

Tornado Devastation

At around 8pm on March 24th, 2023, Rolling Fork, Mississippi was struck by an EF4 tornado. EF4 tornados have sustained winds of 195 mph. It is estimated that there was a gust of at least 221 mph. That is what the engineers said was needed to flatten the town's water tower. People were killed when a semi-tractor truck and trailer was thrown into their house. In total, 17 people in the area were killed. Several blocks of the city had every house destroyed. Numerous buildings lost their roofs or were totally obliterated. Several trees had their bark scoured off—all lost limbs. Several people survived by huddling in the business' walk-in cooler. When they emerged, the rest of the building was gone. The weather service detected debris as high as 13,000 feet.

Today, there are still several destroyed buildings present where minimal recovery has been done. Blocks of the town are empty where houses once stood. The house next to our job site still had a large tree laying on it. The town has been partially deserted since the tornado. And yet there are several brand-new house-builds in progress. That, and the reconstruction like we did, is slowly bringing the town back.

Travel

A group from this church spent the last week working in Rolling Fork, Mississippi. We were working on a house that was damaged by the tornado last spring. We were hoping to bless the people of Mississippi; we ended up being just as blessed.

We travelled in two groups. Jeff Potter and Phil Benson flew to Jackson and drove from there. Pastor Dan, Betsy Wolfe, Victoria Wise, Dave Tillman, and Todd Barkus rode in the Pastor's van. Jeff's trip was lonely. Phil kept getting upgraded to First Class. Phil was able to get Jeff into the Delta Lounge for a two-hour layover in Atlanta. So that was a bright spot for Jeff.

The people in the van had a disheartening trip down. They travelled 800 miles south before the outside temperature was above freezing. Add to that embarrassment. There was more snow in Missouri and Mississippi than there was in Minnesota!!!

We all arrived without serious incident.

Unexpected Help

We were joined by "Bob", a farmer from Iowa. Bob's last name is Muchmore, and he was a great addition to the team. He knew "much more" about construction than we did. He has been doing service projects for the last 17 years. Bob is 85 years old, but he did things many people in their 70s would not do. The simplest way to describe Bob is to "think of Grover".

Accommodations

We were hosted by Leland Presbyterian Church in Leland, Mississippi. They had spent a considerable amount of money and time to make sure we would be comfortable. Hosting groups working on disaster recovery is a new mission the church is taking on, and they are deeply committed to making it work.

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The Work

The reconstruction efforts are coordinated by the Mississippi Conference of the Methodist church in association with Presbyterian Disaster Assistance (PDA). The PDA is primarily providing funding, some of which comes from our One Great Hour of Sharing gifts.

Kris and Daryle are employees of the Missouri Conference. Kris was the coordinator and Daryle was the job foreman for several sites in Rolling Fork. There were a couple of groups from Michigan working the other sites.

Monday when we arrived at the site, the house owner, Maggie, was mopping up water where her sink pipe had frozen and burst. During the reconstruction she, her son, and possibly a daughter, live in a trailer provided by FEMA that is also at the site. There were several FE-MA trailers around town.

The importance of our volunteer labor cannot be overstated. The work we do frees up monies that can be spread to other parts of the house. In our instance, Daryle is hoping to "bless" Maggie, the owner, with new flooring, and the painting of all the rooms.

There was a bit of a culture clash at the beginning. Mississippi and Minnesota have different building codes. In Minnesota, with our super-tight houses, we don't want any mold present. Mississippi is an area where mold is always present, so they just attempt to keep it sealed away from the living areas.

During our time at the site, we worked in two or three teams, with members interchanging based on need.

- We installed two windows that had just been temporarily tacked up and repaired a third window.
- We ripped down rotting ceilings in a bedroom and a bathroom.
- We did lots of cleaning because of the mess caused by our work.
- We installed new ceilings in the bedroom, the bathroom, and the room that has the new windows.
- We added insulation in the walls and attic.
- We painted.
- We left the house cleaner than when we arrived.

We ended up working ourselves out of a job. By early Thursday we had completed everything that they had planned for us, and several other improvements.

Other Activities

Our trip wasn't all work:

- We held morning and evening devotions where we read scripture, discussed our re-flections on the day's work and prayed.
- We all enjoyed conversations amongst ourselves.
- We had a game night.
- We visited local museums and saw the sights.
- We went to a local restaurant for a celebratory meal Thursday evening.

We were semi-celebrities. Everyone in town knew we were there to help. They gave us free admission to the sites.

Conclusion

We all felt good about what we had accomplished for Maggie, her family, and the town. It is hard to describe what accomplishing a service project like this does for you. There was talk about returning next year. Regardless of the location, we are all committed to doing another service project.