

First Church Rolling Fork continues to carry hope to community in disastrous aftermath

Pastor Britt Williamson of First Church Rolling Fork joined Tanner Cade, Director of Communication Services, and Jon Martin, Director of Men's Ministries, on the Mississippi Baptist Convention Board's (MBCB) "Around the Table" Podcast. They discussed the long road of rebuilding and recovery after the F4 tornado which devastated Rolling Fork on the night of March 24.

"Our city is 1.4 miles wide," Williamson remarked. "The tornado was a mile wide. We had an eight-minute warning if you were watching the Jackson television station. If you weren't, you had no warning. It just hit you. A mile wide tornado went directly through the middle of Rolling Fork ... An F4 tornado, 190 mile an hour winds."

Although the tornado hit on that Friday night, the leadership of First Church Rolling Fork decided not to shut down Sunday's worship service. "We had people that had to walk to church. They had no homes, they had no cars, yet that was probably one of the most attended services that I've ever had here at the church.

"We're not that large of a church, but we had 18 families who lost everything... That takes a devastating toll mentally, emotionally, physically on your congregation, and people are still dealing with the trauma of that. We now have 15 deaths from the tornado in Rolling Fork ... We have about 2,000 people here, and there should have been 600 or 800 people dead. We hurt for those families that lost loved ones, but not having

800 people pass that night was just the grace of God.

"We've increased our membership by 26 people this year, and for the size of our church, we've seen about 15 people come to faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, and we are very thankful for that and praise the Lord for that. We've had a lot of baptisms, and so it's in the midst of the difficulty that there's been a lot of blessing."

On that destructive night, help arrived almost immediately. "The tornado hit at 8:08 PM ... and before the sun came up, we had MS Baptist Disaster Relief people on the ground," said Williamson. "To see the response from them and how quickly it was, was just incredible."



Members of the Rolling Fork community gather in the worship center of First Church, Rolling Fork, on Sunday morning, March 26, after a massive tornado on the evening of March 24 took out most of the Mississippi Delta city and resulted in a number of fatalities. (Photo credit: Tanner Cade)

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“Our committee decided we were going to make the effort to meet individually with every family, and we would schedule times to have them come into the church. We would pray with

them, encourage them, just listen to their story, which is a great part of the healing process.

"I personally met with over 110 families, delivering assistance that came from MS Baptist churches who sent money. That was really instrumental in our church being able to do ministry in the aftereffect of this tornado. It really blessed my heart, too, because we got to be hands-on and help these families. Everybody here has some level of post-traumatic stress, (but) we were able to set aside a large amount of money from that fund to help pay for Christian counseling."

Much of Rolling Fork was broken down to its foundations. "We're rebuilding from scratch... So what can MS Baptists do?" Williamson asked. "Number one, we still definitely need a lot of prayer. A lot of people are still hurting. A lot of people are still dealing with the mental and emotional effects of it. A lot of people are still displaced into other areas. Pray for the mind and the body and soul of the people that experienced that night.

"Another way is we still have a disaster relief account here at the church. MS Baptists have sent us money. They've also sent money to the MBCB's Disaster Relief."

A third way MS Baptists can help is by giving to the church's nonprofit, Rolling Fork Rising. In disaster recovery, most funds flow to homeowners. But more than 60% of the residents in Rolling Fork lived in rented homes. Rolling Fork Rising seeks to bring these displaced and often impoverished families back to the city and make them homeowners.

"There's a lot of challenges here," Williamson said. "But anytime you have a challenge, it's an opportunity for ministry. It's an opportunity to do like Jesus did. As you're giving somebody food or water, you also are giving them the Gospel. And that's what we've tried to do."

Williamson and his family have faced many personal challenges

this year, as well. “My wife on March 17 had multiple strokes, two of which were major. Two neurologists said she should have died. She’s alive and doing really good today. But we had just gotten her out of the ICU at Baptist in Jackson when the tornado hit. Then on Aug. 11, the parsonage we lived in was condemned from mold and moisture damage, and it was so bad we had to leave nearly everything that we owned inside of it... It’s been a challenging year ... But we just continue to put one foot in front of the other and continue to trust and pray.

“It’s definitely not something I ever asked for or ever wanted or ever thought would happen to a pastor in little Rolling Fork, MS. The tornado hit on a Friday night at 8:00, and Sunday morning at 6:30, my daughter and I were interviewed on Fox News Live. I wasn’t even able to take a shower. I just had a baseball cap on because we had no water ... When Fox News got in touch with me Saturday night, because they heard our church was having worship, I didn’t want to do it. My head was spinning. We didn’t even know at that time how many had lost everything; we were fresh into it. I just started praying about it in my bed. I was about to tell them no, and then I said, ‘How many opportunities does a preacher from Rolling Fork get to share the Gospel on live TV and point people to the hope that can only be found in Jesus?’

“Hope doesn’t come from a house. Hope doesn’t come from your stuff. Hope only comes from an eternal relationship with Jesus.”

If you are interested in giving toward Rolling Fork Rising, visit [Rolling Fork Rising: Rebuilding Homes, Restoring Hope](#).

If you are interested in giving toward Disaster Relief efforts like Rolling Fork, visit [Disaster Relief Support – Mississippi Baptist Convention Board \(mbcb.org\)](#) for more information.

To listen to the full “Around the Table” episode with Pastor Britt Williamson, visit [Podcasts – Mississippi Baptist](#)

Convention Board (mbcb.org).