

Associated Baptist Press

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Oklahoma bombing shakes lives of Baptist families

By Ken Camp

OKLAHOMA CITY (ABP) -- When a car bomb exploded on April 19, reducing one third of the federal building in downtown Oklahoma City to rubble, it shook churches throughout the city.

Few families in the area's many Southern Baptist congregations remained untouched. Some grieved for dead or missing loved ones. Some rejoiced with survivors. Many reached out to friends, neighbors and co-workers whose lives would never be the same.

Members of Mike Loudenslager's family distributed fliers with a picture of the man, who was still missing April 23. A member of Nicoma Park First Baptist Church, Loudenslager was head of maintenance at the doomed Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building.

"One report was that he was seen outside the building after the bomb exploded. Speculation was that he went back in to help people who were trapped there," said his pastor, Mark Estep.

The downtown bombing hit the suburban Nicoma Park church unusually hard, Estep said. Four active members of the church and a former member whose family still attends Nicoma Park were in the federal building. All were still missing three days after the blast.

Dana Cooper, 24, worked in the building's second-floor day-care center. Both she and her two-year-old son, Christopher, were there on April 19. "We dedicated Chris to the Lord a year ago," Estep said.

David Walker, who worked in the office of Housing and Urban Development, was "highly involved in the life of the church," serving on several strategic committees, Estep noted.

Paul Ice, who worked for the Treasury Department, had been a member of Nicoma Park First Baptist Church. His ex-wife, Faith, and his two daughters, Mandy and Sarah, are still active members.

"Just being there" was the greatest ministry Estep said he could perform for the hurting families. They didn't need answers as much as they needed a visible reminder of God's presence.

"To be honest, I haven't quoted a lot of scripture. I haven't been preachy," he said. "I've just been a friend. That's what they need right now."

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Robbie Maroney was at her home early Friday, April 21, when she received the word she had dreaded for 48 hours: the body of her husband, Mickey, had been discovered in the rubble of the federal building.

Her pastor, Mark Hartman of Council Road Baptist Church in suburban Bethany, was there when she was told of her husband's death.

"Of course, she and the children immediately broke down. But the first words out of her mouth were, 'We know where he is now. He's OK,'" Hartman recalled.

Maroney, 50, was a Secret Service agent who had helped to protect four presidents and had been assigned to Bill Clinton during his presidential campaign. He was working in his ninth-floor office at the federal building in Oklahoma City at 9:03 a.m. when a car bomb exploded.

His brother, Jimmy Maroney, is a 28-year veteran of foreign missions who currently directs the global desk at the Southern Baptist Foreign Mission Board.

Since first receiving word that Mickey Maroney was missing, his family had rested in the assurance that God would rescue him -- either by sparing his life or by taking him to heaven -- Hartman said.

When Hartman first went to visit Robbie Maroney several hours after the Wednesday morning explosion, he realized he had no adequate words of comfort.

Instead of offering superficial cliches, Hartman said he read from the Bible to the family for about 30 minutes. Then he asked them to share stories of times when God had been a deliverer and helper in Mickey's life.

"When I left, I saw a sense of victory where there had been despair as they refocused on who God is as the rescuer," he said. "I knew pat answers were not good, but I didn't know what to put in their place. Now I know."

Another confirmed fatality was Kenneth McCullough, 50, a special agent with the Drug Enforcement Administration. His father, the late Glendon McCullough, was president of the Southern Baptist Brotherhood Commission.

He is survived by his wife, Sharon; children, Jessica and Patrick; and stepmother, Marjorie McCullough of Alexandria, La., former Southern Baptist missionary and Woman's Missionary Union president.

The Southern Baptist church closest to the bombing -- First Baptist Church, Oklahoma City -- was the only Baptist church that sustained significant structural damage. The explosion caused more than \$150,000 damage to the church's facility, including the loss of six large and two small stained-glass windows.

But the church's members escaped injury. The only two active members of the church initially believed to be working at the federal building, deacons Jerry Reese and Jerry Barnett, were not in the federal building on April 19. One was on a trip to Los Angeles and the other had moved to another office building a few weeks before.

Many friends and extended family of church members were affected by the blast, however. "The most severe test of faith is trusting God when we don't have answers," said Pastor Gene Garrison.

Paul Heath of Exchange Avenue Baptist Church, Oklahoma City, was not untouched by the federal building bombing, but he did escape from it relatively unscathed.

Heath was working in the fifth floor offices of the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building when the explosion took place.

"The Lord just took care of me. The bomb blast went around me," he said, tracing a semi-circle around himself with his forefinger.

Heath, a psychologist who has worked 25 years with the Veterans Administration, said he was covered in dust and debris up to his shoulders.

