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**Seminary mourns loss,  
celebrates faith of victims**

By Dan Martin

FORT WORTH, Texas (ABP) -- Students and faculty packed Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary's 1,600-seat auditorium Sept. 16 to remember the deaths of three of their own and severe injuries to two more by a gunman who opened fire at Wedgwood Baptist Church during a youth rally the night before.

Of the seven fatalities other than the gunman and the seven who were wounded, five were either current students or graduates of the seminary in Fort Worth, Texas.

Participants sobbed, hugged, applauded, sang, prayed and even cheered as they turned the regular Thursday morning chapel service into both a memorial for the dead and injured and a celebration of faith.

"This was a regular chapel service; we have such services each Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday, but today it turned into a wonderful memorial service," said David Porter, the seminary's director of public relations.

President Ken Hemphill set the tone as he prayed, with his voice breaking, asking God to "be present in our grief ... suffering and sorrow." He also prayed, thanking God that in God's presence is "our hope and our power."

Hemphill, Wedgwood pastor Al Meredith and Little Rock, Ark., pastor Rex Horne spoke briefly.

The service began with participants singing a medley of favorite hymns: "Blessed Be the Name of the Lord," "Glory to His Name," "My Jesus I Love Thee."

The songs were reverent, hushed and almost dirge-like as those present remembered Shawn Brown, 23, who was studying to be a youth minister; Kim Jones, 23, a first-year student; and Sydney Browning, 36, a Fort Worth teacher and children's choir director at Wedgwood who graduated from the seminary in 1991.

They thought, too, of the injured: Jeff Laster, a diploma student who was a custodian at the church; and Kevin Galey, a doctoral student and teaching fellow who was minister of counseling at the church.

Hemphill wept as he called the dead Southwesterners "martyrs," and then he told the students that in the midst of their sorrow and grief, "there are some things that we know.

"We know that God is still on his throne, ... that death and devastation are tactics of the adversary, ... that the resurrection is a sure and certain reality ... and that our fellow students are already present with the Lord.

"We know that our Lord is an ever-present help in time of trouble. There are no easy answers, but we know he will bring solace."

Hemphill said the tragedy shows the "need for a spiritual awakening."

"We need revival to end this senseless violence, so that our children will be free to walk our streets, ... feel safe in church and in school," Hemphill said. "I urge you to pray as you have never prayed and witness as you have never witnessed."

He called the participants to a time of prayer, and for more than 10 minutes, they prayed. Some sat silently, with folded hands in laps. Some knelt at the front of the bare auditorium, and still others prayed in groups of twos, threes, fours and clusters. Some lifted hands.

At the end of the prayer, they sang "a hymn of victory." Their voices swelled as they sang "Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound."

At the end, they applauded, then shouted and then cheered for several minutes.

Meredith described the three who had died and said he had known all three well.

He told of Kim Jones, who had only become a Christian two and a half years ago, but had "really come to know the Lord" when she was converted.

"On the night before her death, she led a Bible study for her old sorority sisters and begged them to accept Christ as their personal Savior," he reported.

Brown, a graduate of Howard Payne University, was a youth minister and "came to seminary to learn better how to win kids to the Lord," Meredith said. He told how Brown and his wife taught fifth grade Sunday school and recently taught in vacation Bible school.

When a single mom with children in the fifth and sixth grades called the church to ask for a visit from someone, Meredith said without hesitation he sent the Browns to see her.

Meredith called Browning "a special woman. She loved the Lord; she defined commitment." He told how she directed the children's choir at the church, and since she was sitting in the foyer when the gunman arrived, was among the first killed in the rampage.

"They called her 'Squib,'" he said.

Meredith told the students they were enduring a time of pressure, but he reminded them that what they really are is demonstrated when they are under pressure.

"You don't squeeze an orange and get Dr. Pepper. What you have on the inside is what shows when you are under pressure," he added.

As he spoke, he began to sing the old gospel hymn, "Great Is Thy Faithfulness," and the participants joined in, a cappella.

Horne, who had been scheduled earlier to be that day's chapel speaker, reminded participants that for many of those killed or injured in the spray of gunfire, the day had begun with a celebration around the school flagpoles.

"It started with 'See You At The Pole,' and then became 'See You In Church,' and finally moved on to 'See You In Heaven,'" he said.

He talked of heaven and told the participants that "while we weep, they are laughing; while we miss them, they are having a great reunion, and while we have memorial services, they have a great celebration."

