

Tornado cut short prayer service, tore off church wall

May 31, 2024

TEMPLE—The sky grew dark with threatening clouds shortly before 6 p.m. May 22, but the eight people gathered for the midweek service at Dyess Grove Baptist Church, southeast of Temple, decided to go ahead as planned.

“All of a sudden those warnings on our phones went off” at about 6:20, said Pastor Steve Goode.

“We said, ‘Let’s cut this short.’”

Members fled the church building. Moments later, a tornado ripped off the wall that formed one side of the church worship space.



Texans on Mission volunteers tarp the damage at Dyess

Grove Baptist Church in Temple. (Texans on Mission Photo
/ Ferrell Foster)

The end of the building remained open to the elements until a Texans on Mission temporary roof team arrived to close off the structure as much as possible.

“The insurance company put a tarp on the roof” initially, said Larry Cooksey, a lifetime member, treasurer and deacon of the church.

“But they wouldn’t tarp the end, and so, we had our roofer come out. They were going to put a tarp on the end, but the way those boards are sticking out, ... they said it’s going to tear a tarp.”

The Texans on Mission team, with volunteers from Georgetown and Abilene, arrived a few days later. After studying and discussing the various challenges of tarping the open end, they shored up the partially fallen vaulted ceiling, then tarped the end.

“I have never done a job like this before—quite unique in just one wall being sucked off and the structure still standing,” said Mike Pickel of Crestview Baptist Church in Georgetown. “We weren’t able to close off the wall, because there is no structure to hold the tarp. The tarp would just blow right off.

“So, we went in and tarped it from the point of the vault down to the floor to try and mitigate as much water as possible from getting to the pews and the piano inside. It’s not going to keep it completely waterproof, but hopefully God’ll provide.”

God surely provided on the evening of the tornado. As the people scattered, the pastor and his wife, Linda, went one way, and other members went the other.

Less than five miles down the road, the Goodes saw the tornado. They “flipped back around and tried to get out of its path.

“We got thrown into ditches” first on one side of the road then the other as they drove to outrun the approaching twister, the pastor said. It lifted the passenger side of the pickup off the ground.

‘It was nuts’

“We were going side to side. It was nuts. ... There was no holding the steering wheel straight,” the pastor said. “My wife was screaming, ‘God save us.’ I was trying to be as calm as possible.”

They drove fast past the church building and pulled their truck in behind two water towers to block the wind as the tornado skirted off to their right.

“Our church members made it home safe,” the pastor said.



Dyess Grove Baptist damage from inside. (Texans on Mission

Photo / Ferrell Foster)

Cooksey visited the building the next morning. "We noticed that the roof was gone, the whole south side of the building was gone, over 20-something tombstones knocked over, fence tore up in three or four places, stuff scattered for a quarter of a mile.

"It was just a very terrible thing, because this church was established in 1895. I'm not sure when the building was built, probably soon after that. We've tried our best to take care of it, but storms, they tear stuff up."

Cooksey said about 25 people worship together on Sunday mornings "when all the regular members are here, ... maybe a little more. We have a lot of people that are elderly that can't come out in bad weather, can't come out if it's too hot and stuff like that. So, we livestream the service on Facebook. ... We try to take care of everybody we can."

As for the church building, the insurance adjuster said it would be a few days before they had a final financial loss figure.

Coming to tears after tarping the structure, Pickel of Texans on Mission said: "We just pray that God's Spirit will continue to grow this church for another hundred plus years. He doesn't need a building. He needs a people."

The people of Dyess Grove Baptist Church scrambled away from the building that Wednesday evening, but Pastor Goode said the tornado "hasn't shaken our church's faith."

Four days after the storm, the church gathered on a concrete slab beside the building. Twenty-two people attended, and most were visitors, he said.

"No matter what happens, ... the glory of God is going to shine through the people. ... The church is going to be a beacon" to the surrounding area,

Goode said.

“We know we’re going to be all right, but we just don’t know how God’s going to work it out yet.”