"The glass was horrible," he said.

Although the floor collapsed just a few feet in front of him, Heath sustained only a minor cut to his left leg which he received helping someone else out of the building.

"My first thought was, 'Lord, help me keep my head and get out of here alive,'" he recalled. "Right after that, I began praying, 'Lord, help me get other people out.'"

All of Heath's 13 co-workers in the VA office escaped the blast. It was "one of the few offices where everyone got out alive," he added somberly.

Heath, an Oklahoma Baptist University graduate who works as a counseling psychologist in the VA's vocational rehabilitation program, said he received more than 100 phone calls in 72 hours from people affected by the bombing.

The greatest difficulty survivors and the families of victims will have in the near future will be in focusing their grief on seeking answers to questions of "why" and "who."

For his own part, Heath answers both questions with a single word: hate.

"People who allow hate to be a part of their lives breed additional hate in others," he said. "Hate breeds hate."

Ernie Perkins, director of missions for Capital Baptist Association, predicted shortly after the explosion: "I think we're going to discover a whole network of hurts and pains that are going to affect every one of our churches, directly or indirectly.

"Oklahoma City is a big little city. It's amazing how in this city there's a small-town type of spirit. Therefore, the whole city was hurt in something like this, whether we were directly involved or not.

"We're all in a state of shock around here," he continued. "It's a mixture of anger, and it's also just something we haven't worked through. We'd appreciate you praying for us."

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Local Baptists offer healing balm to a city wounded by terrorist bomb

By Ken Camp

OKLAHOMA CITY (ABP) -- In the confusing hours after a terrorist bomb shattered Oklahoma City's sense of security, and throughout the anxious days that followed, local Baptists offered a calming, compassionate touch.

Three days after a car bomb exploded in front of the downtown federal building, 70 deaths were confirmed -- including 12 children -- but the death count was expected to rise as high as 200 as recovery efforts continued. More than 450 people were treated in a dozen local hospitals, and many remained in critical condition.

Located seven blocks north of the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building, Oklahoma City's First Baptist Church sustained more than \$150,000 damage, including the loss of eight historic stained-glass windows. But that did not prevent the church from quickly becoming a ministry center for rescue workers.

Pastor Gene Garrison was leaving a breakfast meeting with two city officials several miles from downtown when he heard the blast. Children's minister Bob Carter was sitting at his desk when a tremendous concussion shook the church building.

"At first, I thought our boiler had blown up. Then, all of a sudden, I could hear people running. At the break room window, I saw the black smoke," Carter said. "I knew something was terribly wrong."

He and youth minister Rusty Elkin rushed down Robinson Street, passing the shattered glass and twisted frames of office buildings. When they reached the federal building, firefighters and paramedics already were on the scene.

"We saw them carrying children out. Men gave up their shirts for other people to use as bandages. People were just sitting on the curb, staring into space. Sometimes, three or four would be huddled under a single blanket," Carter said.

"I don't ever want to see anything like that again. I felt so helpless. People didn't need to talk right then. They needed medical attention, and we didn't want to get in the way."

Rather than get in the way, church personnel and their spouses began preparing about 1,000 sandwiches for medical and rescue workers.

The Church also opened its facility to the emergency workers as a site for shift changes, allowing firefighters and other rescue personnel a place to take a shower, drink coffee and refocus. Many of them attended the church's Wednesday evening prayer service.

"About half of those at the service were people I didn't know," Garrison said. "I just let them talk. They were emotionally and physically drained."

The Baptist General Convention of Oklahoma's disaster-relief mobile unit was set up in the church's parking lot, preparing meals that were delivered to rescue workers by Red Cross emergency-response vehicles. The Oklahoma Baptist Men prepared about 1,000 meals in their first day of relief operations.

David and Mary Ellen Warren, retired Southern Baptist home missionaries, worked as chaplains with the relief workers. The Warrens, members of Capitol Hill Baptist Church, also met with families waiting for word of loved ones still missing in the blast.

Mothers clutched toys belonging to the children they hadn't seen in two days. A young woman showed her mother's picture to everyone she met, clinging to the hope that someone would recognize her as a survivor.

"Mostly they were just very quiet. They're hurting deeply," said David Warren, who works with the Baptist General Convention of Oklahoma in ministry to internationals. "There's a lot of heartbreak and disbelief."

Mary Ellen Warren also felt deeply for the displaced residents of a downtown apartment complex near the epicenter of the explosion.

"There are people who say they need to get back into that highrise for their medication, but they can't go back in," she said. "We try to help them be patient. We tell them the Red Cross will help them get the medicine they need. But it's not easy."