## **Theologians, ethicists disagree about meaning of tragic deaths**

By Mark Wingfield

FORT WORTH, Texas (ABP) -- A gunman walks into a church and randomly shoots worshippers while shouting obscenities about Christianity. Is it a hate crime? Is it a sign of spiritual warfare between cosmic good and evil? Or is it just the senseless result of a crazy person acting out delusions?

Theologians and ethicists interviewed in the wake of the Sept. 15 deadly shooting spree at Wedgwood Baptist Church in Fort Worth, Texas, offered a variety of views on such questions.

Some said they see elements of all three.

"These are not mutually exclusive categories," said Jeph Holloway, associate professor of Christian ethics at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, near where the shootings occurred.

Holloway said he suspects the assailant, Larry Ashbrook, was "someone who has lived a tortured life of one sort or another" and "known loneliness, darkness that maybe he brought on himself."

"To label him simply as crazy is sometimes a device we use to try to impose rationality upon our world," Holloway continued. "He by definition has to be crazy because in a rational world these things don't happen."

Yet that must not preclude a consideration of spiritual influences that had taken Ashbrook into "real darkness" as well, the ethicist said. "I don't want to leave out of the consideration the reality of genuine evil in the world. Too quick an appeal to 'he was crazy' seems to mitigate against that reality.

Glen Bucy, a 17-year-old high school senior who looked Ashbrook in the eye as he entered the sanctuary of Wedgwood Baptist Church, said he definitely considers the event evidence of spiritual warfare.

"The way he was cussing, I think he just had a real hate for God," Bucy said, noting Ashbrook spewed constant slurs against Christianity during his rampage

"I think he just wanted to kill Christians. ... I think there's a real war going on right now against Christianity. Even at Columbine, they asked that girl if she believed in God and she said yes and they shot her. Now they're coming into our churches. I think it was just a real hate for God that caused him to do this."

Franklyn Harber, evangelist in residence at Southwestern Seminary and one of the first to minister to the shooting victims at the scene, echoed those sentiments.

"It is very much fair to classify this as martyrdom," Harber said. "These young people definitely died for their faith. That's exactly why this gunman was there. He was shooting them because they were professing Jesus Christ."

Others, while equally disturbed by the rampage at Wedgwood, called it premature to hastily classify the event as a hate crime or as religious persecution.

"In this particular case, we don't know whether this could be called a hate crime because we don't know the motivation of the individual who murdered these people," said Weston Ware, director of citizenship education for the Texas Baptist Christian Life Commission. "The assumption you make when you say something is a hate crime is that you know why someone killed."

Robert Parham, executive director of the Baptist Center for Ethics in Nashville, Tenn., said he is reluctant to tag such events hate crimes because he fears such labels too often are used to promote political agendas.

"I have a great deal of suspicion about the notion ... that Christians are under persecution," he said. "A lot of that is coming out of the Religious Right, and it's nothing more than their copycatting what other groups do in trying to obtain victim status."

"I think the Religious Right is in this game of saying, 'We can't pray in public schools, so we're victims. We can't make Hollywood make the movies we want, so we're victims. We can't cut federal funding for art, so we're victims.' ... I think it's part of the victim card some Christians are playing."

The bigger point to be seen, Parham said, is recent shootings are increasingly taking place in vulnerable settings such as schools, a Jewish community center, businesses and a church.

"These are very vulnerable places that have almost no security," Parham said. "The question in my mind is, what happens when Americans realize how vulnerable their institutions are?"

Texas Gov. George W. Bush expressed sympathy with both sides of the equation during a brief news conference outside Southwest High School in Fort Worth the day after the shootings.

He freely used the word "hate" to describe what had happened, yet at the same time he said he didn't know of anything government could have done to prevent such a crime.

"It's hard to explain to high school students or elementary students how somebody can have so much hate in their heart to walk into a church and kill people like this," Bush said. "There is no law that says people will love one another. I wish there were; I'd sign it. But that's a greater law."

Events classified as hate crimes traditionally have been violence clearly aimed at someone because of their ethnicity or sexual orientation.

Two religious leaders who live amid the threat of racially motivated hate crimes said they might be willing to extend the definition to cover an attack like the one at Wedgwood.

"It's hate true enough, but it's not a hate crime in the sense that it is committed against a racial, ethnic group," said Michael Bell, a Fort Worth activist for African-American causes and pastor of Greater St. Stephen Baptist Church.

