

# Associated Baptist Press

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## **Baptist church bears brunt of killer Texas tornado**

By Dan Martin

JARRELL, Texas (ABP) -- A May 28 tornado spared the red-brick building of First Baptist Church in Jarrell, Texas, but took the lives of 10 members of the small congregation, including its minister of music.

The tornado -- one of the most powerful ever observed in Texas -- wiped out a subdivision near Jarrell, a small town 40 miles north of Austin on Interstate 35. At least 27 residents were killed.

The church, located in the center of town, became a headquarters to provide food and counseling for victims and their families, other townspeople and relief workers.

Max Johnson, the bivocational pastor of First Baptist Church of Jarrell, said he received a call from his son, telling him the storm was on the ground. "I could hear it roaring," Johnson said.

The funnel cloud missed his home. When it passed, he went to the nearby feed mill to check on his son, 21-year-old Mark, who rode out the storm by huddling in a feed pit. He then moved to Double Creek Estates, a grouping of 25-50 homes, where some church members live.

Johnson said 10 church members were among the 27 town residents confirmed killed, including the church's minister of music, Larry Igo, and his family.

Igo, who operated a business restoring classic automobiles in Jarrell, lived with his family near the center of the subdivision. His wife, Joan, their daughter, Audrey, 17, and twin sons, John and Paul, 15, were all among the confirmed dead.

All were musically inclined. Joan and Audrey were pianists. All sang in the choir at the church, with an average Sunday morning attendance of 40..

Johnson jokingly referred to them as the "Von Igos," because of their musical talent and in reference to the Von Trapp family in the movie "The Sound of Music."

"They kept the church going," a church member told an Associated Press reporter.

Texas Baptist disaster-relief units came from Tyler and Fort Worth to set up feeding operations.

Baptists were among the approximately 30 ministers who offered counseling and family assistance to residents of the unincorporated town with population estimates ranging from 400 to 1,000.

"Some talked with the families. Some prayed with the families. Some just sat quietly with them," said Milfred Minatrea, church ministries director for the Baptist General Convention of Texas.

Minatrea described the pain etched on the face of one veteran law enforcement officer while telling about pulling back debris and finding the bodies of a child cradled in his mother's arms. The veteran lawman had seen tragedies before, but this was different, said Minatrea.

David Edwards, pastor of Main Street Baptist Church in neighboring Georgetown, helped a member of his church, Jimmy Bitz, talk to families.

As justice of the peace, it was Bitz's responsibility to tell families that loved ones had died. "Judge Bitz is a compassionate man who deeply cares about people," Edwards said. "Before he talked with the families the first thing he did was have prayer."

After counseling families through the long ordeal of waiting for word of survivors and remaining with those who lost loved ones, ministers took a "walking tour" of the tornado's path to talk with relief workers.

"We told them they were doing a tremendous job, and asked them to tell us if there was a mental image which sticks in their mind. It was a can-opener question which opened up a lot of emotion," Minatrea said.

He told of the sanitation worker who was overwhelmed because he had found body parts of one of the victims.

"Our purpose was to get them talking and to follow up with spiritual enrichment and prayer to help these people who were out there in a very difficult situation. I was overwhelmed by the large number of them who said they wanted us to pray with them. They were very open and appreciative of prayer."

Richard Mangum, director of missions of the nearby Bell Association, brought a number of pastors to help minister in the wake of the tragedy. He, too, participated in the walk through to minister to rescue workers.

He told of a worker who told a pastor, "It is very difficult to find a child's picture or a toy without feeling the pain of their loss. Tonight I am going home and hug my children and my wife."

David Oats, the Jarrell church's volunteer youth minister, ferried food to search and rescue teams.

He leaned on the side of a pickup truck and gazed at the windswept emptiness which the day before had been a thriving subdivision.

"This is a small town, and you can just about name everybody here. That's the thing that hurts ... I've known everybody who lived here for years. I have visited in many of these homes ... I know the folks and all the kids. I lost some of my kids and some of my best friends."

Max Johnson said that by early May 30, officials had found 27 "clear bodies and some body parts." Other sources confirmed some of the victims were dismembered or badly mangled, making the job of official identification much harder. In some cases dental records, DNA or fingerprints were required for official identification.

