

Alabama Baptists clearing debris after deadly tornadoes

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BEAUREGARD, Ala. (BP)—As a tornado ripped through Baptist deacon Barry Gullatte’s home in eastern Alabama, he and his family could feel themselves being sucked out of the bathroom where they took shelter.

Thankfully, the entire family emerged from the tornado uninjured, said their pastor, John Meadows of Pleasant Grove Baptist Church in Salem, Ala. And “almost immediately” upon exiting their house, he noted, their church was there to help.

“We’re just out there on the spot” with all three Pleasant Grove families who had their homes damaged, Meadows said in an interview. Volunteers from the church have “been bringing in food (and) giving not only moral and spiritual support, but physical support,” he said. A fellow church member even allowed the Gullattes to live in a spare house she owned while theirs is repaired.

Such reports of ministry and cleanup continue to emerge in the wake of a deadly system of tornadoes in Alabama on March 3. The storms killed at least 23 people, including four children, and others are still missing, according to media reports.

Four tornadoes in Alabama have been confirmed. The strongest was some 1,600 yards wide and stayed on the ground nearly 27 miles, according to media reports, devastating the small community of Beauregard.

Disaster relief teams on the job

In addition to local church ministry efforts, Alabama Baptist Disaster Relief volunteers have been on the ground since Sunday. Though the hardest-hit area of Beauregard has been closed, disaster relief teams have put tarps on roofs in outlying regions, used chainsaws to clear people's property and, in one case, went into the restricted zone to help search and rescue workers clear debris, said Alabama Baptist Disaster Relief Strategist Mark Wakefield.

Local officials have asked the Alabama disaster relief teams to provide laundry units in Beauregard and possibly in nearby Smiths Station in the days to come, Wakefield said. Feeding units also may be called into service.

"Sometimes tornado survivors just need to talk or need somebody to pray with them—somebody to listen to their story. Chaplains are looking for that," he said.

About 70 disaster relief workers were on the field March 4, Wakefield said, and about 50 the following day.

Churches provide ministry

Yet even "before we had any relief" from trained teams, Meadows said, "we had members of the church out boarding up windows and helping try to get things sort of halfway straightened again—just doing everything we can to try to help."

Providence Baptist Church in Beauregard served as a Red Cross shelter and reunification point for families in the community.

Bill King, director of missions for the local Tuskegee Lee Baptist Association, described the Beauregard area as "just total devastation."

“Pray for those who’ve lost their homes,” King said, “that they’ll be able to find housing or rebuild.”

Although the heaviest damage was in Alabama, a tornado touched down March 3 near the South Carolina Baptist Building in Columbia, S.C., as well.

“Fortunately we did not have any damage other than some limbs and leaves in our parking lot,” South Carolina Baptist Convention Executive Director Gary Hollingsworth said March 4 via email. “I literally just heard about 20 minutes ago that the national weather folks have officially said an EF-1 touched down ‘north of the zoo!’ That’s pretty much us! I think there was some tree damage about three blocks from the building, so that is likely where it touched down.”