

Alumni Spotlight:

Fred Winters

Illinois Pastor Sees Exponential Church Growth

Story by Cory Miller

It's not often that a 23-year-old pastor is called to a church with 32 people in attendance, with an average age of 60, located in a town of 800, and a church debt of \$125,000 – and stays for the long haul. Yet 20 years later, Dr. Fred Winters (M.Div. '91) is still at First Baptist Church of Maryville, Ill., located 15 miles east of St. Louis.

"We made a decision that we wanted to plant our lives in one place. And if the people were willing to pray and work, we'd stay," Winters said. After arriving at the church in 1987, he began studying the church's history and found that the average tenure for a pastor there was 15 months.

According to Winters, it took him about five or six years before the people began to trust him and the fact that he was not leaving.

"There was a sense that people wanted a pastor and wanted him to stay. They didn't believe anybody would do that," he said, also noting that in each deacon's meeting they would joke about whether they were going to fire the pastor.

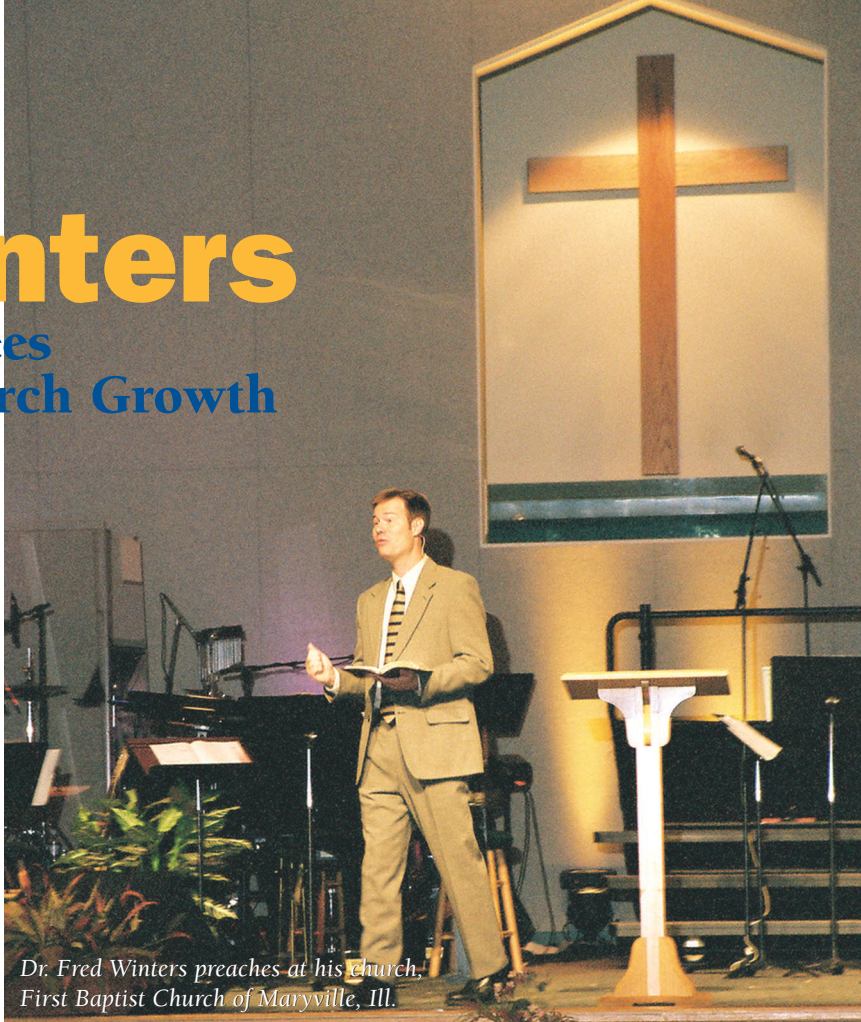
"It took me about six months to realize they were joking."

But since that initial commitment to stay in 1987, First Baptist-Maryville has grown exponentially.

- Attendance grew from 32 to 1000-plus in 2006.
- The church budget went from \$48,000 to \$1.6 million
- Cooperative Program giving went from \$2,885 to \$160,000

- The church helped plant four churches in Illinois
- And five building programs took them from a small 30x40-foot fellowship hall in 1987 to today's 1,000-seat sanctuary that sits on 70 acres.

- The church is currently in the process of adding a new Family Life Center – debt free.



Dr. Fred Winters preaches at his church, First Baptist Church of Maryville, Ill.

"The church began to slowly grow. It didn't happen quickly. We didn't do a lot of big changes," Winters said. "We were just faithful about preaching the Word, visiting people, and sharing the Gospel."

"The original core had a vision to reach people," he said. "They understood their purpose was to reach people with the Gospel of Jesus Christ."

With so much change, one might be tempted to ask how many of those original 32 are still around.

"Almost all of them – minus the ones that have gone on to heaven or moved away," he said. "They're pretty much all still here."

He said that through all the changes and growth, those original members realized the deeper and profound purpose behind it all. "They bought into the purpose," he said. "When the style of music changed, and new things were introduced, while they might not have been excited, they bought into why we've done those things." They have seen the fruit of their labor – and their pastor's commitment to stay.

The Sunday before this interview was conducted, the church had more than 1,100 people in attendance. And the average age is now 36.

"This has become a great church not because I'm a great pastor. I don't think I have great skills. I don't think my walk with Christ is head and shoulder above others," he said. "What I've found is if you make a commitment to persevere, God blesses and honors that.

"And people respond." MW