

Safe and Saved: Storm Survival in Oklahoma

Less than two weeks after a violent tornado cut a huge swath of destruction through Moore and south Oklahoma City—killing 24 people—another set of deadly tornadoes ripped through the area last Friday evening, once again striking fear and panic in weather-fatigued Oklahomans.

In the midst of this latest round of lethal storms, up to a couple hundred community residents sought refuge at Emmaus Baptist Church, the local base of operation for the Billy Graham Rapid Response Team chaplains and Samaritan's Purse, and nearly a dozen surrendered their lives to Jesus Christ and found peace that surpasses all understanding. Emmaus Baptist Church is located on South Western Avenue in the Oklahoma City area, not too far from areas ravaged by the May 20 killer tornado.

Just before 6 p.m. on May 31, a large, slow-moving cluster of supercell thunderstorms moved across central and northern Oklahoma, spawning five tornadoes. None were as powerful as the EF5 tornado that ravaged the area two Mondays ago, but these storms still claimed the lives of 16 people, including five children, and triggered heavy flooding when up to 10 inches of rain fell in a short time span.

Residents trying to flee the latest tornado onslaught rushed to Emmaus Baptist Church because they had heard about the good work stemming from the outreach by Samaritan's Purse and the RRT chaplains throughout their community. The people felt it was a safe haven and also brought their pets along—dogs, cats and even guinea pigs—to escape the peril barreling down on them.

When warning sirens began blaring, about 150 Samaritan's Purse

workers and eight RRT chaplains had just begun dinner. They left their chicken dinner on the tables inside the fellowship hall and rushed to pre-designated "safe rooms" off the church sanctuary.

Not too long after that, the church lost electricity, and people were escorted to an even safer location, where they crawled into a long and narrow cement and steel-girded alcove area underneath the sanctuary.

In the dark, people prayed, sang songs and quoted favorite Scripture verses. Many called family members at home, expressing their love and telling them they were safe. Some received text messages that they were being prayed for.

Unbeknownst to them, top Samaritan's Purse and RRT leadership were monitoring the rapidly deteriorating weather conditions outside. As conditions worsened and debris tossed through the air, the leaders noticed that cars began racing into the parking lot and panic-stricken residents dashed toward the church.

Doors required three people to push them open from the inside because of the falling air pressure, but people were able to squeeze through the open cracks. At least 200 people made it safely inside the church, where they huddled under tables in classrooms, as a tornado touched down about a mile or a mile and a half away.

Once an all-clear signal was issued about 90 minutes later, Samaritan's Purse workers and RRT chaplains emerged from their crawlspace shelter and began mingling with local residents. They laughed and cried together.

And they shared the Good News of Jesus Christ with their fellow survivors. Eleven people surrendered their hearts to Him.

One was a family of four, along with the husband's best

friend. Michael Glassey, an RRT crisis-trained chaplain from Riverside, Calif., talked with them, asking if they knew Jesus Christ as their personal Savior, which they responded “no.” Michael explained how much God loved them and how Jesus came to earth to die for their sins.

“I asked each one separately if they wanted to receive Christ as their personal Savior so that if this ever happened again they would have the assurance of going to Heaven, and that they could also experience a new beginning that very moment,” Michael said.

“They all said, ‘yes,’ and each received Christ into their hearts,” he said. “God sheltered them, then He saved them.”

Mike Booth, senior pastor of Emmaus Baptist Church for 20 years this July, said: “Emmaus Church had been designated as the lighthouse church for the Samaritan’s Purse command post, and even though we lost our electricity, we were still the shining beacon in the dark for people to come running to.”

Please pray that these new believers can be followed up and nurtured in their faith.

And pray for the ongoing work of Samaritan’s Purse and the Billy Graham Rapid Response Team chaplains.

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