

50 Years Later, Birmingham Bombing Survivors Share Forgiveness Message

Bishop James Lowe can recall precisely where he was at 10:22 a.m., Sunday, Sept. 15, 1963, when a bomb planted under the basement stairs at Birmingham's 16th Street Baptist Church in Alabama detonated, killing four young girls—and in the process bringing national focus to the growing issue of civil rights for blacks in America.

"I was in a Sunday school room two doors down from where the bomb was placed that killed the four girls," recalls Bishop Lowe, pastor of Birmingham's thriving Guiding Light Church and a prominent spiritual leader in the community.

Eleven years old at the time, Lowe was with a number of other boys in one of the church's Sunday school class rooms when the bomb, placed by local Ku Klux Klan members, exploded and killed four of his friends and acquaintances: Addie Mae Collins, Cynthia Wesley, Carole Robertson, and Denise McNair.

On Sept. 11 and 15, Christian television's Trinity Broadcasting Network will partner with the City of Birmingham to produce a pair of exclusive televised programs to honor the memory of the four girls and to commemorate the tragic event that changed the face of the struggle for civil rights in America.

The memories of the tragic and historic event are still fresh in Lowe's mind 50 years after the fact, as are the emotions with which he and other survivors have struggled.

"I remember a loud deafening noise and seeing glass flying out from the windows," Lowe recounts of the moment of the blast. "Instinctively, I turned my back and shielded my head with my

arms to protect myself from whatever it was that was happening. From that moment on, I lost an awareness of my friends that were in the room. It was as if a dark cloud had enveloped me.”

One of the most vivid impressions that has remained with Bishop Lowe over the many years since the tragedy is not the physical pain—like other survivors, he suffered cuts and injuries from broken glass and flying debris. Rather, it is the memory of the terror on the faces and in the voices of those caught in the blast and of parents frantically searching for their children.

As Lowe ran out of the Sunday school room with thoughts of his two younger siblings somewhere nearby, he caught a glimpse of a Sunday school teacher under a table embracing his 5-year-old sister. “I could see the fear on their faces and in both of their eyes,” he remembers.

Later, as he stood outside the damaged church building, looking on the desperate faces of parents and watching police put up barricades, Lowe suddenly heard the voice of his own terrified mother calling to him and still distinctly remembers her sobs of relief when he assured her his two sisters were okay.

“To this day I still choke up remembering her voice,” he recalls.

Like other survivors, Lowe was forced to deal with the trauma of being the target of an attack motivated by intense hatred.

“How does any young person deal with that kind of thing?” he asks. “There were no counselors available to us, so for the most part we had to deal privately with a whole range of emotions.”

Uppermost was sorting out the motive for such a heartless assault on children.

"How could people be so vicious and so hateful that they would place a bomb in a church," he wondered, "and then set that bomb at a time to go off when innocent children were in Sunday school?"

Lowe says that for years following the violent attack, he struggled with conflicting emotions regarding his faith in God and the actions of those who claimed to worship Him.

"I became cynical regarding this life and the ability of man to deal righteously with his brother," he recalls.

It was only after Lowe fully committed his life to Christ in his mid-twenties that forgiveness came, along with God's purpose for his life—to help bring true healing and reconciliation to individuals, families and communities.

"It is in the heart where evil resides, and unless the heart is changed by a personal relation with Almighty God through Christ Jesus, no change will occur," he says. "Today I do not look for good in any man. I look for the God in him."

Lowe adds that one of his main missions today is "to do all [he] can to help people come to a true sincere love and respect for one another and deal with differences in such a way that tragedies like this will never have to occur again."

Dale Long, another of the bombing survivors, says returning good for the evil that was done that day in 1963 is key to living in forgiveness. Also 11 years old at the time of the bombing and in the same classroom as Lowe, Long says two individuals were personally responsible for helping him turn in the right direction following the bombing.

The first was Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., who provided what Long considers a personal epiphany at the funeral service he attended for three of the victims of the bombing.

"At the conclusion of this very moving and emotional service,

as Dr. King joined the other ministers in a recessional, this great man appeared to lock his stern and somber gaze upon me," Long recalls. "I looked away for a few moments, and when I turned back, Dr. King was still looking straight at me, as though he were issuing a challenge to me—and my generation—to be part of the healing and change that had to take place to put a stop to such violence and hatred."

The other person who provided Long with needed counsel after the bombing was his grandmother.

"My grandmother had always taught me the importance of faith, prayer, walking uprightly and getting a good education," he recalls. "But after the bombing, she emphasized to me, 'Dale, you were spared for a reason. Don't take it lightly.' Those words deeply motivated me."

With two such influential people spurring him on, Long went on to graduate from Texas Southern University in Houston and today works for the City of Dallas in community outreach.

But perhaps his greatest calling has been to mentor youth for nearly 40 years through the national Big Brothers Big Sisters program. A former national "Big Brother of the Year," Long has mentored a total of seven young men through the Big Brothers program and has been influential in encouraging other men and women to give back to their community through mentoring and speaking into the lives of young people.

Long says he feels a particular calling to reach out to the many African-American boys and young men who have no fathers and few positive role models available to them.

"African-American boys are the civil rights issue of today," he says. "We must reach out to them and show them the way, just like Dr. King and a few other key men reached out to me and my generation. We can't afford to sit by and let hatred, violence, poverty and hopelessness define their futures."

Long adds that he has been powerfully motivated by the memory of the four girls who died that day in Birmingham's 16th Street Baptist Church.

"Addie Mae, Cynthia, Carole and Denise didn't get the chance to impact their families and their communities," Long says. "That was stolen from them, so I and others who survived that day are standing in their place. We're making a difference in their names."

Bishop Lowe agrees with that motivation.

"These were four young, innocent girls," he says. "We can honor their memories by recognizing that anytime there is hatred of any human being, there is the unpleasant reality that even the innocent will be hurt. We can honor them by learning to overcome our biases and hatred of one another and learn to forgive and allow God to administer true righteous judgment."

Lowe says that while he, like many other children who were in the church that day, was a victim of violence and hatred, he has "made a conscious choice over the years not to be known as a victim, but rather a victor over that violence and hatred."

On Sept. 14, Lowe and his church will sponsor a reunion for all those who survived the Birmingham bombing—the first time such a reunion has taken place.

"In addition to remembering those who died, we want to honor those who survived this despicable act, who struggled through the pain and raw emotions, and who are living testimonies of God's mercy and forgiveness," he says.

Lowe says one of his goals in bringing the survivors together is "to embrace and comfort those who may be still hurting and broken as a result of that horrific event, and say to them, 'Let us take confidence in Christ and know that we shall overcome.'"

Trinity Broadcasting Network will be on hand to record some of the poignant moments of this unique and historic reunion and will include them in the broadcasts of the programs commemorating the 50th anniversary of the Birmingham bombing.