Bell was quick to compare the Fort Worth shootings to the shootings this summer at a Jewish community center in Los Angeles.

"I don't know how to categorize it," Bell concluded. "This is behavior outside the box to the extreme. ... Is the sanctuary a sanctuary any more? What happens when the sanctuary is violated?"

Marty Cohen, a Messianic Jewish rabbi and member of Ridge View Baptist Church in Rockwall, Texas, said he, too, thinks it's fair to compare the Wedgwood shootings to the Jewish community center shootings.

"The shooting in Los Angeles, the shooter went there because he had a passionate hatred toward Jewish people," Cohen explained. "And it sounds like this fellow had a passionate hatred toward Christians. As both a Jewish man and a believer in Jesus, the two are very much motivated by the same hatred for God's people. Satan is truly a roaring lion seeking whom he shall destroy."

Cohen said the situations represent Satan's efforts against both the Christian church and the Jewish race. "Satan is the source of all evil, and his mission is to destroy God's people," he said.

"We read about spiritual warfare and we make light of it," he noted. "We better not. We don't have time to. What we saw in Fort Worth was a battle waged in the heavenlies that touched earth."

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## **Counselors offer tips for helping kids cope**

By Marv Knox

DALLAS (ABP) -- Although parents can't shield their children from psychological trauma after tragedies like the Sept. 15 massacre in Fort Worth, Texas, they can help youngsters' emotional wounds heal.

Honesty, affirmation and openness provide the balm children need in the aftermath of violence, according to ministers experienced in helping young lives heal.

The beginning is point-blank acknowledgement of evil in the world, they said.

While the shooting at Wedgwood Baptist Church once again stunned the nation, smaller-scale violence and tragedy "happen every day" observed Wade Rowatt, director of St. Matthews Pastoral Counseling Center in Louisville, Ky.

"We've got to begin by addressing the fact tragedy strikes the just and the unjust alike. Accidents and evil are real, and they happen," said Rowatt, author of "How to Talk with Teenagers" and a national lecturer on youth issues.

"We just have to sit down and say to children: 'You know, we have tried to teach you that our world is not as safe as we wish it were. We've told you to be careful about talking to strangers and never get in a car with them or let them in the house,'" added Dick Maples, director of Texas Baptists' minister/church relations office and a veteran pastor and counselor.

"But we must understand there's really no safe place in the world. Our safety is in the Lord, our faith in him and in each other."

"Assure them the violence is not their fault," Rowatt urged. "They're not guilty for being survivors. They likely could not have prevented this. And they appropriately can express thankfulness for the well being of the survivors.

"Then talk to them about grief -- the normal emotional response to tragedy and loss. It's shock, numbness and a flood of emotions. You date the rest of your life from this event -- everything that happened to you before this tragedy and everything that happened after."

"Talk" is the operative word, Maples emphasized.

"It's awfully important to allow the children to talk about the tragedy and express their feelings, rather than the parents doing all the talking," he said.

"Begin by asking how they feel and what they think about it and if they're fearful about going to school or going to church," he suggested. "We'll see so much that is so graphic, with scenes of wounded people lying on the grass and stretchers and teens emotionally distraught. This goes beyond those who were personally involved. That's why you've got to allow children to express their fears."

In doing so, parents, teachers and children's workers need to recognize the different abilities of children and teenagers to deal with fears and trauma, noted two specialists at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in Fort Worth.

"The main difference is children are not able to express their feelings as well as teenagers," said Dana Wicker, an associate professor of counseling and psychology.

"What we need to do first with children is process what they know," she explained. "We can listen and watch to determine what they have heard, what their understanding is, their thoughts and their feelings about it."

Children may talk some, but they also may act out their understanding of what happened in play, draw pictures and "grieve in spurts," she said.

However children process trauma, their first concern is for safety, she added. "My 8-year-old heard about the shooting on TV, and his first question was, 'Is the shooter dead?' I said, 'Yes,' and he said, 'Good. He won't come to shoot me.'

"Younger children want to know they're safe. That's the first thing we need to communicate. We don't want to give them false hopes. But we can talk about the ways that they are safe, the things we do to protect them."

Much like children, "it's very important for preteens to feel a sense of safety from the world," pointed out Phil Briggs, distinguished professor of student ministries at Southwestern.

"I fear some parents will react instead of respond, being overprotective," he warned. "We've watched this type of over-protectionism come in America -- almost a family isolationism."

