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Editor: Greg Warner
Associate Editor: Bob Allen
Phone: (904) 262-6626
Fax: (904) 262-7745

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Bible reminds storm victim of God's presence in tragedy

By Barbara Denman

KISSIMMEE, Fla. (ABP) -- A torn, tattered and water-soaked Bible will serve as a reminder for Joan Hoschar how she miraculously survived the deadliest swarm of tornadoes to hit Florida in the state's history.

Alarmed by a weather report warning that a series of twisters was touching down in central Florida, J.R. Hoschar awakened his wife, Joan, early Monday morning, Feb. 22. Together they fled their mobile home, jumped in their car and headed for the clubhouse at the Ponderosa Park Campground in Kissimmee, Fla.

Finding the building locked, the American Baptist couple then drove to a cement-block bathhouse, where they crouched in a shower stall with another couple while the storm raged. When the winds subsided, an estimated 90 seconds after hearing the tornado's tell-tale roar like a train, they found their winter home for more than 20 years demolished.

Despite their loss, Joan Hoschar reflected, "We were blessed." A next-door neighbor and a close friend were among at least 10 campground residents killed by the storm, which lifted bodies and trailers out of the park and dumped them onto an adjacent turnpike.

The Hoschars lost all possessions except their car, the clothes on their backs and her Bible, which was later found among the rubble and taken to the Osceola County Sheriff's office where she claimed it. Tattered, torn and water soaked, it will serve as a reminder of that night and her faith in God.

"God works in mysterious ways," said Joan Hoschar, a member of North Parkersburg Baptist Church in Parkersburg, W.Va. "My favorite Bible verse says, 'All things work for good for those that love the Lord.' That is such a wonderful comfort. Jesus is our friend and Savior. Aren't we blessed to have him?"

The storm, blamed on the infamous El Nino weather pattern, produced so many tornadoes in central Florida that weather observers lost count. Some packed winds clocked at 260 miles per hour. In all, 41 people died, 265 were injured and property damage totaled an estimated \$67.5 million.

Among those responding to needs of storm victims, Southern Baptist volunteers helped local churches reach out in ministry to their communities.

A group of Florida Baptist volunteers stationed at First Baptist Church of Kissimmee helped victims at Ponderosa Park sift through rubble looking for personal belongings and hang tarps over damaged roofs. The volunteers also offered a sympathetic ear and offered counsel. All around them lay the carnage of twisted steel, shattered glass and splintered lumber.

The tragedy enabled the survivors to "get their attention off the world to discover that life is very precious," said Ken Woolridge, a Baptist volunteer from West Palm Beach who spent four days in the campground helping the victims. He befriended a Christian woman who for years prayed for the conversion of her husband, a self-proclaimed atheist. In the hours after the storm, Woolridge led the man to Christ. "He had let the barrier down," said Woolridge.

Four days after the storm, in a location miles from the trailer park but within the same swath of destruction, Baptist disaster-relief volunteers arrived in the Morningside area, only to be ordered to leave because authorities were still looking for bodies. As the volunteers departed, an ambulance passed on its way to the affected area, lights flashing and siren blaring, signaling that search was not in vain.

Nancy Wilder had been in the Morningside area helping a friend when she noticed a man sitting alone on the steps of a demolished home. Bruised and battered, the man described his experiences, telling Wilder that his wife was still hospitalized. As they talked, Wilder learned the couple had been visiting First Baptist Church of Kissimmee, where her husband is pastor.

Pastor Tim Wilder was soon at the wife's bedside. "It's a tragedy, but a golden opportunity for us to minister," he said. The Kissimmee congregation experienced no fatalities as a result of the disaster, but five church members lost their homes, including the minister of music, Mark Epperson. Another 20 church members' homes were severely damaged.

After sending out clean-up crews throughout most of the week following the storm, the church planned to offer support groups for storm victims. Church members will be trained in grief counseling. As members of his church rallied to help the tornado victims, Wilder said he once again understood "the importance of church family in times of crisis, as well as the importance of relationship and the unimportance of material things."

Working among twisted steel lodged in trees, smashed cars, crumpled homes and scattered belongings, residents of Winter Garden, a community with a small-town atmosphere on the outskirts of Orlando, sought to piece together their lives after the killer tornadoes. The congregation of First Baptist Church of Winter Garden reported two tornado-related deaths: an 80-year-old long-time church member, Gordon Chandler, and Allie Fulk, who regularly attended church activities.

Within hours after the early morning storm, First Baptist Church members began responding to needs of storm victims. A relief center was set up in the church's Spanish mission, Iglesia Bautista de Park Avenue, located adjacent to a hard-hit area.

From there, church members led other Florida Baptist volunteers to knock on doors in the area, assessing damage and needs. Volunteers made sandwiches and chocolate-chip cookies and delivered them to residents who were either without electricity or who refused to leave their homes over fear of possible looting.

Other Baptist volunteers helped residents trim trees, clear debris, cover damaged roofs and sort through the rubble for salvageable belongings. When residents of one large apartment complex were given only 45 minutes to remove any personal belongings, Baptist volunteers pitched in with helping hands and transport vehicles.

"They have lost everything," said volunteer Janet Massey. The Spanish mission became a community-relief flagship and distribution center for food, canned goods, diapers and clothing, donated by local merchants and other concerned persons.