Herb Bradshaw, fire chief for the suburban Warr Acres Fire Department and a member of Council Road Baptist Church, Bethany, arrived at the bomb site about five hours after the blast and worked a 12-hour shift. Two days later, he was back for another eight hours.

"I've done a myriad of things down there as safety officer on the site, along with three other safety officers," he said.

"I have not been involved in removing anyone from the building, but I've been in the areas where the bodies were being removed."

Bradshaw's official job is to ensure the physical safety of the rescue workers. But as a Christian, he said, he also believes he has a responsibility to promote their emotional and spiritual well-being.

"You hear a lot of guys in our line of work, firefighters and emergency personnel, say that they get calloused. But you really don't," he said. "It hurts tremendously to see man-made suffering like this."

Bradshaw said many of the rescue personnel know him because he is vice president of the Oklahoma State Firefighters Association. That offers him an open door to share his faith.

"I tell them these kinds of situations make me think about three things: my relationship with the Lord, my relationship to my family, and the importance of this job that we do," he said.

"I definitely see this work as a ministry. It's an opportunity to show love in Christ."

When he learned of the federal building explosion in downtown Oklahoma City, Bradshaw's pastor, Mark Hartman, knew his church needed to respond.

"I said, 'We can do something. Now, Lord, what is it?'" he recalled.

Prayer and counseling came to mind. Hartman quickly scheduled prayer meetings at Council Road Baptist Church on Thursday and Friday evenings, following the Wednesday blast.

He also contacted Don Sapaw at the Houston offices of Rapha counseling and treatment centers asking for help. Sapaw volunteered to send a team of six counselors for three days at no cost, and a second counseling team if needed.

Council Road announced through local media that the Rapha counselors were available to provide free help to anyone struggling with the federal building tragedy.

The counselors also conducted free training sessions on April 22 to potential care-givers.

Baptist Medical Center in Oklahoma City also provided no-cost counseling opportunities to community residents, including age-appropriate debriefing sessions for children and teenagers.

"Once our people are trained, we'll begin attacking this thing one person at a time," Hartman said. "This church knows how to love people. It's just who they are. And I know they'll just keep seeking people out whom they can help."

Like many ministers throughout the Oklahoma City area, Hartman counseled rescue workers and emergency personnel who struggled with the carnage they had witnessed.

"They didn't much want me to whip out my Bible. They just wanted to talk, so I listened," he said. "Then I asked to pray with them, assuring them, 'God is here. He'll give you strength.'"

Mark Estep, pastor of the suburban Nicoma Park First Baptist Church, worked at First Christian Church, ministering to families who were waiting for word from the rescue site.

"It's not nearly so much what you say as just being there," Estep said. "I pray for them, and pray with them. I tell them we will pray for a miracle until God shows us different.

"But mostly, I think it's important just to be there as an ambassador for God -- a visible reminder of His presence."

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Baptist bomb victim accepts scars, losses, as his 'thorn in the flesh'

By Ken Camp

OKLAHOMA CITY (ABP) --Jamie Norfleet answered the phone not long after 9 a.m. on April 19. A fellow member of the prayer circle at First Baptist Church, Stillwater, Okla., asked her to pray for victims of the federal building explosion in downtown Oklahoma City.

"I dropped the phone," she said. "I knew my husband was in there."

Randy Norfleet, 29, was talking to two co-workers at the Marine Corps recruiting office on the sixth floor of the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building when the blast hit.

Norfleet, a Marine pilot who served in Operation Desert Storm, compared it to being in the eye of a hurricane.

"At first, I couldn't see anything. There was just this gray mass everywhere, like a hurricane. There was too much dust and debris to see anything," he said.

Norfleet immediately ducked and tried to cover his face with his left arm. When the air cleared a bit, he was amazed at the sight.

"Everything had collapsed around me," he said.

In keeping with both his Marine training and his Christian convictions, Norfleet's first thoughts were for his buddies.

"I started looking for the other Marines. The two who were in the room with me were in good shape. Then my attention turned to myself," he said.

An artery in his left arm and another in his head had been cut, and his upper body quickly was covered in blood. A fellow Marine took off his own shirt to use as a bandage as Norfleet reclined on a table, trying to stop the bleeding.

"It wasn't long before I started to lose consciousness. I knew I'd have to get out of there or I'd bleed to death," he said.

His two companions helped Norfleet down six flights of stairs. At ground level, he was met by paramedics who put him into an ambulance and rushed him a half mile to St. Anthony Hospital.

Norfleet had started the morning in a 7:30 Metro Prayer Breakfast and he said he continued in prayer through much of that trying day.

