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Pastor Sees Silver Lining In Flood

MAY 13TH 2011 BY NEWS

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DORENA, Mo. - When the U.S. Army Corps Engineers blew the Birds Point levee along the Mississippi River May 2, the waters washed away as many as 100 homes and 133,000 acres of fertile farmland. It also flooded a small Southern Baptist church.

"The church is gone," said LeRoy Davenport, pastor of Dorena Baptist Church. "I've seen aerial pictures, and it's gone."

The church building is still there, but at one point the muddy waters were up to the edge of the roof. The day after Mother's Day, when the National Guard allowed property owners to inspect their homes via boats, a man reported to Davenport that he stood in the window ledge and could see pews floating inside.

The church had been around since 1946 and had never had floodwater in it, thought it came close a few times.

When the floodway was activated, it was done so in part to save the town of Cairo, Ill., which experienced a record crest along the Mississippi River and a swollen Ohio River. With rain continuing and water levels at historic levels, the Corps said there was "no way to stop all flooding, but rather to do our best to reduce the risk to life and property in the region."

This spring the Mississippi River has experienced precipitation 125 to 150 percent above normal. Corps experts estimate it will take up to two months for water to recede from the

floodway, assuming there is no additional rainfall.

After the water has receded, it will take another 20 to 30 days for the land to dry out.

If there's an upside to the manmade

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flood, it's that the residents of the floodplain and members of Dorena Baptist at least had some warning. Most of the church's small membership lived outside the floodplain in East Prairie, but two who lived in mobile homes had to move the homes to higher ground and are now out of work.

"We knew it was coming, and kept praying," Davenport said. "We got the piano, pulpit and Lord's Supper table out, but not everything. The rest of it is gone. The brick on one side of the building is gone, too. Then, if the water goes down like they're telling us, there may not be any roads left."

Davenport said there isn't a lot to be cheery about and recovery is going to be hard work, but he sees a glimmer of hope in the dark waters. There are lots of discussions floating around, including rebuilding and permanently relocating.

"Maybe God just wanted us to move this church into town," he said, referring to East Prairie. "Whatever He wants, that's what we'll do. There's no growth possibility in Dorena simply because there's nobody down there. It's hard to leave the site of your home church, but maybe this is what God wants us to do."

Volunteers Needed

In addition to Dorena Baptist, two other Missouri Baptist churches flooded in the recent surge of the Mississippi River. Shining Light Baptist Church in Charleston and Hooe Baptist Church in Oran also were impacted. First Baptist Church in Morehouse has been among those to open as a shelter.

Volunteers are needed for large-scale cleanup as the water recedes.

Rick Seaton, a men's ministry specialist with the Missouri Baptist Convention and the state's disaster relief coordinator, said he anticipates at least a two- or three-week response in the area.

"We currently have mud-out teams beginning in the Poplar Bluff area and are presently looking into the need for other areas," he said. "We also need chaplains now and through next week. If you are available to respond at any time, please contact our office."

The Missouri Baptist Disaster Relief office can be reached by email at dmaier@mobaptist.org or by phone at 1-800-736-6227, extension 631.

In St. Louis, the chainsaw work in the wake of the Good Friday tornadoes is finished. St. Louis Metro Baptist Association and local churches report that they anticipate being able to fulfill any further requests for assistance. The official disaster relief response site has been shut down.

"Some have been on this site for over two weeks straight, and there were around 328 jobs completed," Seaton said. "We are very thankful to everyone both in state and out of state who have responded and helped in this area."

Photos Above: Top Photo - Jo Ann Haas of First Baptist Church in Oak Ridge and Dan Dickerson of First Baptist Church in Millersville prepare trays of food for flood victims at the feeding station at First Baptist Church in Morehouse. Bottom Photo - Davie Price of Calvary Baptist Church in Neosho and Andrew Gruber of South Side Baptist Church in fulton remove flood soaked flowing from a home in Poplar Bluff. (Photos by Bob Greenleee/Baptist Press) Brian Koonce is a staff writer for The Pathway, newsjournal of the Missouri Baptist Convention.

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