

# Rolling Fork pastors describe deadly storm's destruction, aftermath

ROLLING FORK, Miss. (BP and local reports) – Bob Gilliland, pastor of Deer Creek Church, Rolling Fork, got a telephone call on the evening of March 24 from his son Roger who told him to turn on the weather report, that a tornado was approaching the church's parsonage where they lived.

"We turned on the weather and they were showing pictures of the tornado and said it was heading towards us. I stood in the hall. The tornado came through and shook the house but neither one of us got a scratch," he said, referring to wife Betty who rode out the super cell storm in a bathtub in the parsonage.

"It blew out every window, a tree came down on the power system out back, ripped it off the wall," Gilliland said. "It's reparable, but it's going to be expensive."

The Gillilands survived the tornado system that killed at least 21 people and injured dozens more in three states, with nearly all the deaths occurring in Rolling Fork, a town of about 1,800 people in the Mississippi Delta. Economically, it's one of the poorest communities in the state.

The National Weather Service (NWS) reported tornadoes struck a path more than 100 miles long through Rolling Fork in Issaquena County, Silver City in Humphreys County, Tchula in Holmes County, Winona in Montgomery County, and Amory and Smithville in Monroe County.

Initial projections by NWS put the largest of the tornadoes at an EF-4 rating, with wind gusts above 200 miles per hour. That's the tornado that virtually flattened Rolling Fork and Silver City, traversing the Delta flatlands to the northeast

at an estimated 65 miles per hour.



RECOVERY BEGINS – Rolling Fork residents who survived the major tornado that destroyed virtually the entire city on the evening of March 24 have begun the long process of recovery from the deadly storm. Mississippi Baptist Disaster Relief volunteers will be at work in the stricken areas for the next several months. (Photo credit: Tony Martin)

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The storm destroyed or damaged at least 2,000 homes in Mississippi. Additional damage was reported in Georgia and Alabama, including one death in Alabama.

Mississippi Baptist Disaster Relief (MBDR) has set up command centers in Rolling Fork, Winona, and Amory, MBDR Director Hubert Yates told Baptist Press. He anticipates responses ranging from one to two months, including chainsaw, debris removal, and counseling.

Feeding units are providing meals for volunteers and victims. Arkansas Baptist Disaster Relief is assisting in Rolling Fork, and about 15 other state Baptist Disaster Relief units have notified Yates of their availability.

Britt Williamson, senior pastor of First Church, Rolling Fork, expressed both surprise and gratefulness that the death toll isn't higher. "It's amazing and it's a blessing that we don't

have hundreds and hundreds of fatalities,” he said. “How we didn’t have hundreds – if not a thousand – is just the hand of God.”

Many of their churches’ families lost homes, Williamson and Gilliland said, but neither of them are aware of members of their congregation dying in the storm.

Both Deer Creek Church and First Church, Rolling Fork, are the only Southern Baptist congregations in town and suffered damage ranging from a toppled steeple, roof, and water damage at First Church, to the damage to the parsonage at Deer Creek Church.

“There’s over 13 families just in my church that had their homes totally destroyed,” Williamson said. “Our community, the vast majority of it is totally destroyed. Most of our businesses in our small town were totally destroyed, but our people are very resilient.

“We’re used to being able to spring into action to help people. The thing is a lot of my people who are the first to... help, they’re the ones that have their homes destroyed and so they’re in need of a lot of help,” Williamson said.

The tornado was the second that the Gillilands survived in the past few months, having also ridden out a December 2022 tornado that struck Anguilla, a community six miles northeast of Rolling Fork in neighboring Sharkey County.

“I’ve been through two tornadoes in the last four months. The first one totally destroyed the house I was in, and my wife and I walked away without a scratch,” Gilliland said, “and then Friday night the parsonage got ramshackled and we both walked away from that without a scratch.”

Deer Creek Church lost all of its roof shingles. A tree fell on the back of church and also destroyed the power system there. The sanctuary suffered roof damage.

First Church held Sunday worship service onsite March 26, ministering to many members of the community.

“The main thing I said is the church steeple may be in the road in front of our church, and your home may be destroyed, and tornadoes or different things in life can take away things from you in a moment’s notice, but there is nothing that can separate you from Jesus,” Williamson said.

“I used Psalm 23, that Jesus doesn’t look down on us in the valley and just leave us there [and] forsake us, but the Bible says He walks with us through that valley and we’re definitely in the valley of the shadow of death, but He’s with us.

“He knows our pain. He knows our struggle, and He’s going to be here to see us through it.”

Yates listed prayer requests for immediate needs in the aftermath of the storm:

- Prayer for each community affected, the churches and their staffs, the volunteers as they respond, and their leadership as they plan and lead.

- Financial donations to allow for purchase of items in bulk quantities, which will facilitate transportation, handling, and storage.

Tax-deductible donations to assist MBDR are being accepted. At the present time, in-kind contributions such as clothing and furniture are not being accepted. “The need right now is for critical supplies to be purchased in bulk, such as food and cleaning materials. Monetary gifts will help accomplish that,” Yates said.

Monetary gifts may be made by check, or electronically by clicking [here](#). Checks should be made payable to Mississippi Baptist Convention Board, with “Disaster Relief” designated on the memo line, and mailed to MBCB Business Office, P.O. Box

530, Jackson, MS 39205-0530.

For general information about MBDR volunteering and credentialing, [click here](#).

MBDR is supported by gifts to the Mississippi Cooperative Program, the Margaret Lackey State Missions Offering, and donations from individuals.