

Frances leaves indelible mark on Florida church_92004

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MELBOURNE, Fla. (BP)—While most people evacuated Cocoa Beach, Dave Guise decided to ride out Hurricane Frances' onslaught inside First Baptist Church, thinking he could help protect the structure in the event of fire or other danger.

The
steeple of
First
Baptist
Church of
Cocoa
Beach,
Fla., was
severed
by
Hurricane
Frances
and
speared
the roof of
the
sanctuary,
coming to
rest in the
balcony.
No one
was
injured.
(ABP/Greg
Warner
Photo)

Guise spent most of the night crouched in a hallway at the bottom of the stairs leading to the sanctuary. At 1 a.m., as the massive building creaked and groaned under the relentless winds, a thunderous crash drew Guise to the church sanctuary, where the massive steeple broke off from its foundation and plunged through the roof to rest on the church's balcony.

Two days after the storm, he admitted: "It was very scary. I don't think I will ever do that again. I'd think I'd rather fight a war than to have to endure that."

The beckoning Cocoa Beach steeple was a landmark in the community, said Deacon Don Johnson. Pilots from nearby Patrick Air Force Base are said to line up for the runway using the steeple as a navigational tool-so much so, he said, base officials offered to repair the bell tower light when it burned out one time.

Three dozen members from First Baptist Church of Melbourne survived Frances' seemingly endless march through their community by barricading themselves in the 4-year-old concrete block building, beginning about 1 p.m. on Friday. They joined members of the church's Haitian mission, and everyone shared food they had brought-shrimp, scallops, linguine and clams, said Pastor Larry Bazer.

When the storm ended and the church escaped unscathed except for the loss of power, the congregation gathered for what the pastor called a "catacomb service," much like the early New Testament church, reported church member Billie Norczyk.

The congregation's first-century Christian mindset continued even as the community sought restoration after the storm. When the church got back its electrical power on Labor Day, the congregation housed displaced families from the community as well as members whose homes had no power.

Bazer and other church members spent Labor Day going throughout the community, using chainsaws to remove fallen limbs and trees and patching roofs.

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