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- Furloughing missionary family sees brunt of Oklahoma storm**
- Baptist church provides refuge as tornado hits small Texas town**
- Clarification**

**Furloughing missionary family  
sees brunt of Oklahoma storm**

By Ken Camp

OKLAHOMA CITY (ABP) -- Southern Baptist missionaries Steve and Patti Ellis have endured hardships and even survived a military coup during five years living in Cambodia.

But when they emerged from a storm cellar in suburban Oklahoma City after a tornado ravaged the neighborhood where they were spending their furlough, one of their four daughters cried out, "I want to go back to Cambodia where it's safe!"

The Texas natives had planned a quiet homecoming Mother's Day weekend, speaking at Midway Road Baptist Church in Dallas, where they were members seven years before leaving for Cambodia, and staying with their friends, the Walt Kriss family.

Instead, Kriss prepared meals for the Ellises and other tornado victims from the Texas Baptist Disaster Relief Mobile Unit's field kitchen.

The Ellis family had been living since October in a missionary residence owned by First Southern Baptist Church of Del City, Okla. The house was leveled in the storm. It was one of at least 3,000 homes destroyed or heavily damaged by tornadoes that cut through central Oklahoma May 3. The twisters -- some rated the maximum F5 on the Fujita-Pearson Scale, with wind speeds greater than 260 mph -- killed at least 41 people, injured 750 and caused \$500 million property damage.

Two days later, Texas Baptist Men disaster-relief volunteers set up their mobile unit in the parking lot at the Del City church, in suburban eastern Oklahoma City.

The crew prepared meals that church members served to rescue workers and storm victims in their fellowship hall and American Red Cross workers delivered throughout the area.

Oklahoma Baptists set up a similar emergency food service at First Baptist Church of Moore, just south of downtown Oklahoma City.

The Texas volunteers cooked 4,000 meals their first day in Oklahoma, said Larry Blanchard, on-site coordinator. He expected the meal count to rise rapidly in coming days.

Monday afternoon, May 3, the Ellises were watching their young daughters play in the backyard when a neighbor commented on the storm clouds gathering to the southwest. She offered that should the weather become threatening, the family could come next door and join her in a storm cellar her late husband had built 30 years ago.

After a few minutes, 12-year-old Hannah went indoors to watch television. Before long, she ran into the yard alerting her parents to storm warnings that had interrupted regular programming.

When they learned tornadoes were pounding the Bridge Creek community on Oklahoma City's southwestern fringes and were headed their way, the Ellises ran to their neighbor's cellar.

Twenty-one people from four households, including their neighbor's children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren, crowded into the dark cellar.

Initially, Ellis and a couple of other men kept the door cracked open an inch or two to watch the developing storm.

"First came the rain, then dime-sized hail. Next it was golf-ball sized and finally baseball-sized. Then it stopped, and it was deathly quiet," Ellis said.

A deafening roar followed the eerie silence. The tornado was bearing down on them. Ellis and the others closed the storm cellar door tight.

"It sounded like the turbo engines of a jet plane coming right toward us," he recalled. "It took three grown men holding onto the army straps on that door to keep it closed."

Although their neighbor was a devout Lutheran, the rest of her family had little church background. Even so, Patti Ellis recalled, they began reciting the Lord's Prayer and the 23rd Psalm.

A loud crash interrupted the liturgy. Those inside the storm cellar waited a few minutes until they were sure the storm had passed, then they tried to open the door. It wouldn't budge.

After about 20 long minutes, the Ellises heard voices outside. Everyone inside the cellar called out for help.

"Are you OK in there?" someone asked.

The group responded they were not injured but could not open the cellar door. The rescuer said a house had collapsed on top of the storm cellar. With help from others, he managed to move enough debris to pry open the door.

"It looked like a bomb had gone off. No, it was worse than a bomb would have been," Ellis said, recalling his first impressions of the storm-ravaged neighborhood.

Water spouted geysers from broken pipes and the smell of natural gas hung in the air. A body lay in the street.

