

In the Aftermath of the

TORNADO

In the initial hours after the tornado hit Joplin, Missouri, USA, on Sunday, May 22, 2011, members of the Church in that area knew what to do: the Joplin stake had an emergency plan in place, and members were prepared to account, assess, and report promptly in the wake of disaster.

During the first few days, Elder Jonathan C. Roberts, Area Seventy, met in council with stake and ward priesthood leaders and Welfare Services representatives from Salt Lake City. Meeting by candlelight because there was no power, the council discussed the most pressing needs—one of which was a location from which to operate.

Finding an Operations Location

Normally, relief efforts are coordinated from the stake center, which acts as a command center. It's there that Church headquarters can ship supplies, that volunteers can meet and receive assignments, and that members of the Church and the community in general can find temporary shelter if needed.

But the Joplin Missouri Stake Center, which was at the heart of the area where the tornado touched down, had been destroyed. There was nowhere to hold disaster relief meetings until a solution was presented by some business owners who were not members of the Church. Jim and Virginia Snodgrass, owners of a decorative concrete business in Joplin, offered to share



When a tornado hit Joplin, Missouri, USA, in May 2011, members of the Church relied on both physical and spiritual preparation.



Members of the Church in Joplin, Missouri, were physically prepared for a natural disaster. More important, they were prepared spiritually.

with the stake not only their office and warehouse space but also the acreage surrounding it. It would become the Church's command center and provide an ideal camping place for the hundreds of Mormon Helping Hands volunteers who came in from surrounding stakes each weekend for the next several months to help with cleanup efforts.

Preparing Physically and Spiritually

When Bishop Chris Hoffman of the Joplin First Ward first heard on that Sunday evening that a storm was coming, he never anticipated how serious the situation would be.

After the tornado, he said, "As we realized that things were a lot worse than we thought they might be, we started to try to establish communication." But those efforts were frustrated by phone outages. Even so, he and ward leaders tried to collect what information they could that night via

sporadic phone calls and text messages. In the instances where those methods failed, they turned to prayer.

In a situation of this magnitude, Bishop Hoffman said, "You recognize very quickly how reliant you are on Heavenly Father for answers, because you need them, and you need them quick. But the answers came. They always did. They always will."

The next morning, several men from the ward met at a central spot in town to begin checking on ward members. "It was hard to determine where to start," Bishop Hoffman said, but the group relied on the Spirit in deciding where to go first. They split into smaller groups and went to ward members' homes one by one, assessing needs and helping where they could. In instances when members were OK and available to help, they joined the assessment efforts and fanned out from there throughout the ward boundaries.

PHOTOGRAPHS BY CARMEN BORUP; MAP © STOCKPHOTO.COM/FRANK RAMSPOTT



Priesthood holders from surrounding stakes pause for a brief sacrament meeting on a Sunday morning before receiving their cleanup assignments.

As members of the ward followed the emergency plan of helping each other and their neighbors, they saw miracles happen. Bishop Hoffman reported that people in the ward told him about times they needed a particular kind of help, only to have a fellow ward member arrive with exactly what they needed when they needed it.

“You can’t plan those things,” Bishop Hoffman said. “There wasn’t a phone call saying, ‘Let’s get a work project together.’ It was everyone in the ward understanding that we needed to take care of each other. It was extremely gratifying to me as a bishop to hear not ‘What do you want me to do?’ but ‘This is what I’ve done.’”

Mobilizing after a Disaster

That kind of response is exactly what needed to happen, said Matthew Montague, first counselor in the Joplin stake presidency. “First and foremost has been the care of our members,” he said. “Once we discovered that they were cared for and accounted for and that members within those wards were meeting immediate needs, then came . . . coordinating our efforts with local agencies and relief efforts.”

Immediately following the tornado, first responders—such as search and rescue teams and medical professionals—asked community members to wait to come in. But when city leaders were ready for additional aid, the Joplin stake was poised to help.

“We don’t want to get ahead of local agencies,” President Montague said. “We want to work with them. We respect and commend them for what they’re doing, and we want to build important relationships because we know that disasters will indeed happen again. Seven of our wards or branches have been affected by tornadoes in the last 11

years, so our association with these agencies is essential.”

