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**Baptist volunteers overwhelm
storm victims with kindness**

By Mark Wingfield

MOORE, Okla. (ABP) -- Trying to describe the devastation wreaked by deadly tornadoes that swept across Oklahoma May 3, survivors sometimes find themselves at a loss for words. Now, some community leaders are similarly speechless about an outpouring of volunteers donating manpower and goods.

At First Baptist Church of Moore, which has become a central-staging ground for relief efforts in the Oklahoma City area, a man showed up soon after the storm and unloaded a forklift off a truck.

"I'm a forklift operator, and my company sent me here with this forklift to help you," he said. "They told me not to come back to work until you didn't need me any longer."

That man has spent days moving tons of donated goods around the First Baptist campus. Volunteers there are working day and night to sort and store donated goods in a circus tent in one parking lot, perhaps a dozen semi-trailers in another parking lot and in a nearby warehouse donated by a church member.

Inside the church looks like something resembling a shopping mall, community center and aid station. Tornado victims push shopping carts down the carpeted halls of an education wing, picking up free groceries in the choir room, clothing in one classroom, toys in another.

The Federal Emergency Management Agency has an office there. So do various insurance companies and the state insurance commissioner.

In addition to a mobile kitchen operated by Oklahoma Baptist Men, which supplies hot meals for Red Cross distribution throughout Moore, the church is operating a continuous-service cafeteria inside, staffed completely by volunteers.

Randy Harms, who owns a local catering company, is donating his time to oversee the cafeteria. Kenny Meeks, a local businessman, has left others to run his two businesses while he works from dawn until late night managing the entire First Baptist relief effort. They are assisted by a rotating cadre of volunteers, some from the church, some from the community, others from far away.

Asked how many volunteers have kept this ministry center operating non-stop for more than a week, First Baptist Pastor Alan Cox simply shrugs. "Hundreds and hundreds," he finally suggests.

The Sunday after the tornado, Pastor Gary Smith of Fielder Road Baptist Church in Arlington, Texas, asked for volunteers to help with relief work in Moore. He quickly got 130.

Two days the following week, church members boarded buses early in the morning. They traveled three hours to the Oklahoma City suburb, worked all day sorting, moving and distributing donated goods, then got back on the bus for a late-night trip home.

The minute his pastor called for volunteers, truck driver Bill Ater said he knew he had to go. He first had to deliver a load to San Antonio on Monday and didn't get home until late that night, but he was on the bus Tuesday morning for the trip to Oklahoma.

So were Rodney and Rosemary Pirkle, who at the end of the long day both said they felt "blessed" to be able to give their time and energy to the relief effort. "I wouldn't take anything for today," she said after working in the church kitchen preparing and serving meals to scores of other volunteers and residents displaced by the tornado.

And then there's Larry Blanchard, fresh from assisting Kosovar refugees in Albania. With only a few days' rest between assignments, now he's heading the Texas Baptist Men disaster-relief unit set up at First Southern Baptist Church of Del City, Okla.

Blanchard and a team of Texans are cooking several thousand meals twice each day for residents of Del City neighborhoods who are trying to repair their homes, clean debris from the property or, in the worst cases, remove what little remains before their homes are bulldozed.

The Texas Baptists prepare the meals -- such as chicken and dumplings with mixed vegetables and bread -- which then are distributed street-by-street by the American Red Cross in special vans called ERVs, short for emergency response vehicles.

Like many on his team, Blanchard is a veteran disaster-relief volunteer. He scans the list of previous disasters painted on the side of the semi-trailer turned mobile kitchen and grows teary recalling the good Texas Baptists have done around the world.

"We go out with arms of love," he said. "It's a beautiful way to show God's love."

Robert Thomas, the group's head cook, also gets emotional while describing how Oklahomans have received the Texas volunteers, who are highly visible in their blue disaster-relief uniforms with bright yellow caps bearing the words "Southern Baptist Disaster Relief" and "Texas."

After one day's work, he said, the crew of 15 went to dinner at a steak house. After the meal, the waitress asked whom she should give the \$200 tab.

As one of the men reached for it, a voice came from behind. A stranger took the bill and said, "I'll pay it." The volunteers protested, but the man insisted. "You're helping us," he explained. "And I want to help you."

Then there was the little boy, about 4 years old, who approached the Texans at the same restaurant just to say, "Thank you for helping us."

Although disaster-relief workers often labor behind the scenes -- usually preparing meals someone else delivers -- they say the work is richly rewarding. "God called me to this," said Thomas, a former mess sergeant in the Army. "There's no ifs, ands or buts about it."

