV and hopefully this will teach the world that.

Sorry to go on so long, but this was really an incredible experience. I hope you all go see *WE ARE MARSHALL!!!!*

Go Herd

Brandon