Still, he advised against forcing preteens to talk about the tragedy "except when they bring it up."

And both Wicker and Briggs advised against allowing younger children and pre-teens to watch much of news reports about tragedies.

Pay close attention to children's behavior after a tragedy, Wicker said.

"Children may have nightmares about this and be anxious," she reported. "All that is pretty normal. But if a parent continues to see a child having nightmares or regressing -- acting younger than they are, wetting the bed, having difficulty at school or staying anxious or quiet or frustrated or cranky for a prolonged time -- then they may want to talk to somebody. The child may need additional help."

With children, "the main thing right now is not so much giving them answers as being alongside them, helping them to begin the grief process," she said. "It's not so much putting words to it. Later on, they can begin understanding why this happened."

Teenagers, however, need to talk, Briggs stressed. "Teens learn by talking," he noted.

"The thing that makes grief or death so hard on teenagers is it's outside their sense of reality," he added. "They live so much in the now. Their imagination still is in a fantasy world. But when they see or know of a close friend who is killed, it's such a shock to their reality, they need to talk about it. It needs to be a topic of conversation."

"Realize one discussion won't solve it all," Maples cautioned. "And the time they want to talk may not be when the parents want to talk or have the time to talk. So, parents must be sensitive to be open, so that they are free to talk," especially at bedtime.

Parents need to get one-on-one with their children since some children won't share their deep feelings in front of siblings, he advised.

"Be ready to listen for this and talk about this for a long time," he said. "Children may have to talk about this many times over an extended time before they are ready to put this to rest. One week just won't do."

All the counselors stressed the importance of honesty with children.

"The main thing is that you've got to be honest with them and talk on a feeling level," Maples said. "Some children will freely express their emotions and some won't. You've got to be gentle and gently probe."

Honesty also means dealing with anger, Rowatt acknowledged.

"Anger is a normal part of this," he said. "Revenge is a real temptation, but constructive use of the anger is a healing road out.

"Survivors sometimes crash and burn themselves if they try unhealthy ways of avoiding anger and fear -- like alcohol, drugs, sex or just giving up," he noted. Healthy ways of responding include participating in a support group with friends, talking openly with family and making changes in their own lives.

"Survivors have to begin to get on with their lives," he urged. "It doesn't seem fair or just if normalcy returns, but it does. We don't get out of the rest of our lives. We return to normal without the lost persons and with the tragedy as part of our memory, but we don't let it rob us of living the most productive lives we can live."

Teenagers particularly can benefit from the use of rituals "that carry meaning beyond words, such as planting a tree that is a memorial or dedicating or writing a hymn in memory of the lost friends and loved ones," Rowatt said.

Sometimes a healing ritual is much simpler, he added, telling about his family's response to the recent death of his daughter's lifelong friend. "Because of what's happened, we are never going to bed without saying, 'I love you.' We tell each other we love each other every time we part."

Community rituals include coming together in worship and "speaking the unspeakable -- speaking their pain and hurt together," he said, urging pastors to "provide sanctuaries where taboo thought can be addressed in the context of the holy."

"Theologically, we need to give people permission to express anger at God," he explained. "If God is God at all, God can receive our anger as a loving prayer. The honest expression of anger helps us move beyond bitterness. We have to move through the anger, almost like moving through a hurricane.

"We want to help people own their own anger and dark side and revenge. Until we come to terms with the revenge inside ourselves, we're not going to be able to help people like this man (at Wedgwood Baptist Church) seeking revenge on others."

He urged parents and ministers and others to help people "reimage their dreams, partly by helping them see themselves as part of the solution" to the tragedy.

"This will be a great time for parents and kids to talk about religious things, for parents to verbalize their faith for their kids," Briggs stressed. "Don't use pious cliches. (This was not 'God's will.' If this is your concept of 'God's will,' then you're in bad shape.) This tragedy is too real to children and teenagers for cliches."

"And pray together," Maples pleaded. "That is so very important in times like these."

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## **Baptists offer ministry in wake of shootings**

By Ken Camp

FORT WORTH, Texas (ABP) -- From the time Pam Minatrea woke up Sept. 15, she felt an inexplicable need to pray for the safety of the young people around the state who were gathering in schoolyards for "See You At the Pole" prayer meetings. She told her husband, Milfred, about her uneasy feeling.

About 12 hours later, Milfred Minatrea, director of church ministries for the Baptist General Convention of Texas, was helping coordinate the faith community's response to hurting families after a gunman burst into a youth prayer rally and shot 15 people.

