

Grace of God, openness of people sustained Wedgwood Church, pastor says_92004

September 17, 2004

Posted: 9/17/04

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By Ken Camp

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FORT WORTH-An American flag flies outside a south Fort Worth church. The flagpole looks just like the kind students gather around for "See You at the Pole" schoolyard prayer services each year in mid-September. But an eight-sided monument at its base sets it apart.

One panel bears the inscription: "Wedgwood church shooting: Sept. 15, 1999. A disturbed gunman disrupted a youth prayer rally shouting obscenities, fired a handgun repeatedly and exploded a pipe bomb. Fourteen persons were shot. Seven died. This is a memorial to their homegoing."

Each of the other seven panels bears the name and likeness of one of the seven fatalities-Kristi Beckel, Shawn Brown, Sydney Browning, Joey Ennis,

Cassandra Griffin, Kim Jones and Justin “Steggy” Ray.

Students have continued to gather at Wedgwood Baptist Church each September on the evening after the annual early-morning flagpole prayer meetings. This year, the service fell on Wednesday, Sept. 15, just as it did the night five years earlier when Larry Gene Ashbrook violated the sanctuary, killing four young people and three adults.

“We've had college kids who were there as high school kids say, 'Is it open?' Of course it's open” for anyone to attend, said Wedgwood Pastor Al Meredith.

Openness—both in the sense of welcome and in terms of honest “transparency”—has characterized Wedgwood in the five years since the tragedy, Meredith said. And by God's grace, he added, that openness has helped sustain the congregation.

“I've heard of other churches that have had tragedies like this that just fractured under the pressure. ... But that hasn't been the case” at Wedgwood, Meredith said. “Ultimately, the answer is the grace of God. It's certainly not because we're better people than others. My wife keeps reminding me: 'We're not extraordinary people. We're just ordinary people with an extraordinary God.'”

As church members shared each other's burdens and walked together through dark times, Wedgwood has experienced “a strengthening of the relationships in the body and a joy in one another's presence, as well as in God's presence,” he added.

Sunday school classes, small groups and individuals ministered to each other by “weeping with those who weep, rejoicing with those who rejoice, praying with those who are burdened, being there for people ... and worshipping together—just being church to one another—being the body of Christ,” he said.

Soon after the shooting, Meredith preached a sermon series on the church's mission, keeping the congregation focused on its purpose of “knowing Christ and making him known.”

At conferences about dealing with trauma and grief, Meredith learned people who experience crisis often fall apart about six months after a tragedy—once the adrenalin rush is over.

He responded by preaching a six-part series of sermons on how people in the Bible handled depression.

“God's truth ministered grace,” he said. “It was encouraging to many people to realize that saints get depressed and even suicidal. ... If we get it on the table and we can talk about it, at least we can deal with it.”

Wedgwood offered a safe place where people could discuss their doubts and anger with God openly and honestly.

“It's a healthy sign that you believe in God's sovereignty enough to be angry with him when things work out irrationally or tragically,” Meredith said. “That's a rational response. And God can handle our anger.”

Instead of admonishing Christians not to question God, leaders at Wedgwood gave people freedom to ask “why” in the middle of a situation that did not make sense.

“The only human being who ever lived a perfect life was Jesus Christ, and as he hung dying in agony, he said, ‘My God, my God, why?’ If he could ask why, we can ask why,” Meredith observed.

Rather than allowing themselves to become “paralyzed by what-ifs,” Wedgwood members held onto two biblical truths, he added.

“God is sovereign. And he loves us. And though we don't understand, we're going to cling to those two truths, no matter what the circumstances,” he

said.

Wedgwood maintained not only its openness in terms of honesty, but also in the sense of keeping its open-door policy, Meredith noted.

“Some people suggested we ought to have armed guards at our doors, and I know some churches that do that now,” he said.

If there had been a guard at the church door five years ago, he probably would have been Ashbrook's first fatality, Meredith maintained.

“Quite frankly, there isn't enough money in the kingdom to pay for off-duty cops to stand at every one of the doors-and to do what? Screen people out? ... On what basis do you screen people? Because of the way they dress? Who wants to go there? Not me.”

Wedgwood's attendance has grown 50 percent in the five years since the shooting. The church averages about 1,500 in worship, and worshippers have “maybe even a keener sense of God's presence” when they gather now than when they met prior to the tragedy, Meredith said.

Earlier this year, Wedgwood sent out 120 members to start a mission congregation-Meadowridge Community Church.

Looking to the future, Meredith hopes his church will cope with growth by building educational facilities, adding worship services and sending out members to start missions.

One thing Meredith cannot imagine is relocating to a new site or building a new sanctuary.

“Because of what happened here, we're tied to this corner,” he said. “At least for the remainder of my tenure here, we're committed to this corner.”

For the members of Wedgwood Baptist Church, it's hallowed ground.

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