Disasters create natural opportunities for a spirit of volunteerism that exists in all people and especially in Christians, said Sam Porter, director of men's ministries and disaster relief for the Baptist General Convention of Oklahoma.

"We have a God-given void inside, and we fulfill that whenever we serve others in Jesus' name," Porter said. "Everybody wants to make a difference.

"Jesus said if you lose yourself for my sake, you will find yourself, and that's what volunteers do."

In the end, volunteer ministry helps not only those who need the aid of volunteers, but it also helps the volunteers and their churches, Porter said, explaining he found this to be true in three churches he served as pastor.

"Volunteer missions, or hands-on missions, turned all those churches around," he said. "Two tripled in attendance and membership. And it wasn't from great preaching; volunteer missions made a world of difference. People discovered their spiritual gifts through hands-on ministry."

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Storm-related tragedy in Oklahoma bridges distance between couples

By Mark Wingfield

BRIDGE CREEK, Okla. (ABP) -- It's almost 500 miles from Bridge Creek, Okla., to Cimarron, N.M., but a deadly tornado and Christian love have made it seem no distance at all.

Two months ago, Bob and Ollie Johnson traveled from their home in Bridge Creek to help build a church in Cimarron, a small town in northern New Mexico. Last week, friends the couple met on that trip stayed in the Johnsons' home while burying two family members in central Oklahoma.

The Johnsons, members of Snow Hill Baptist Church in nearby Tuttle, Okla., took part in a mission trip organized by Del Norte Baptist Church in Albuquerque. The Johnsons had been members there before retiring to rural Oklahoma three years ago.

On that trip, they worked alongside Pat and Margaret Soule, who had joined the Del Norte church since the Johnsons moved away. They formed a friendship that neither couple imagined would be rekindled so soon or so dramatically.

A tornado that destroyed much of the Bridge Creek community May 3 killed Pat Soule's sister, Lucille Darnell, and her 3-week-old grandson, Asheton. Their deaths were widely reported in news accounts because of the dramatic story of the baby being blown from his mother's arms by the tornado while seven members of the family huddled underneath a staircase in their home.

In addition to the two who died, the remaining five family members all were hospitalized with serious injuries.

Before they knew that, the Soules were frantically calling from Albuquerque to check on their loved ones. They heard some of the family members were in a hospital, and they believed at the time that Lucille Darnell also had survived.

So they called their friends from the mission trip, who live about a mile away from the Darnells. The Johnsons' house escaped the storm unscathed, though just by a few feet.

Ollie Johnson knew where to call for information. The local skating rink had been turned into a command center for emergency workers. With one call, she learned that Lucille Darnell was at the morgue, and family members were needed to identify the body.

She then took the responsibility for relaying the sad news to Pat Soule, who was already en route from New Mexico to search for his sister.

In the next few days, the Johnsons opened their home to the Soules and various members of the Darnell family who needed a place to stay.

For a short time, they even cared for 2-year-old Wyatt, another grandson of Lucille and Blayne Darnell who had been released from the hospital but had no family able to care for him. His mother,

Michelle, lay in one hospital and his grandfather in another. The toddler, who was bruised from head to toe, later went to stay with a nurse while others in his family recuperated.

The Johnsons said opening their home to someone in need was just a natural response. "They needed a place they could sit down among friends. And there's so many people displaced, if they went to look for a hotel, they couldn't find one," Bob Johnson said.

The Johnsons said everyone around them had responded in similar fashion in the aftermath of the storm. They said they drew strength from working side-by-side with neighbors to clean up debris and then sitting down to a home-cooked meal prepared by Ollie Johnson.

Most of all, the Johnsons said they realize they have much for which to be thankful. That lesson was driven home in an especially powerful way.

After the tornado, the Johnsons found many items in their yard that didn't belong to them or their immediate neighbors. One was a large wooden cutout in the shape of an apple with two words painted on it: "Give thanks."

That sign now adorns the front drive of the couple's home, partly in hopes that someone who lost it might see it and partly as their testimony about God's grace in a storm.

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BTSR establishes endowed chair to honor North Carolina pastor

RICHMOND, Va. (ABP) -- Baptist Theological Seminary at Richmond has received gifts totaling more than \$300,000 to endow a faculty position honoring a veteran North Carolina pastor.

Officials of the Virginia seminary announced the establishment of the Russell T. Cherry Chair of Old Testament Studies May 2 at First Baptist Church of Bladenboro, N.C., where Cherry has been pastor since 1993. Earlier he was pastor of First Baptist Church in Lumberton, N.C., for 22 years.

Seminary President Thomas Graves took part in the service, along with Samuel Balentine, the first faculty member to be named to the endowed chair.

