

National Black Church Initiative

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For immediate release
PRESS RELEASE

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NATIONAL BLACK CHURCH INITIATIVE CONDEMNS CHURCH SHOOTING

NBCI CALLS FOR CHURCHES TO DEVELOP SECURITY PLANS FOR ITS CHURCH LEADERS AND PARISHIONERS

Washington, DC, -- March 10, 2009: The National Black Church Initiative (NBCI) condemns the shooting of Rev. Fred Winters, a southern Illinois pastor who was fatally shot during Sunday services on March 8. This latest shooting is a tragic event for the nation and NBCI calls churchgoers to take immediate action in developing security plans that will make the church a violence free zone. Violence has no role in the life of the church in either words or deeds.

NBCI is committed to taking deliberate and measured steps to mitigate the number of violent attacks made on faith communities. To spearhead the effort, NBCI is calling on the Department of Justice to collaborate with national church leadership in developing a legal framework that makes it a serious offense to harm any clergymen. NBCI would also like the Department of Homeland Security and related law enforcement entities on the federal and state levels to join forces with national church leadership to develop guidelines for effective security plans.

Rev. Anthony Evans, President of NBCI, expressed his deep sympathies to Rev. Winters' family and congregation, commenting, "I am shocked at the level of violence that has been visited upon the church in recent years. It is as though the church has become a target for every deranged individual who believes that they have the answers. Since religion has become a prominent fixture and topic in the American political arena, the local church has become the object of frustration and now a place of violence. This cannot be, and NBCI will utilize its full resources to make sure that the worship

experience and the environment of the church remain holy. I offer my sincere condolences to the family of Rev. Fred Winters, and we will continue to pray for God's blessing on his wife, children, and church family."

This shooting is not an isolated event and represents a disturbing pattern of violence against clergymen and churchgoers across the country:

- August 12, 2007: A lone gunman, Eiken Elam Saimon, opened fire in a Missouri Micronesian church, killing a pastor and two other churchgoers.
- May 20, 2007: A standoff between police and a suspect in the shootings of three people in a Moscow, Idaho, Presbyterian Church ended with three dead, including one police officer.
- Although not at a church building, the Oct. 2, 2006, attack in Lancaster County, Pa., by a gunman who killed five girls and then himself at an Amish school targeted a religious site.
- May 21, 2006: Louisiana. Four were killed by a man at Jesus Christ Church.
- Feb. 26, 2006: Michigan. Two people were killed at Zion Hope Missionary Baptist Church by a man who reportedly went to the church looking for his girlfriend. He later killed himself.
- April 9, 2005: A 27-year-old airman died after being shot at a church in College Park, Ga., where he had once worked as a security guard.
- March 12, 2005: A man walked into the services of the Living Church of God in Milwaukee and open fired immediately, killing seven people.
- Oct. 5, 2003: A woman opened fire in Turner Monumental AME church in Kirkwood, east of Atlanta, killing the pastor and two others.
- Sept. 16, 1999: Seven young people were killed when a man opened fire during a prayer service for teen-agers at the Wedgewood Baptist Church in Fort Worth, Texas.

In Rev. Evans' remarks, he also stated "part of the 'Christ Walk' is not just condemnation, but reconciliation and love." As a Christian community, NBCI insists that members of the Church pray for the perpetrator of this heinous crime. Leading the reconciliatory effort will be Rev. Mark McCleasy, Chair of NBCI Ministers' Alliance, who at the recommendation of Rev. Evans will have NBCI's Midwest Faith Command reach out to the suspect's family.

Rev. Evans' pointed out that the German Lutheran pastor and theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer said, "Christ is calling us to service and to die for the sake of the Gospel." Rev. Winters did just that. In his last moments, Winters deflected the first of the gunman's four rounds with a Bible, sending a confetti-like spray of paper into the air, in a scene rife with horror, but also with grace and beauty. As Evans commented, "he died in Christ and his salvation is secured."

NBCI recognizes the shooting of Rev. Fred Winters and the two worshippers as a deplorable tragedy for not only the families involved, but for the entire Christian church. Yet, NBCI hopes the atrocity will serve as an urgent reminder to Christians that evil is

real and churchgoers must no longer allow evil's demonic forces to taint the sanctity of the church and Christ's teachings. To safeguard against future violence against clergymen and their congregations, NBCI recommends that local church leadership, in partnership with federal government agencies, develop and implement security plans immediately.

About NBCI

The National Black Church Initiative (NBCI), a coalition of 16,000 African-American and Latino member churches works to eradicate racial disparities in healthcare. In addition to our member churches, we have 18,000 sister churches. NBCI is a faith-based health organization dedicated to providing critical wellness information and preventive health screening to all of its members. The African-American community ranks first in eleven different health risk categories. NBCI's purpose is to partner with national health officials to provide health education, reduce racial health disparities, and increase access to quality healthcare.