

# Wedgwood pastor to preach Sunday at grieving Illinois church

March 11, 2009

MARYVILLE, Ill. (ABP) — One week after its senior pastor was shot and killed while delivering a sermon, an Illinois church will welcome as its guest preacher March 15 one of the few pastors with a similar experience.

The [website](#) of First Baptist Church in Maryville, Ill., said the church plans to hold its normal Sunday schedule that day. It will feature Al Meredith, pastor of [Wedgwood Baptist Church](#) in Fort Worth, Texas, preaching at all three worship services.

This photo of Fred Winters and his family appears on First Baptist Church's Facebook page.

Nearly 10 years ago a disturbed gunman walked into an evening youth rally at Wedgwood, fired more than 100 rounds from two handguns and exploded a pipe bomb. The attack killed seven and wounded seven others before the gunman took his own life.

Though Meredith was not present when the attack occurred on Sept. 15, 1999, he is one of only a few pastors with first-hand experience in coping with the aftermath of something like what happened to the Maryville congregation.

Police say Terry Sedlacek, 27, of nearby Troy, Ill., gunned down Fred

Winters, a married father of two who led First Baptist Church as pastor for nearly 22 years, before stabbing himself in the throat and wounding two church members who tried to subdue him. Sedlacek faces charges of first-degree murder and aggravated battery.

In the years since the Wedgwood shooting, Meredith has spoken publicly about the impact the attack had on the Southern Baptist flock that is affiliated with both the Baptist General Convention of Texas and the Southern Baptists of Texas Convention.

An [article](#) on the Wedgwood website said the biggest question the church had to answer was the unanswerable, "Where was God when all this happened?"

Out of that struggle came a new understanding of what it means to say, "God is sovereign."

"He was there during the shootings," the article says. "He comforts us today as we grieve and as we continue to recover. Through trials he brings understanding; he strengthens our faith when there can be no understanding."

### **Dealing with grief, anger, depression**

In a 2004 [story](#) in the *Baptist Standard*, Meredith said he had heard of other churches that fell apart after a tragedy. At conferences about dealing with trauma and grief, Meredith learned that people often start breaking down about six months after a tragedy. He responded with a six-part series of sermons about how characters in the Bible handled depression.

Meredith said the church also 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 enoughAl 

to be angry with him when things work out irrationally or Meredith tragically," Meredith said. "That's a rational response. And God can handle our anger."

At a 2004 conference on crime victims, Meredith said that, because of the attack, he was able to share the message of hope in Jesus Christ when he offered the invocation at the Cotton Bowl in 2000.

Meredith said the congregation experienced a deeper sense of God's presence in worship after the tragedy, and as news of the congregation's positive outlook spread, visitors started attending from out of town.

Attendance grew about 50 percent in the five years after the shooting, and the church sent out 120 members to launch a mission congregation in 2004.

### **Post-traumatic stress**

Meredith said post-traumatic stress syndrome is "real," and it can return in waves years later, but Wedgwood Baptist Church was committed to moving on.

"Don't ask us when we'll get over it," he [said](#). "We'll never get over it. We'll get through it."

Services at First Baptist Church of Maryville are scheduled at 8:15, 9:30 and 10:55 a.m. on Sundays. Meanwhile, the church is arranging for overflow parking and shuttle services from neighboring churches for the memorial service for Winters, scheduled for March 13.

The church website said the building is getting swamped with flowers and plants, and requested that, in lieu of flowers, contributions be made to a trust fund being set up for Winters' two daughters.

Information on how to give is available from the [website](#) and a Facebook

[page](#) set up for prayer for the church and Winters' family. As of midday March 11, more than 10,000 members had joined the group.

Prayer services for First Baptist Church were scheduled Wednesday night, March 11, at United Methodist, Catholic, Disciples of Christ, Lutheran and Assembly of God churches in Maryville, coordinated by the town's ministerial alliance.

Dan Crawford, a member of Wedgwood Baptist Church and former professor at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, wrote a book about the Wedgwood tragedy in 2000. Titled *A Night of Tragedy, a Dawning of Light*, the book is no longer in print but is accessible as an Adobe Acrobat PDF [file](#) on the Wedgwood website.

*-Bob Allen is senior writer for Associated Baptist Press.*

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[A year later, Wedgwood still sees God's grace through pain](#) (*Baptist Standard*, 9/18/2000)