

# Chaplains Loving Like Jesus in Devastated Oklahoma

There's a long, difficult road ahead for the Oklahoma residents who survived the deadly series of tornadoes earlier this week. The Billy Graham Rapid Response chaplains are simply there to walk that road with them.

Al and Toni New deployed to Moore, Oklahoma, where residents are reeling from the death and destruction that ripped through homes, businesses, and schools. Many people there vividly remember a similar scene from a tornado that hit the same community in 1999.

The scene is pretty familiar to Al and Toni, too. It reminds them of their time in Joplin, Miss.

"This was a horrible, horrible tornado," said Toni New. "It looks a lot like Joplin. Houses just obliterated, torn all to pieces like pick-up sticks."

She and her husband, both crisis-trained chaplains, are there to see past the damage and focus on the people—like a man who pulled up on his motorcycle, just wanting to talk.

"He pulled up to us and started talking and sharing his story," said Toni New. "He told us just how afraid they were and how difficult it was to get through the tornado."

After dozens of deployments in the wake of hurricanes, tornadoes, floods, and shootings, Al and Toni know listening is just as important—maybe more important—than speaking. Al listened to the man tell his story. Then he asked if he would like some prayer.

"We prayed with him," said Toni New. "He was just so glad for that prayer. You could just see on his face that it touched

him so much. It was like God just put him right there and drew him to us.”

The chaplains find that happens quite a bit. They pray for God to open doors, and watch Him work.

“Our goal and our focus is to come alongside the homeowners, the family members who have just gone through this terrible disaster, and to be a ministry of presence to them,” said Toni New. “Just showing them the love of Jesus Christ and somehow letting them know that He’s going to be there with them and send people to help them.”

The chaplains are working side by side with volunteers from Samaritan’s Purse who help meet the physical needs of residents—salvaging belongings buried in the rubble, tearing down, and rebuilding. The Rapid Response Team is there to meet the spiritual and emotional needs of people who are often anxious and overwhelmed.

While Al, Toni, and a group of other chaplains focus on Moore, another group is at work 40 miles down the road, in Shawnee, Okla.

Rapid Response Team chaplains Desi and Carolin Perez arrived in Shawnee less than 24 hours after a deadly tornado struck the small community. They’ve been working with Samaritan’s Purse and a local church to care for residents who aren’t sure how to pick up the pieces.

“We met one man who just just didn’t know where to start,” said Carolin Perez. “There’s just an overwhelming sense of emotional distress.”

Carolin and Desi listened to the man’s story. His home was damaged in the tornado, and he’s waiting to speak with an insurance adjuster. Then he has a long list of decisions to make.

“I prayed specifically for God to give him direction and wisdom for the decisions that he and everyone faces when they go through something like this,” said Carolin. “He was grateful.”

The chaplains are also serving as a quiet presence at funerals and visitations that are open to the public. Wednesday night, Carolin and Desi presented a family Bible to a woman who lost a loved one in the Shawnee tornado.

“She was very appreciative and welcomed us praying with her,” said Carolin Perez.

In the days to come, as the news crews disperse, more chaplains will arrive. The long journey to recovery is just beginning.

No one can take away the pain, fear, and loss felt by the people of Oklahoma; the chaplains are just there to show them they don’t have to go through it alone.

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