



GOD'S HANDS in the rubble

The spring of 2011 seemed merciless to much of America. Extreme droughts turned into raging wildfires while a few states away, floodwaters breached levees.

Then came the tornados.

The first round struck the South on April 27, leaving 345 dead from at least 60 tornados with some of the worst destruction across Alabama. On May 22, Joplin, Mo., suffered the single most fatal tornado in 60 years with 156 deaths.

In the midst of splintered wood, shattered glass and devastating financial loss, the Church became a beacon of God's care. Christians came from across town and across the country to help with relief efforts by cleaning up debris, providing medical care, rebuilding entire neighborhoods and distributing everything from food and clothing to Bibles and letters of encouragement.

In both disasters, pastors and volunteers echoed one statement consistently: It was an opportunity to see the Church be the Church — the active, serving, body of Christ.

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photo by Bradley Isbell



Joplin, Mo., youth minister Lew Poe said. "Scripture talks about there being many parts of the body that all work together. It's incredible."

Poe helped coordinate relief efforts at Wildwood Baptist Church in Joplin, where he serves as youth minister. He had left the church only minutes before the tornado hit the neighborhood and returned with his wife shortly after the storm to open the church as a center of refuge. The church itself suffered little damage; only a neighbor's tree fell, puncturing a hole in the building.

"We truly believe God kept us standing so we could minister to the people in our neighborhood," Poe said. "Dozens and dozens of people were wandering into our building because we were literally the only thing standing."

The church set up a store in their sanctuary as donations of clothing, cots, air mattresses and other items began arriving from across the country. The cooks of the church prepared three hot meals a day for both the victims and volunteers. Though they had no affiliation with the church, 10 trauma room nurses and an emergency room doctor discovered they could not reach a large nearby hospital due to destroyed roads. Thus, Wildwood Baptist became a medical care center as well, with the church lobby serving as a triage operating room.

"They just saw activity," Poe said. "We knew we were going to be set up as a shelter and resource center. I had people

from all over the country calling me and asking how they could help. I don't even know how they got my cell number."

In coordinating the efforts, Poe was able to use his years of training and experience in emergency services, years he said God used to turn around his "typical prodigal son story" into a calling for the ministry. Still, he is quick to admit that it is not his own strength as a leader or background that kept him going each day.

"Every day I woke up and asked 'Can I do this today?' and sometimes I was already at the church because I had been there all night," Poe said.

"LITERALLY THE ONLY WAY I COULD GET THROUGH WAS GETTING IN THE WORD."

Poe said his community saw no shortage of miracles as well. Children talked about seeing butterflies in the storm or men with wings wrapping a protective arm around them. Immediately upon being pulled out by rescue workers, one little boy spoke of Jesus being there with him on the floorboard of his mother's car. Poe told of many situations where the only room that remained standing of an otherwise flattened house was the room where the family inside was seeking shelter.

"He [God] is the one who is in control of

life. I pray that my students use this as an opportunity to see we aren't promised tomorrow or even a half hour from now," Poe said.

Roswell Street Baptist Church in Marietta Ga., drove three teams to three different cities to help with relief efforts. Team members ranged in age from 13 to 58. Jason Miley, contemporary ministries lead pastor, said they relied on their teams' diversity as a gift, referencing **1 Peter 4:10**.

Each of you should use whatever gift you have received to serve others, as faithful stewards of God's grace in its various forms.

Miley said the experience brought his church closer as a family, though the team members hardly knew each other before setting out.

"God has given us all gifts," he said. "Every one of us has something we can bring to the table."

Kaitlyn Holtzclaw, a 13-year-old on Miley's team, said her trip to Tuscaloosa, Ala., opened her eyes to "how fragile everything is."

"It really puts into grasp what you think you have now, you might not have in a week," she said. "It kind of hits home."

Holtzclaw said she was able to witness some of the devastation as they drove throughout the neighborhoods of demolished homes next to ones that

hadn't been touched. "One had a sign up that said 'The joy of the Lord is in this home.' It was torn up, but they were still worshipping," she said.

While on the trip, she was able to help in a warehouse by sorting clothes, bags, bedsheets and other items for those in need.

"It's nice to help people and know that for that person, it may have actually helped change their lives or impact them in some way," she said.

First Priority, a high school campus ministry, gave away more than 1,500 drawstring backpacks to teens affected by April's tornados. The Bags of Hope, as the project was called, were full of magazines, Bibles, books, gift cards, movies, shirts, flip flops and other gifts teens would enjoy. Some of the bags even had mp3 players pre-loaded with songs of hope and restoration.

These gifts, donated by First Priority students and churches all over the country, were "not necessarily the soap or toothbrush — they already had those — but the kind of gifts that would encourage a spiritual life," said Matt Wilson, executive director of First Priority for the Birmingham, Ala., area.

"The kids are kind of blown away with their new CDs, stuff that teenagers really value," he said. "Some of that stuff, it kind of seems silly, like 'you don't have a house, why are you worried about an MP3 player?' But we also know from working with teenagers about how that makes them feel connected and makes them feel like life is getting back to normal."

Wilson said the teams visited schools and local summer camps where all activity stopped for them to distribute the bags and share the Gospel. He said this type of outreach fulfills his ministry's mission of student involvement. He said,

"MOST OF THEM WERE FILLED BY TEENAGERS, WHICH IS WHAT IT'S ALL ABOUT. TEENAGERS MINISTERING TO TEENAGERS."

Many of the teen volunteers were from Hattiesburg, Miss., a city hit by Hurricane Katrina in 2006. Though only the oldest of these volunteers would have been teenagers during the hurricane, it is possible that their older brothers and sisters could have received bags of hope during hurricane relief efforts five years ago, Wilson said.

South Mississippi area executive director J.D. Simpson said they saw the tornado as an opportunity to repay for the help they had been given. They called the national office to ask how many bags were needed, but didn't stop at donating bags. They made the trip to Alabama to deliver the bags of hope themselves multiple times.

"We had these drawstring bags with a handwritten note that said 'Hey, you may not know me, but you have hope in Jesus' and 'You may have lost everything but somebody's thinking about you' and just words of encouragement," Simpson said. "The smallest handwritten note — the smallest act of kindness — is immeasurable."

Many of the pastors and volunteers that participated in the relief efforts encouraged others that they can participate as part of the body of Christ no matter where they are located or what their gifts.

"Don't hesitate; don't think you are too far away," Simpson said.

WHEN GOD PUTS SOMETHING ON YOUR HEART TO DO SOMETHING, JUST DO IT.

You'll see faces, though you may not remember names, that will last the rest of your life."

Poe said that though the Joplin tornado provided an opportunity to show the love of Christ and helped lead many to the Lord, Christians don't have to wait until disaster strikes to spread the Good News.

"It shouldn't take a tornado for us to realize we have a mission field around us," he said. "We should have been reaching out before the tornado hit. I pray it wouldn't take a natural disaster to realize we have a huge urgency to share the gospel with a lost world."

FAITH FOUNDATIONS: THE WORD

For several months before the tornado ripped across Joplin, youth minister Lew Poe led his youth group at Wildwood Baptist Church in studying the Bible with a renewed intensity, building a solid foundation of faith in them. They used the Word to answer questions like:

- Do we still have a healthy fear of God?
- Do we really believe that God is the same yesterday, today and tomorrow?
- Do we really believe that God uses everything for the good?

By building his students' "houses" of faith upon the rock, they were better prepared to withstand the literal storms.

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