Minatrea learned about the shooting at Fort Worth's Wedgwood Baptist Church from a televised news bulletin. He immediately started trying to reach Tom Law, director of missions at Tarrant Baptist Association, to offer crisis-counseling services.

While Minatrea was attempting to call Law, Ted Elmore of the BGCT evangelism division made a personal contact. Elmore currently serves as interim pastor at a church in Tarrant Baptist Association, and he arrived to pray with members and leaders of the grieving sister church.

As a former police officer, Elmore also was able to minister to several law enforcement personnel and emergency workers. The tragedy hit the police, EMS workers and firemen especially hard, he observed.

"You're used to seeing dead bodies. You're not used to seeing dead kids in church," he said.

Elmore also talked to Law about the services that Minatrea and his staff could provide in group crisis intervention, pastoral counseling and community ministry, and the director of missions requested his help.

When Minatrea arrived at the scene soon after 8 p.m., he recognized the church campus had become the temporary property of the state. It was, after all, the scene of a crime against the state.

But Minatrea felt impressed that this also had been a crime against the faith community, and no allowance was being made for people of faith to minister to their own during the immediate criminal investigation.

"Please, let us own our grief," Minatrea pleaded with the officials in charge.

Steve Abbott, director of emergency services with the American Red Cross, heard Minatrea's appeal and agreed with him. Together, they made sure every victim's family was placed not only with a licensed mental-health professional but also with a pastoral-care provider.

Gene Grounds, field coordinator of restorative-justice ministries with Texas Baptist Men, along with several Baptist chaplains, a Baptist student ministry director and counselors from Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, spent the night ministering to the families. The ministers kept vigil with them during their long hours of waiting and offered comfort when death notices were delivered.

Bobby Cox, associate director of missions for Tarrant Baptist Association, was stationed at John Peter Smith Hospital throughout the night, helping provide pastoral care in that setting.

Minatrea recalled his experiences ministering in the aftermath of two plane crashes at Dallas-Fort Worth International Airport more than 10 years ago. He remembered how meaningful it had been to victims' families to know that the bodies of their loved ones had been treated with dignity and that a minister had been present.

He persuaded the officer in charge at the crime scene to allow Mitch Felder, an African-American police chaplain, to enter the church building with the medical examiner to remove the bodies of victims.

"It was important for someone from the faith community to be there," Minatrea said.

Minatrea was kept busy coordinating the faith-based response to the families and was not able to stay with a single family for hours at a time, as the other chaplains did. However, he was able to talk to several parents, as well as to law officers.

"A number of times I heard expressed the question, 'Why would God let something like this happen to my kids? They were not out on the street, not anywhere they shouldn't have been. They were in church.'"

It was an issue that others struggled with in the hours following the tragedy, including classmates of the victims. Jim Young, coordinator of restorative justice ministries for the BGCT and former prison chaplain, attended an early morning meeting of school counselors at the Fort Worth Independent School District office to make available the services of pastoral crisis counselors to assist the mental health professionals.

Throughout the experience, both Elmore and Minatrea noted that many of the police officers, school counselors and others in secular helping professions made it clear that they were acting out of their own faith commitments.

"It was so clear that so many of the other caregivers are God's people, too," Minatrea said.

As another expression of support, the Texas convention sent a check for \$15,000 to Wedgwood to assist in recovery from the tragedy.

"Our hearts are broken over the tragedy at Wedgwood Baptist Church," said Executive Director Bill Pinson. "We grieve with those who are suffering because of this terrible act of violence. This church and the people related to it are a special part of the family of Texas Baptists."

Elmore said the Texas Baptist convention is encouraging a statewide prayer emphasis for Wedgwood Baptist Church and its surrounding community. "We are also asking that we display our prayerful support by tying ribbons to our automobile antennas, wearing them on our clothing, or displaying in some other way ribbons of Wedgwood blue."

BGCT President Russell Dilday echoed that call to prayer.

"As a fellow resident of Fort Worth, my heart goes out to the mothers and fathers and the youth and all who hurt because of this tragedy. As president of the Baptist General Convention of Texas, I express concern for a wounded part of our Baptist family and for my friend, Wedgwood Pastor Al Meredith," Dilday said.

"Texas Baptists join me in pledging our prayers and support for all of the people who hurt and grieve because of this tragedy. Texas Baptists will offer every possible assistance.