"Biblical studies are at the heart of what we do, and to have Russell Cherry's name attached to this area of study is an honor for us," Graves said.

Baptist Theological Seminary at Richmond was founded in 1989 and opened for classes in 1991. It currently has 14 full-time faculty members and enrolled 285 students for the 1998-99 school year.

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-- By ABP staff

Spiritual themes in Star Wars don't match the Bible, prof says

By Marv Knox

WACO, Texas (ABP) -- The Star Wars saga contains themes of a spiritual quest, but its message is not essentially Christian, contends Baylor University religion professor John Wood.

"Episode I -- The Phantom Menace," the fourth installment in the Star Wars series, premieres May

19, 22 years after filmmaker George Lucas began chronicling a story from "long, long ago in a galaxy far, far away."

For more than two decades, moviegoers, critics and theologians have explored parallels between Lucas' vibrant mythology and the Bible's account of God's battle against Satan.

"The main parallel is such a general thing: There is this cosmic struggle between good and evil," observed Wood, who teaches a "Christianity and Films" class.

"One reason folks identify with Star Wars is we know there's a struggle in our hearts between good and evil," he explained. "But we like to see it in cosmic terms -- a gigantic transcendence far beyond the individual level. When you see it in cosmic terms, the good guys always win."

On that level, the Star Wars saga agrees with the Bible's assurance that God will triumph over Satan at the end of the world, Wood noted. "For a long time, it looks like evil will triumph, but ultimately good will win out."

Despite that, Star Wars is fundamentally flawed, from a Christian standpoint, because of the method by which good prevails, Wood said.

"Where the problems start for Star Wars is that evil is always overcome by violence," Wood said. "Non-violent confrontation won't work, because the evil forces are so intransigent. The way you defeat evil is to annihilate it. Violence is the only way."

Wood said that is not the Bible's viewpoint. "The way God overcomes evil is by redeeming it."

The New Testament teaches that a loving God overcame evil by sacrificing his only Son, Jesus, to save the souls of "whosoever" believes. That sense that salvation is available to everyone is another point of contrast between the gospel and Star Wars, Wood said.

"In Star Wars, the Force (a supra-human power) is only for a few elite, the Jedi Knights," he said. "Some people try to make parallels between the Force and the Holy Spirit or the power of God."

"In Star Wars, only the Jedi warriors have that Force. But the Christian faith says God's Spirit is available to everyone. There's elitism in Star Wars."

Furthermore, Star Wars' violence perpetuates its elitist structure, he added. "In the Star Wars conflict, you use violence to maintain the hierarchy -- protect Princess Leia, preserve the Jedi Knights. You don't have biblical egalitarianism, that God's love is for everybody."

Wood said he appreciates Star Wars even though it misfires on Christian themes, because he considers Lucas a storyteller and not a theologian.

"Lucas never claimed he was writing anything more than a fairy tale," Wood said. "But it touches all of us because of its cosmic scope."

In an interview for Time magazine, Lucas told journalist Bill Moyers: "I don't see Star Wars as profoundly religious. I see Star Wars as taking all the issues that religion represents and trying to distill them down into a more modern and easily accessible construct -- that there is a greater mystery out there."

"I would hesitate to call the Force God. It's designed primarily to make young people think about the mystery. Not to say, 'Here's the answer.' It's to say, 'Think about this for a second. Is there a God? What does God look like? What does God feel like? How do we relate to God?' Just getting young people to think at that level is what I've been trying to do in the films."

Religious storytellers have been grappling with those themes for millennia, Wood asserted.

For thousands of years, people of faith have dealt with the reality of good versus evil, he explained. "Evil is real in the world, and evil is going to be defeated. Otherwise, you have total despair -- if you don't believe good is going to win out."

The theme particularly is resonant with one American film genre -- the Western, Wood said.

"All our old Westerns deal with this same theme," he noted. "You have good guys and bad guys, and they're clearly identified. White hats and black hats."

For example, the title character in the movie "Shane" represents "a redeemer figure who wins over evil against unbelievable odds," he said.

The same is true for Clint Eastwood's character in "Pale Rider." "The bad guys are going to win, and yet this one guy saves everyone."

"In that sense, Star Wars is nothing new," he added. "Star Wars just puts it in cosmic terms. It's bigger than saving the town or a village. It's saving the whole universe."

And that theme is as old as humankind, Wood stressed. "It follows back as far as we can go," he said. "Everyone wants to describe how all this meanness and evil got here and what's going to be the final outcome."

"People have struggled with that from the beginning of time," Wood said.
Long, long ago.

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