"Our community has become unselfish," said Johnnie Neal, recreation minister at First Baptist Church, who coordinated the relief effort. "God supplies, we deliver."

Neal pondered the imponderable "why?" of disasters. "God's sovereignty is seeing it's all a part of a plan," he said. "Although we can't see around the corner, we know who is there."

Hispanic pastor Jose Rivera acknowledged that the church members' response will provide opportunities for the fledgling mission. "This will open doors to the community. We have already had many opportunities to present the gospel."

Similar relief operations were established at Westview Baptist Church in Sanford.

A Florida Baptist Convention staff member trained in disaster response was dispatched to each location to provide resources and expertise to the local churches.

"We supplied volunteers and a staff person to walk alongside the churches responding to the needs in their areas," said Jim Brown, director of the Florida Baptist Men's Department. "The churches will be there to minister long after the disaster is over and the volunteers have left. For their efforts, these churches will be beacons in their communities."

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New Mexico crash kills Baptist leader

By John Loudat

CLOVIS, N.M. (ABP) -- Four New Mexico Baptist leaders on their way to a board meeting were involved in a fatal car crash Feb. 27.

Killed in the accident was Helen Lee Lambirth of Elida, N.M., a long-time lay leader and generous financial supporter of New Mexico Baptist ministries. She was pronounced dead at the scene of the accident, near Melrose in eastern New Mexico. Three other crash victims were injured and transported to Plains Regional Medical Center in Clovis.

J.B. Tidwell of Hobbs, N.M., was listed in critical condition with broken ribs, a bruised heart and a punctured lung. RoJean Massey, also of Hobbs, was in serious condition with internal injuries, lacerations and a broken nose.

They were passengers in a car driven by Massey's husband, Ivey Massey, which collided with a truck. Ivey Massey suffered a broken leg and lacerations. The truck driver was uninjured.

The four Baptist leaders were on their way to a meeting of the New Mexico Baptist Foundation board of trustees in Albuquerque.

Foundation President Lee Black called Lambirth "the most godly woman I know." She had been a member of the Foundation board 14 of the last 15 years, and was a former chairwoman. She also had served on the executive board of the Baptist Convention of New Mexico and was twice president of the state's Woman's Missionary Union.

WMU Director Judy Edwards said Lambirth will be remembered for "unending contributions she made to missions in New Mexico" and for her work as a Girls in Action leader in her church, First Baptist Church of Elida.

Lambirth established several endowment funds for Baptist efforts in New Mexico, including the Oliver and Helen Lee Lambirth Trust for New Mexico Baptist Missions, the O.D. Lambirth Scholarship Fund and the New Mexico Baptist Foundation Administrative Endowment Fund.

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Grace brings hope to homes, Hendricks tells Texas Baptists

By Ken Camp

SAN ANTONIO (ABP) -- The Bible offers examples of hope for families that are flawed and fractured, theologian Bill Hendricks told a Baptist conference in Texas.

Hendricks, director of Baptist studies at Texas Christian University's Brite Divinity School in Fort Worth, delivered theme interpretation messages for the "Hope for Home" workshop sponsored by the Texas Baptist Christian Life Commission.

In sermons at the Feb. 27-28 conference at First Baptist Church in San Antonio, Hendricks cited four biblical families as examples of God bringing hope to homes even when they are flawed and fractured.

In Genesis, enmity between the first siblings ended in one brother murdering the other. The Bible says God placed a "mark" on Cain after he killed Abel. The mark, Hendricks said, was a sign of reproach but also symbolized the Lord's protection and the first murderer's redemption.

"Grace is always possible," Hendricks said. "If it was for one who wiped out one fourth of the human race, it is available for us as well."

Hope for humankind was rekindled after Abel's death in the birth of Seth, Hendricks noted. "The birth of a child is the gift of hope," he said.

The Old Testament story of Isaac, Rebekah, Jacob and Esau illustrates frustration growing out of parental favoritism and the disruption that deceit can create in families, Hendricks said. But it also demonstrates that God's purposes are achieved through imperfect people in the middle of difficult situations.

"Good can come from bad circumstances. Look for it," he suggested. "But don't interpret another person's difficulties for them. You'll have enough trouble with your own. God's purpose will endure, and it will often be accomplished through strange means."

Pointing to the joyful testimony of the imprisoned Apostle Paul, as expressed in the New Testament book of Philippians, Hendricks added: "Don't try to direct hope. Just experience it with joy."

A look at the lost son, the forgiving father and the older brother in Jesus' parable of the prodigal son teaches the disrespect of open rebellion, the disdain of self-righteousness and the desire of gracious forgiveness, Hendricks said.

Those who remain at home need to examine themselves for attitudes that may drive the prodigals into a far country, he noted. "Dare we have radical grace?" he asked.

The New Testament example of Timothy, Eunice and Lois and their relationship to the Apostle Paul illustrate the reality of intergenerational families, mixed marriages and the role of significant non-relatives in family formation, Hendricks observed. Timothy's gentile father was absent, and he was raised by his Jewish mother and grandmother.

"Paul helped complete that non-nuclear family cemented by faith," Hendricks said, urging conference participants to "enlarge the parameters of what you think of as home."

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