

Church gathers for worship week after pastor slain

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MARYVILLE, Ill. (ABP) — One of a select fraternity of pastors who has experienced a church shooting consoled and challenged an Illinois Baptist congregation one week after its popular pastor was fatally shot while preaching his Sunday sermon.

"You are the most prayed-for church in all of Christendom this morning," Al Meredith, pastor of Wedgwood Baptist Church in Fort Worth, Texas, told worshipers in one of three morning worship services March 15 at First Baptist Church in Maryville, Ill.

Meredith delivered the sermon from the pulpit where 45-year-old Pastor Fred Winters' life was cut short March 8, when Terry Joe Sedlacek, 27, of nearby Troy, Ill., killed Winters with a gunshot wound to the heart. No motive for the shooting has been revealed, but Sedlacek's family claims he is mentally ill.

Police officers stand in front of First Baptist Church of Maryville, Ill., to show support for the congregation resuming worship one week after its pastor was slain.

Meredith's church suffered similar violence nearly a decade ago, when 47-year-old Larry Gene Ashbrook interrupted a youth prayer service with gunfire that killed seven and wounded seven others.

Meredith warned the Illinois congregation it is "heading into uncharted waters" in dealing with the aftermath of the tragedy. He said the old hymn line, "every day with Jesus is sweeter than the day before" is "baloney."

"Every day with Jesus is not sweeter than the day before," he said. "Some days are evil days, and last Sunday was an evil day."

Still, he said, the message of the gospel is, "there is hope in this violent world."

"That's why the media are so eager to hear your story, because it's so unique," he said. "We live in a hopeless world."

Describing in detail events of Sept. 15, 1999, that turned Wedgwood Baptist Church into "a killing field for a hopeless madman," Meredith said one question asked during an initial press conference is if there is anywhere in society that is safe.

"Of course not," Meredith said. "We live in a hostile world. The only real place of safety is in the center of God's will." But even that, he said, does not guarantee against untimely death.

Another question Meredith said he received was, "where was God?" when the shooting took place.

"God is exactly where he was when his own dear son was cruelly tortured and murdered," he said. "He is a parent who knows what it's like to lose his only son."

Meredith said God is in control and gives Christians who struggle the ability to get through when they need it.

He also said there are members of his church who are still having counseling nearly 10 years after the tragedy. He warned the Maryville congregation to reach out for help and avoid the "phoniness" of claiming "victory in Jesus" and going it alone.

"Get help from the body of Christ," he advised. "We are still struggling."

Meredith said the Wedgwood tragedy gave him numerous opportunities to share a Christian witness through the mass media.

"God has given us hope and peace in the face of life's worst tragedies," he said. "God gives a peace that the world doesn't understand."

On the other hand, Meredith said, tragedy can cause doubt.

"Faith is not having no doubts," he said. "In fact, faith necessitates doubt."

It's one thing to believe in God when everything makes sense, he said. It's when "God pushes into the abyss where it doesn't make sense" that faith comes into play.

"You don't really have faith until you're pushed beyond your controls," Meredith said. "Most of you are control freaks, and you want to have all your ducks in a row, and last week your ducks all fell apart."

Meredith challenged the Maryville congregation "it is time to put up or shut up" about their faith.

"You are what you are under pressure," he said. "If you squeeze an orange, you don't get Dr Pepper.... When you're squeezed, what's on the inside is what comes out."

-Bob Allen is senior writer for Associated Baptist Press.

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