As Ellis worked his way through the rubble trying to help neighbors, emergency personnel evacuated Patti and the girls from the area, fearing numerous gas leaks might cause an explosion.

The family was separated for about three-and-a-half hours. Ellis made more than 40 frantic phone calls before finally reuniting with his wife and daughters at the home of a staff member of First Southern Baptist Church.

The next day, a U.S. Marshall took Ellis into the cordoned-off disaster area so he could see what was left of his neighborhood.

Ellis found no trace of more than \$20,000 worth of donated medical supplies he had planned to take back to Cambodia. The corner of the house where bedrooms had stood was stripped to a bare concrete slab.

But Ellis, who had been struggling with uncertainty over whether it was God's will for him to take his family back to Southeast Asia, found some confirmation.

"The first thing I found was our six passports and our return tickets to Cambodia," he said. "They weren't damaged. They were not even wet."

## **Baptist church provides refuge as tornado hits small Texas town**

By Ken Camp

DEKALB, Texas (ABP) -- Kristy and Monte Clearman huddled with their three preschool children and 100 neighbors in a narrow basement hallway at First Baptist Church of DeKalb while a tornado bounced through the Northeast Texas town of 2,000.

As the acoustic ceiling tiles above them popped and bowed, Kristy reminded her oldest daughter of the words to a favorite Bible song: "When I am afraid, I will trust in you."

Monte Clearman, the church's minister of music, led nearby people in prayer as the tornado passed over, ripping half of the roof off the church's sanctuary, destroying 90 percent of the downtown business district and killing one woman in a neighboring county.

Swirling winds also collapsed the church's bus barn, knocked out double-paned storm windows in the fellowship hall, and damaged the family life center roof.

None of the three staff residences adjacent to the church sustained serious damage, but the tornado destroyed 20 other houses and heavily damaged more than two dozen, many of them members of the church.

"There were so many who suffered loss, but it was just stuff. It was just things," Kristy Clearman said, giving thanks that no fatalities resulted in the immediate DeKalb area.

Baptist families affected by the storm qualify for limited financial assistance from the Baptist General Convention of Texas. Convention officials also helped assess structural damage and offer advice to First Baptist Church.

A dozen children and four teachers from a nearby Christian day-care center were among those seeking shelter in the downtown church.

Pastor Bill Townsley and a lay leader picked up the children when church member Kellie Fannin, who runs the facility, called to ask where they should seek shelter. They crowded into the narrow basement hallway just before the storm hit.

"I've been looking around for Brother Bill to hug his neck," Fannin said the day after, as she and other members gathered at the church to clear debris.

The tornado snapped towering pine trees like matchsticks and littered the churchyard with stuffed animals and flowers from a florist shop down the street.

The regional East Texas Baptist disaster-relief unit set up emergency food service outside the church's family life center.

Mike Brittain, pastor of Morton Baptist Church near Diana, Texas, and regional disaster-relief coordinator, said a state trooper initially stopped the group from entering the area. Once he identified them as Texas Baptist Men disaster-relief workers, however, the officer turned on his flashing lights and escorted them downtown.

The church planned to worship Sunday in its family life center. Brittain said wives of the men on his crew planned to attend the Mother's Day service and offer comfort to women in the community.

Even though it was hard to see in the middle of suffering, Townsley said he was confident that God would bring good things out of the experience.

"One man who hasn't ever been to our church, as far as I know, told me, 'I'll be on the front row the first Sunday morning that you have services again. Just tell me when it'll be,'" Townsley said.

"I really believe this will bring our community closer together," he continued, while tossing broken lumber onto a trash pile outside the church. "I imagine there are people working alongside each other today who haven't spoken to each other in years."

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CLARIFICATION: In the May 6 ABP story "State paper editor resigns unexpectedly," please replace the sixth paragraph with the following.

Foster is the sixth program-staff member, along with four secretaries, to resign or retire since the new staff structure was approved in July 1998 and severance packages became available.

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