

Trinity Lutheran Church members called to help their neighbors

Written by Elizabeth Barrett
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Church members take supplies, help clean up after Oklahoma tornadoes.

One trip in May to help people in Oklahoma who survived devastating tornadoes was not enough for Jeff Cottingham.

In mid July, the minister of the Trinity Lutheran Church in Gothenburg, returned with three parishioners to help farmers and ranchers whose fences and equipment were lost or damaged by twisters.

“For an agricultural community like Gothenburg, it was the perfect place to be because we were helping our own kind,” said the Rev. Jeff Cottingham.

Cottingham’s first visit was on May 31 when he and parishioner Lonnie Warner took donations of water, sunscreen, gloves and other items on a list provided by the Red Cross.

The supplies and monetary donations, given by church members and the community were enough to fill a 14-foot trailer which they unloaded in Edmond.

During the second trip, Cottingham, and parishioners Jolene Block of Gothenburg and Vic and Sharon Larson of Eustis worked with the Field of Teams organization to clean up prime agricultural and grazing land full of debris near three communities surrounding Oklahoma City.

“There was mile after mile of fences ripped up, equipment and outbuildings destroyed and livestock lost or killed,” he said, noting that the monetary loss for ranchers with cattle was enormous. “One rancher heard what we were going to do and was on the verge of tears.”

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Cottingham said his group collected 1 miles of barbed wire and pulled up posts so new ones could be installed.

Although ranchers typically ask their neighbors for help, he said the neighbors had their own cleaning up to do.

“It felt good,” Cottingham said about their work. “We were concerned about a heat wave the week before we arrived but then there were three days of rain that cooled things off.

“We believe God provided good working conditions.”

Although he said most of the people displaced by a May 20 tornado were from Moore, other towns around Oklahoma’s capital city were also affected by the EF5 twister that killed 25, injured 377 and left many homeless.

With 210 mph winds and an estimated \$2 billion in damage, the tornado earned the highest rating of EF5 for strength and damage on the Fujita scale.



Cottingham said the twister was part of a larger weather system that had produced several other tornadoes over the previous two days that also damaged the area.

While driving to Edmond to drop off supplies on May 31, the minister received a call from the contact person there who told them tornadoes were touching down in El Reno which is about 35 miles away.

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“El Reno was the last community to be hit by the tornado,” Cottingham said. “We unloaded in the rain in Edmond and drove right back.”

At the time, he and Warner didn’t know that the twister would end up in the record books as the widest on record as it spanned 2.6 miles and packed 297 mph winds.

The previous record came from tiny Hallam, NE, where a 2.5-mile monster hit in 2004.

Tornadoes aren’t new to Cottingham who survived an EF3 tornado that struck Siren, WI, and surrounding communities.

Because of the half-mile of destruction the twister carved, he said he understood what the Oklahomans were experiencing when he learned about the devastation in and around Moore and El Reno.

“I felt led to do it,” Cottingham said. “Discipleship teaches us to put others first and we are called to be imitators of Christ.”

During the community drive to get supplies and monetary donations for tornado victims last May, \$2,400 was raised and delivered.

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