The subdivision, which had an estimated 25 to 50 homes, was a blend of ranchettes, homes on lots and mobile homes. The storm swept some slabs clean, even removing tile from the floors, but left rubble at other sites and piles of splintered lumber and shredded insulation at still others.

The storm was so strong it picked up asphalt from the subdivision's roads and even pulled grass from the ground. National Weather Service observers at the scene said the storm probably contained winds in excess of 260 miles per hour.

One rescue worker said it was like "a giant broom swept the whole area ... like someone just came and wiped it clean."

Pastor Johnson got to the area before the emergency workers and found four bodies. "All I saw was devastation," he said. Later, he went back to the small church near the center of town and opened the facilities to begin doing whatever he could to provide services to the families and survivors.

## **Black Baptist leader support's Istook amendment**

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- The president of the National Baptist Convention USA, the nation's largest predominantly African-American Baptist convention, voiced support May 22 for the Religious Freedom Amendment offered by Rep. Ernest Istook, R-Okla., according to an Istook press release.

"This convention believes a constitutional amendment is the only way to overturn three decades of court decisions denying our First Amendment rights, including voluntary prayer in public schools," said Henry Lyons, president of the 8.5 million-member convention.

The Istook amendment would allow school-sponsored prayer and the display of religious symbols on public property. It would allow religious groups to receive tax dollars, clearing the way for school-voucher proposals and proposals to give public funds to churches to provide welfare services.

The National Baptist Convention is a member of the Baptist Joint Committee, a religious-liberty coalition which opposes the Istook amendment. The Southern Baptist Convention's Christian Life Commission supports the bill.

Lyons was not available for comment and the press office of the NBC did not return a reporter's calls.

While the news release called Lyon's statement an endorsement by the National Baptist Convention USA, another NBC pastor said Lyons spoke only for himself.

In order to take a stand on the amendment, the convention would have to vote at its annual meeting in September, said Wallace Charles Smith, pastor of Shiloh Baptist Church in Washington, D.C.

"No one person speaks for all Baptists," said Smith, whose church also is affiliated with the Progressive National Baptist Convention and the American Baptist Churches in the U.S.A. "There are a number of us that disagree with Dr. Lyons."

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-- By ABP staff

## **Educator, preacher Samuel Proctor dies**

NEW YORK (ABP) -- Prominent African-American Baptist preacher and educator Samuel Proctor died May 22.

Proctor, 75, was pastor emeritus of the Abyssinian Baptist Church in New York City, where he served as pastor from 1972 to 1989. He also was professor emeritus at Rutgers University who taught at Yale, Vanderbilt and Duke divinity schools, among others.

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-- By ABP staff

## **Film on Baptist dispute over women to be shown on public television**

NEW YORK (ABP) -- A 1996 film documenting a dispute at a Southern Baptist seminary over whether women can be pastors will be shown on public television in June.

"Battle for the Minds," a film by Los Angeles filmmaker Steve Lipscomb, will premiere on PBS at 10 p.m. ET, Tuesday, June 10, as part of public television's P.O.V. (Point of View) series. Local listings may vary.

The film, Lipscomb's first, describes a shift at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Ky., from a faculty and administration that affirmed women in ministry to new leadership which says the Bible forbids women from serving as senior pastors.

Lipscomb, a former lawyer who grew up in Knoxville, Tenn., said he set out to make a film about struggles faced by his mother, Dixie Petry, as she sought to become a Baptist minister. Lipscomb visited the seminary with cameras rolling in 1995, capturing scenes of a tumultuous period during which the administration changed school policies to prevent hiring of professors who believe women may be ordained to the gospel ministry.

The film quotes both former professors, who criticized the changes, and current administrators and trustees, who defend the shift. It also includes interviews with students and several leaders of the Southern Baptist Convention.

The film has been shown at several film festivals. It drew capacity crowds and won the award for best feature film at last fall's Louisville Film Festival.

While many viewers have praised the film for its balanced presentation, several SBC conservatives complained it treated their side unfairly. Southern Seminary President Albert Mohler told a newspaper he had seen only parts of the film, which he called "deliberate misrepresentation using classical propaganda techniques."

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-- By ABP staff

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