

Mississippi churches respond to impact of deadly tornadoes

March 28, 2023

ROLLING FORK, Miss. (BP)—Pastor Bob Gilliland's son Roger called and told him to turn on the weather; a tornado was approaching.

"I was getting ready to go to bed and she was watching her Hallmark," the 81-year-old Gilliland said of himself and his wife Betty, 79.

"We turned on the weather, and they were showing pictures of the tornado and said it was heading towards us. She got in the bathroom, and I stood in the hall. The tornado came through and shook the house, but neither one of us got a scratch."

"It blew out every window, a tree came down on the power system out back, ripped it off the wall," Gilliland said, describing damage to the Deer Creek Baptist Church parsonage, where the couple live. "It's reparable, but it's going to be expensive."

The Gillilands survived the tornado system that killed at least 21 people and injured dozens more in three states March 25, with nearly all of the deaths in Rolling Fork, a town of about 1,800 people in the Mississippi Delta. Economically, it's one of the poorest communities in the state.

Tornadoes struck a path more than 100 miles long through Rolling Fork, Silver City, Tchula, Winona and Amory, Mississippi, the National Weather Service reported. The Mississippi Emergency Management Agency initially reported 25 deaths, but revised the number to 21 on March 27. The storm destroyed or damaged at least 2,000 homes in Mississippi. Additional damage was reported in Georgia and Alabama, including one death in Alabama.

Disaster relief teams respond

Mississippi Baptist Disaster Relief set up two command centers in Rolling Fork, Winona and Amory, Director Hubert Yates said. He anticipates responses ranging from one to two months, including chainsaw, debris removal and counseling, and will continue to assess the need. Feeding units are providing meals for volunteers.

About 15 state Baptist Disaster Relief units notified Yates of their availability to respond. Texas Baptist Men placed disaster relief volunteers on standby March 25.

Britt Williamson, senior pastor of First Baptist Rolling Fork, expressed surprise and gratefulness that the death toll isn't higher.

"It's amazing. and it's a blessing that we don't have hundreds and hundreds of fatalities," he said. "How we didn't have hundreds if not a thousand is just the hand of God."

Many church families lost homes, both Williamson and Gilliland said, but neither of them were aware of members of their congregation dying in the storm.

At least 13 families in one church left homeless

Both Deer Creek and First Baptist, the only Southern Baptist congregations in Rolling Fork, suffered damage ranging from a toppled steeple, roof and water damage to the damage to the parsonage at Deer Creek.



A steeple was blown off a building

at First Baptist Church Rolling Fork, Miss., during tornadoes March 25. (Facebook Photo via BP)

“There’s over 13 families just in my church that had their homes totally destroyed,” Williamson said. “Our community, the vast majority of it is totally destroyed. Most of our businesses in our small town were totally destroyed. But our people are very resilient.

“We’re used to being able to spring into action to help people. The thing is a lot of my people who are the first to ... help, they’re the ones that have their homes destroyed,” Williamson said. “And so, they’re in need of a lot of help.”

The tornado was the second Gilliland survived in the past few months, having survived a December 2022 tornado that struck Anguilla, a neighboring community in Sharkey County.

“I’ve been through two tornadoes in the last four months. The first one totally destroyed the house I was in, and my wife and I walked away without a scratch,” Gilliland said. “And then Friday night the parsonage got ramshackled, and we both walked away from that without a scratch.”

Deer Creek Baptist Church lost all of its roof shingles, a tree fell on the back of the church and destroyed the power system, and the sanctuary suffered roof damage.

First Baptist held its Sunday worship service onsite March 26, ministering to many.

“The main thing I said is the church steeple may be in the road in front of our church, and your home may be destroyed, and tornadoes or different things in life can take away things from you in a moment’s notice, but there is nothing that can separate you from Jesus,” Williamson said.

“I used Psalm 23, that Jesus doesn’t look down on us in the valley and just leave us there, forsake us. But the Bible says he walks with us through that valley. And we’re definitely in the valley of the shadow of death, but he’s with us. He knows our pain. He knows our struggle, and he’s going to be here to see us through it.”