

After the Storm: Mississippi church finds reasons to give thanks

September 16, 2005

Posted: 9/16/05



Pastor Chuck
Register of
First Baptist
Church,
Gulfport,
Miss., and his
wife,
Charlene,
(both in
foreground)
worship with
members of
their church
and other
congregations
in borrowed
space. The
Gulfport
church
buildings were
completely
destroyed by
Hurricane
Katrina.
(Photo by Dee
Ann
Campbell/ABP)

AFTER THE STORM:

Mississippi church finds reasons to give thanks

By Dee Ann Campbell

Associated Baptist Press

GULFPORT, Miss. (ABP)—Six days after Hurricane Katrina destroyed the sanctuary of First Baptist Church in Gulfport, Pastor Chuck Register told church members he wholeheartedly believed it is "the redemptive moment in history" for Mississippi's Gulf Coast.

The congregation that received the message had lost everything—homes, cars, personal belongings, even their church building—everything except each other and their faith.



The sanctuary of First Baptist Church in Gulfport, Miss., sustained significant damage from Hurricane Katrina's wind and storm surge.

Register stood in a borrowed pulpit at Crosspoint Baptist Church. His message was one of comfort and hope for his hurting congregation. But it was also one of challenge, to call God's people to service in a desperate community.

“Our Lord is still on his throne, and he's given us the greatest opportunity on the face of this earth to get his message out,” Register said. “We need to use this opportunity to reach this community.”

Almost a week after a 30-foot storm surge and 130-mph winds left much of Gulfport in ruins, hundreds of worshippers packed the borrowed sanctuary of Crosspoint Church, a congregation on the north side of Gulfport planted by First Baptist just last year.

“We're glad to have our 'mom' church here with us today,” Crosspoint Pastor Israel Cox said as he embraced Register. “I just want you to know

that we are praying for you.”

The sanctuary of First Baptist, about 100 yards from the Gulf of Mexico, survived Gulfport's worst previous hurricane—Camille in 1969—with only flood damage. This time, however, it is a total loss, its walls blown apart and pews nowhere to be found. The church's other buildings are similarly damaged.

Register told a reporter the congregation likely will be displaced for three years. It is possible the church will rebuild somewhere besides the waterfront, the pastor said. “It's not fair to make another generation go through this.”

Still, he found reason to be grateful. “Praise the Lord, we've had no fatalities in our church family and no injuries in our church family,” he said.

In addition to members of First Baptist, others attended the worship service, including members of First Presbyterian Church of Gulfport and other local church-seekers who came merely to find a place offering comfort for their pain.

“I came because I needed this,” said lifelong First Baptist member and Long Beach resident Becky Brown, 38, who brought her two sons, ages 7 and 9, to the service. “My week is not complete unless I go to church, and I needed it, especially today. I needed to be with these people, for comfort.”

And words of comfort were plentiful.

“You may be asking, 'If God is a loving God, why is there eight feet of water in my house?'" Register said to the crowd. “You may be asking why you lost everything you had. But God is still with us. He was with us on Monday. He's with us in the dark. He's with us in the gas line, and he will give us strength, even if you have to drag all of your belongings to the roadside for FEMA to pick up.

“From New Orleans to Mobile, this is the message we need. No matter what condition you are in, or what you go back to when you leave here, God wants you to know that he loves you.”

Register's words echoed those spoken prior to the service by First Baptist maintenance director Mike Parmer as he worked to get generator power connected for the sound system.

“Some people are going to ask, 'why?'" he said. “But I truly believe God is going to provide the right people at the right place at the right time to show us why. God's love is all around this, and he will be exalted through it.”

“I took this job two-and-a-half months ago,” Parmer added. “It was a pay cut. At the time, I wondered why God had me do this. But now I know why. It is divine providence that we should be here today.”

Emergency sirens blared outside throughout the service, reminding those in the standing-room-only crowd that their world still was in chaos. But the congregation seemed undaunted. Arms outstretched and tears flowing, they joined music director Ken Nuss in song, hundreds of voices echoing through the building.

Among the worshippers who packed the sanctuary was Gulfport mayor and member of First Baptist, Brent Warr. In an emotional ceremony, Register and other church leaders laid hands on Warr, petitioning God to give him strength.

Also present were members of rescue teams and other ministries who had come to the area to offer assistance, including members of a Knoxville, Tenn.-based ministry who worked with First Baptist on a mission trip to Honduras in July.

“We came here to assess the situation to see what we could do to help,”

said Tim McGhee of Knoxville. “We have about 10 to 15 churches in Knoxville who want to come here, to commit to long-term help. The first team will be here next week.”

In a particularly poignant moment in the emotion-filled service, First Baptist missions director Tom MacIntosh baptized his 10-year-old daughter, Connie, who made a profession of faith in Christ a few weeks before the storm.

Her baptism, Register said, was just the first of many he hopes will follow in the weeks to come, weeks filled with challenges and obstacles but also opportunities to share the gospel.

“While you're out there helping where you can, don't just give out water and food. Give away Jesus Christ,” he told the congregation.

“If, weeks from now, we see people baptized all over this city, we can shout and say, 'All things work together for good according to his purpose.'”

Dee Ann Campbell is a journalist and free-lance reporter in Gilbertown, Ala. Greg Warner contributed to this article.

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