

Little church, big heart: Tornado survival brings renewed faith

By Tony Martin

Editor

On Saturday, Dec. 28, a line of severe storms tore through the Southeast, producing multiple long-track tornadoes in parts of Texas, Louisiana, and Mississippi. More than 20 tornadoes were reported across five states. One of the tornadoes struck O'Zion Church in Meadville, Mississippi.

Pastor Lance Moak was in the Wesson area when the storm hit.

"The Wesson area was kind of where the tornado ended when I was starting home," he said. "I got the message that the church had been hit by a tornado.

"Everyone's doing good," he said. "Sometimes you kind of forget how all of this is going to play on your emotions and your mental health, but everybody seems to be taking it as good as can be expected."

The church was destroyed. The steeple was thrown onto the other side of a stand of trees. Despite the destruction, the storm left a story of providential survival.

Rick Strawbridge, a deacon at the church, and his wife, Diane, live in a manufactured home nearby.

"It was about 3:30 p.m. when all this happened," Moak said. "Rick said that they don't ever leave their home during storms, that he and his wife just pray at the house. But he felt moved to take shelter at the church."

The couple went to the church and sat on one of the front

pews.

“The weather alert went off,” Moak said, “and Rick said when he opened the door, he could see the tornado across the road. They ran and took shelter with their little puppy in the ladies’ restroom. He said when he tried to close the door, it kind of knocked him backward on his back. When he looked up, he could see the sky because at that point the roof and everything was gone.”

When Moak arrived at the church, Strawbridge took him to a breezeway on one side of the building.

“The roof of it was still there on the ground,” Moak said. “We climbed up on it, and you could look out across the rubble. The only clear place you could see was in the bathroom where those two were laying on the floor. It looked just like a handprint that had been put over the top of them that says, ‘You can’t harm them.’”

The church was insured, Moak said.

“Our agent lives right there beside the church. As soon as Rick and Diane got out, I think our agent was checking on them.”

On Sunday, the congregation met at the home of Phyllis Whittington, the church secretary.

“We made the decision to continue to do that in the short term, with the long-term plan being to clean up and rebuild,” Moak said.

Whittington shared some history that Moak hadn’t known.

“Her family has been there since the church started,” he said. “The church has been there since 1917.”

On May 5, 1934, a tornado also struck O’Zion, wiping out the church. It was rebuilt.

The church's slogan is "Little church, big heart." In that spirit, the church plans to move forward.