Marcy Petersen, who serves as the second counselor in the stake Relief Society presidency, was assigned to help with assessments throughout the entire community, not just among Church members. She assigned each ward to cover a particular part of town; at each home, members were to ask if the residents needed help putting tar paper on the roof and windows, if they needed fallen trees cut up and hauled away, and if they needed debris cleared. The assessments continued until all of Joplin had been covered. When a household needed help, the members generated a work order that went to the Mormon Helping Hands command center at the Snodgrasses’ warehouse. There, the work orders were organized, and needed materials were ordered from Salt Lake City.

Serving with Helping Hands

The first weekend following the tornado, two nearby stakes sent in hundreds of priesthood volunteers to help with community cleanup. These men and boys, donning the recognizable yellow Mormon Helping Hands shirts, pitched tents on the acreage surrounding the command center and worked on cleanup Saturday and Sunday, pausing for a sacrament service held inside the warehouse Sunday morning. Similar groups from other stakes went to Joplin each subsequent weekend for several months.

Mr. Snodgrass said that he was grateful to see the entire community respond in such a way, and that the efficiency with which Mormon Helping Hands operated impressed him. After seeing the deployment of priesthood volunteers on the first weekend following the tornado, he said: “Any organization that can come in here with 600 people and basically have them out of here [and on the job] within two hours is very organized. . . . They moved a lot of people in a short period of time.”

“I think everybody has done a great job of really trying to help the people in this community,” Mrs. Snodgrass said. “[The Church has] been so respectful and so nice to us and our property. We just want to thank them, and we’re glad we [offered our space].”

Recovering and Rebuilding

While physical preparation in all forms has helped the members of the Joplin Missouri Stake respond well in a time of emergency, many agree that the best preparation of all has been spiritual.

The Sunday following the tornado, Elder Roberts attended a joint meeting of the Joplin First and Second Wards, where he saw expressions of affection among the Saints and heard their expressions of testimony. He says:

“People who had lost everything—their homes, their workshops, everything—stood up and said, ‘We’re some of the most blessed people.’ How does that happen? How could anybody in those circumstances have the courage and the backbone to square their shoulders, lift their chins, and say, ‘We’re fine?’ Well, it only happens one way. They have a perspective of the gospel of Jesus Christ.”

The storm had swept away many people’s 72-hour kits and food storage. “And yet,” Elder Roberts observes, “the things that were deep rooted, the foundational things of priesthood keys, of testimony, stood strong. And as the Saints gathered together, it was spectacular to watch the preparation that came from spiritual roots that had been set deep—roots that a windstorm, tornado, or hurricane weren’t going to take away, roots that extend beyond mortality to eternity.”

That perspective manifested itself in the way the

Despite the destruction and disruption of the tornado, members in Joplin say their gospel perspective has carried them through.



Volunteers at the command center help generate and organize work orders for community cleanup needs.

members responded, Bishop Hoffman said, “without panic and without chaos, even amid the chaos of their lives.”

He continued, “That’s not to say there haven’t been lots of emotional ups and downs and tears shed, but you see that members really understand the plan of why we’re here. ‘This is just a moment.’ ‘It’s just stuff.’ ‘We’ll rebuild.’ I’ve heard that many times. It’s a testimony and a testament to their preparation and their understanding of the gospel and how they live their lives.”

Mike and Becky Higginson lost their home but said that their knowledge of the gospel helped them keep their perspective. “We’ve had hard experiences before, and the gospel is what sustains us through everything,” Sister Higginson said. “So although this is a shock and a trauma, . . . it didn’t change anything. You revert to your gospel roots, your spiritual roots, immediately.”

Bishop Dave Richins of the Joplin Second Ward has seen this kind of faith over and over since the disaster. He says, “My testimony has been strengthened by watching members of our ward persevere through all this adversity and think of their family first and then others before themselves. They’ve dropped everything to come to the aid of others. When we’ve had service projects, the members with destroyed homes are the ones showing up wanting to serve. I’ve had to send some of them home with some other brethren to take care of themselves, and they’ve always gone reluctantly.

“That’s just a wonderful example of living Christlike lives,” he adds. “These testimonies and this faith give us the hope that allows us to press on.” ■

To learn more about how the Joplin community, including Latter-day Saints, responded in the aftermath of the tornado, visit news.lds.org and enter the keyword “Joplin.”