"The real secret -- the real blessing -- was that I started praying and prayed all the time I was in the ambulance. Because I was concentrating on praying, I never lost consciousness," he said.

"It was a prayer of thanksgiving that I was alive, that I'd made it through everything."

Some of his co-workers apparently were not as blessed. Two Marines in an office next to Norfleet's were still missing two days after the explosion.

"I know that very well could have been me in there. I had been in there about 20 seconds earlier," he said. "God allowed me to be in just the right place in that building to spare my life."

Norfleet was taken into surgery where he spent the next five-and-a-half hours. It took 250 stitches to close his wounds.

Meanwhile, his wife was at home, encircled by about 40 friends from church who were praying for her and for Randy. When a call came from the American Red Cross, letting her know that Randy was in surgery at St. Anthony, one of those friends drove her to Oklahoma City.

"As we started to enter the city, I could see the building," said Jamie, who is seven months pregnant. "It was just overwhelming. I started having contractions, and by the time we got to the hospital, they were strong enough that they took me to be monitored for about two hours."

In time the contractions, which doctors said were stress-induced, stopped. Jamie learned that her husband had made it through surgery, in spite of having a 40 percent blood loss. She also learned he would likely lose the sight in his right eye.

Norfleet was scheduled to be dismissed from the hospital on April 21, though he would have to return to Oklahoma City within a week for further ophthalmological surgery. Regardless whether he regains vision in his right eye, both Randy and Jamie are thankful for God's blessings.

"I always knew that to be a servant of God, you had to be broken and humbled. Well, I wasn't just brought to my knees. I was knocked to the floor," she said.

"When I found out God had spared Randy, I was so thankful. I knew he was injured, but I was anxious to take him any way I could get him.

"All the things I thought were so important -- paying the bills, saving for a trip to Disney World, everyday concerns -- just don't matter. What matters is family, my husband and my children. What matters is following Christ's example. What matters is accepting the responsibility to raise our children in a godly manner."

The Norfleets have two children, Matthew, age 5, and Paul William, 16 months. Norfleet said his family has been his "source and strength" through the ordeal, along with his Christian faith.

"If there's one thing I've learned, it's that whatever brings you closer to God is a blessing. Through all this, I've been brought closer to God. I've become more dependent upon him and less on myself," said Norfleet, a 1987 graduate of Oklahoma Baptist University who grew up on the foreign mission field in Taiwan.

His father, Mike, was associate director of missionary enlistment with the Southern Baptist Foreign Mission Board in the mid-1980s. His parents currently serve in the Ukraine.

"Losing an eye is a small thing," Norfleet said. "I'm very content to be alive with my wife and to be able to watch my children grow up.

"I'm not comparing myself to the Apostle Paul, but he had his thorn in the flesh. Maybe this will be mine, my continual reminder of God's grace."

Anderson College trustees elect president on second try

ANDERSON, S.C. (ABP) -- Trustees of Anderson College unanimously elected a Tennessee university administrator as president of the South Carolina Baptist school, two weeks after rejecting a previous candidate for the job.

Lee Gardner Royce was elected April 18 as the 11th president of Anderson College. In a demonstration of harmony, he was recommended unanimously by the search committee and received an affirmative vote of all 18 trustees present.

Exactly two weeks earlier, trustees met to consider another candidate, Gary Parker, pastor of First Baptist Church of Jefferson City, Mo. When a dispute arose, however, over the fact that Parker's church sends money to the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, he withdrew his name from consideration before even appearing before the trustee board.

Ironically, First Baptist Church of Nashville, Tenn., where Royce is finance committee chairman, also permits members to channel gifts to the Fellowship, a moderate alternative missions-and-ministry agency. The Anderson board did not discuss the practice before voting on Royce.

Royce will assume the Anderson presidency June 15. He succeeds Mark Hopkins, president for 10 years who resigned last August under fire from trustees and faculty.

Royce, 43, has for the past 10 years been vice president for university relations of Belmont University in Nashville, a Tennessee Baptist school.

Born in Coral Gables, Fla., Royce earned three degrees from Vanderbilt University in Nashville. He completed his doctorate in higher education administration two years ago.

Royce taught at Ouachita Baptist University in Arkadelphia, Ark., three years beginning in 1975. Returning to Nashville, he worked seven years with a professional fund-raising firm before joining the Belmont administrative staff.

The new president said he is not bothered by the fact that the trustees had first turned to another candidate. "Of the 87 people on the original list, and I understand eventually pared to five, I am glad my name surfaced and survived, and I am confident I can do the job," he said.

Anderson, founded in 1911, is a four-year college with 850 students. It is one of two colleges and one university identified with South Carolina Baptist Convention.

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-- By John Roberts

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