

In Deeply Religious Oklahoma, Prayer Brings Solace After Tornado

In deeply religious Moore, Okla., God and prayer are frequently mentioned as sources of strength for residents reeling from the fourth damaging tornado in 15 years.

“My family and God is what’s helping us through this,” said Vickie Myers, 39, whose husband, Brent, a disabled military veteran, is now recovering after he was pulled unconscious from the rubble of their home on Monday.

The tornado was the strongest in the United States in nearly two years and devastated large swaths of Moore, a suburb of Oklahoma City, which was hit by another huge tornado in 1999. Smaller tornadoes hit the area in 1998 and 2003.

The tornado killed 24 people on Monday, a remarkably small number considering the ferocity of the storm, officials said, and at least 377 were injured.

Oklahoma is among the states of the so-called “Bible Belt” where church attendance is highest. A Gallup survey published in 2012 found that 77 percent of people in Oklahoma described themselves as strongly or moderately religious—the only state outside the southern region of the country among the 10 most religious states.

There are 82 churches listed on the website of the city of Moore, which has a population of about 55,000 people. All are Christian denominations, including 26 Baptist congregations. There are no Jewish synagogues or Muslim mosques, although there is a synagogue in the nearby town of Norman.

Churches have mobilized to provide food and shelter for

homeless people as well as for first responders and volunteers helping with the cleanup. Local officials said this is one reason, along with families and friends taking people into their homes, that only 29 people were in Red Cross shelters by Wednesday out of an estimated 33,000 affected by the tornado.

Gov. Mary Fallin announced a community memorial service will be held on Sunday at First Baptist Church in Moore, which seats 1,800 people, to: "honor those we have lost, pray for those they left behind and begin to heal together."

Moms in Prayer, a nondenominational Christian group, is one group that sprung into action after the tornado, sending out a call to mothers and grandmothers across the nation to pray for the families and staff of Plaza Towers and Briarwood Elementary Schools in Moore, which were flattened by the powerful tornado.

Seven children at Plaza Towers were killed by the storm, and the first funeral for one of the students was held on Thursday.

Sherry Langston, 42, the Moore coordinator for the group, who works at the Briarwood school, said many people have told her prayer is the only way they got through the ordeal.

Mothers in Prayer plans to hold a community prayer meeting and hopes to establish a prayer group at each school in Moore.

Joseph Salinas, 25, said he prayed for safety as he rode out the tornado in a friend's shelter in Moore, along with his mother and his two children, Andrew, 2, and Faith, 3.

They lost most of their possessions in the storm but Salinas does not despair. "As long as we have God, we have everything," he said.

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