

Texas Baptists minister to Cactus tornado victims

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DUMAS—Clutching his Bible to his chest, Saul Monreal lay on the floor of his trailer home as the April 21 tornado roared through Cactus. He prayed for his life.

Moving to Cactus a month ago for a job with a meat processing plant, Monreal had lived in his new trailer only a few days before the violent storm hit. He didn't know many people in the community of 2,500 people.

Texas Baptists
minister to
disaster
victims like
Saul Monreal
who was
injured in the
Cactus
tornado. He
lost his home
in the storm.
(Photos by
Barbara
Bedrick/BGCT)

“I didn’t know where to go or if there was a shelter, so I stayed in my trailer,” he recalled. “The tornado blew out the windows, and I ran to a bedroom that didn’t have any windows to try for safety.”

As he prayed for his life, his wife and four children were safe at home more than 700 miles away in Durango, Mexico. Glancing up from the floor of his trailer, he realized the tornado had pulled the roof off and ripped out the walls. His home was gone.

“I am alive. It’s a miracle, I think,” Saul said. “I didn’t die because Jesus didn’t want me to.”

Then he remembered “everything started falling from the sky, like metal, wood, metal sheets, 4x4s and 2x2s.”

Frightened, he covered his head with his Bible, but he was knocked unconscious and trapped under a pile of rubble. As firemen and rescue teams searched for victims, they heard his cry, dug him out from under

twisted metal sheeting, wood, a washing machine and a refrigerator, and called 9-1-1 for help.

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Monreal, one of 15 people reported injured in the Cactus tornado, suffered head and face injuries and a shattered finger. Doctors stapled his facial injuries and reduced the swelling, then released him to the Dumas Red Cross shelter.

More than 300 families sought refuge at the shelter after the tornado hit as officials evacuated the entire town of Cactus because there was no water, electricity or gas.

The victims survived the harrowing ordeal and found solace in a compassionate collaboration of Texas Baptist church members, Texas Baptist Men volunteers and Red Cross, among others.

Monreal's injuries were a pressing concern. He lost everything but his "green card, Social Security card and driver's license." He had no food, no home, no insurance and no funds for the surgery.

Texas Baptists partnered with other relief groups to help victims like Monreal get disaster relief. In the first few days, the first responders on the scene including Texas Baptist Men volunteers, many of them from Paramount Baptist Church in Amarillo, prepared 1,500 meals a day. Church members from First Baptist Church in Dumas alternated serving meals and First Baptist Church of O'Donnell brought in their own tractor trailer-size shower unit.

More than five thousand meals were prepared since the tornado hit April

21. Community leaders have been grateful.

“The Texas Baptist Men can cook 40 pounds of pinto beans in 10 minutes,’ said Dumas Mayor Mike Milligan. “They are impressive.”

Milligan is working to secure FEMA trailers for displaced Cactus residents. More than 300 homes, nine businesses and 100 electrical poles were destroyed or heavily damaged, according to emergency management officials.

Four days after the tornadoes hit, Gov. Rick Perry declared Moore and Swisher counties state disaster areas. FEMA officials began assessing damages in Cactus and Tulia April 25. If damages reach \$25 million, the area is eligible to be declared a national disaster area, which means the communities can get federal aid to help residents and businesses rebuild.



Texas Baptist Men volunteers prepare a barbecue meal for tornado victims at the Dumas Community Center.

Many Cactus residents like Monreal spent days and nights at the shelter where Texas Baptists ministered.

Relief workers and victims alike benefited from a shower and laundry unit

provided by First Baptist Church in O'Donnell. The church raised \$40,000 to purchase a trailer and build and equip their own disaster relief shower unit, which combines showers, bathing supplies and laundry services. The church's inaugural mission was in Cactus, where they provided hundreds of showers and laundry loads.

Martina Lorenzo, a Guatemalan mother who could not speak English, sought help as she tried to take care of an infant and two other small children. She was at home by herself when the tornado hit.

"The children were crying, and we hurried to get under the bed," Lorenzo said through an interpreter. "That's when I started praying."

Melva and Rex Stokes from O'Donnell were glad to help the hurting in the Panhandle.

"We had one family who lost everything except for their clothes. Most were strewn outside the area where their home had been," she said. "They picked up every item and arrived carrying five or six trash bags of clothes to wash."

Church members worked tirelessly to remove bits of broken glass and twigs from their clothing, scrubbed sections by hand and washed and dried their belongings.

Five days after the tornado injury, surgeons operated on Monreal's crushed finger at an Amarillo hospital. He returned to the shelter April 26 and cannot return to work for a month.

But the tornado has caused him to re-examine his faith.

"It doesn't matter as long as I'm alive," he said. "I can do more shoes, more clothing, anything as long as I'm alive. And God's going to help me fix everything in my life. ..."

I'm taking the opportunity to serve him and try and be different from now on."

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