



A tornado devastated Ardmore Adventist Academy in February 2009.

Surviving a Natural

It was February 9, 2009, and Ardmore Adventist Academy's weather radio was forecasting bad weather during the night, which only prompted me to feel concerned, as head teacher, that some windows in the gym might get broken by flying debris. So, the phone call and first sight of the tornado-ravaged building were shocking, to say the least. Broken windows? It was impossible to even tell where the windows had been in the building!

My first thought was to thank the Lord that the calamity occurred at 7:38 p.m., when no one was in the building. Not only had the tornado struck after school let out for the day, but the scheduled board meeting also had been cancelled. Although much of the building had been demolished, we were pleased to see how well the bathrooms, our emergency location, had held up during the storm.

What to Do First?

But then the reality of the enormous task ahead of us began to hit home, raising many urgent questions: How quickly could our insurance agents make arrangements to retrieve the still-usable items from the building? Had anyone contacted the conference office? How could we quickly

find a location to hold classes? How do we get the kids through this, emotionally? What steps do we need to take in reconstructing the building? Should we build an in-ground shelter?

The tornado that struck our school in Ardmore, Oklahoma, was classified as an EF 4, with winds of around 170 miles per hour. As I looked around, I was amazed that despite the devastation, the trees were budding. Then I realized that those weren't buds; it was pink insulation splattered throughout the branches.

From the pattern of downed trees and damaged buildings in the immediate neighborhood, it appeared that the tornado had splintered into several parts. The portion that hit the school went right through the middle of the building. The back wall was left standing, but the front wall was bowed out, and the side walls were stacked like dominoes. The tornado collapsed the roof on most of the building, but totally removed it from the back third of the building, including the library where the school board would have convened.

But in that room and several others, books and papers were neatly stacked on the tables and shelves, and pictures were still hanging on the walls. It was hard to comprehend that the storm could rip off the roof while leaving stacks of papers untouched. But, unless destroyed by the falling roof, most of the classroom materials were where we had

BY STEPHEN DENNIS

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left them the day before. At the front of the building, the caved-in roof had actually stopped just three feet short of crushing our expensive handbells, which looked just as we had left them after the last practice session.

Many of the items picked up by the tornado were scattered throughout our pecan orchard. Broken windows, chunks of brick, and broken furniture were all mixed together.

The most urgent concern was where to hold classes and who to hire to rescue usable items from the school. Getting a team in quickly after a disaster is important (before it rains again or the building is vandalized). But if we had taken some additional time to compare bids from several companies, things would have gone more smoothly, and we might have saved some money.

One of the most important things we learned was that we should have chosen a contact person, either before the disaster or at least immediately afterward, whose assignment was to work with all groups or individuals, checking on their fees and the quality of their work, but even more important, making sure that the actions taken in a number of areas suited our needs, rather than simply following the insurance company's directives. This included the rescue of usable materials, demolition of the current building, and reconstruction of the school plant.

Having one person in charge can prevent a variety of business problems, avoid miscommunication, promote unity in decision-making, and ensure appropriate monitoring of expenses (which may even prevent fraud). This person has the final say about a variety of decisions, and is the one through whom everyone should pass information: the insurance company, the school, the parents, the church, and the conference. Even though other people are designated to oversee certain projects, the contact person is the one ultimately in charge. When deciding how to proceed, school administrators must not allow themselves to get stuck wrangling over decisions in a variety of committees. They must designate a contact person with the authority to move forward quickly.

Disaster



The remaining portion of the academy building being removed.

Avoid Snap Decisions

Another lesson we learned is that it's unwise to make quick decisions in an emergency situation. Consultation and research are necessary before making choices with long-term and expensive implications. Yes, some decisions will have to be made right away, for purposes of emergency care and safety. But other decisions can wait until after the shock of the calamity has passed and you have had a chance to seek counsel.

In our case, the rescue team began cleaning up and removing usable materials from the building the day after the tornado struck, and finished its initial work about a week later. By that time, classes had already been moved to temporary quarters: Sabbath school rooms at the local Seventh-day Adventist church, about five miles away.

Temporary Schoolrooms

Although board members and others brainstormed about a temporary location and we be-



Ardmore Adventist Academy students in one of their temporary classrooms.

gan looking for an alternate school site the same day the tornado struck, it was not until later that we realized we should have done some research to ensure that the classrooms had adequate space to conduct everyday school activities. Teachers and students and tables and supplies were all crammed in together. Having people on top of people hinders the education process in ways that are just unimaginable. The large room into which I and the upper-grade students moved was really very nice. But the smaller one was really tiny. My wife and her students actually got more done by sitting on the floor to do their work.

As we searched for a long-term solution, we had to keep in mind a variety of safety and practical issues: health-department requirements, especially the number of bathrooms and food preparation area; building security, especially in relation to visitor access; and the adequacy and location of outside play areas. With our temporary quarters, we were fortunate with the last one. The church property included a large empty grass lot.

Moving to Modular Buildings

Though using the church's Sabbath school rooms was a helpful, if imperfect, short-term arrangement, we decided that installing modular classroom buildings on the playing field just west of the destroyed building would be a better long-term solution while we waited for our school to be rebuilt. It took a month to get the modular buildings in place and to prep them for classroom use. Looking back, I wish we had had shelving installed in the closets and chalkboards/whiteboards hung on the walls before we moved into the buildings. We also discovered that we needed to set up bottled-water dispensers in each room (modulars don't come with much plumbing). For in-class shelving, we did find some crates at an office supply store that worked well until we got the desks replaced. The crates were stackable and connected to each other vertically and horizontally.

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We had to replace all of the school's outside play surface materials before we could allow the students to go outside for recess. Broken glass and other dangerous materials were strewn all over the field and playground. The gravel in our softwells beneath our playground sets had to be removed and replaced (we were able to get this done before we moved into the modular buildings). However, the grass didn't get replanted until shortly before school dismissed for the summer, so the children never did get to play on it again.

We belatedly discovered that it would have been better to delay replacing some classroom furniture until our new building was finished. We had space issues in our modulars, which were designed for classrooms, when we had to use portions of them for storage. In hindsight, we probably should have acquired an additional modular building for our storage needs, which we may do yet.

Connecting With the Conference

Immediately contacting the conference educational superintendent after the disaster was, of course, vitally important. The superintendent, with help from others at the conference office and several local pastors, organized a trauma intervention event for our students the Monday after the tornado (our first day back in class). If your conference doesn't have people at the office who can provide crisis counseling, they can probably put you in touch with local people to provide this service. The conference office can also be helpful in coordinating donations of textbooks from sister schools to enable you to get started again.

As I write this article, in early July, work is moving forward on getting a stand-alone sign made. This is to identify the three modular classroom buildings, next to our destroyed school, as our temporary location while we are rebuilding. This is preferable to trying to attach a school sign to these temporary buildings. We



Temporary classrooms and storage area.

hope to get the sign up before school starts this fall. But we will probably install permanent lettering identifying the new building before we move into it, which is currently scheduled to occur in the fall of 2010. That is, if everything remains on schedule! The architectural plans will hopefully to be approved by the school board, the conference, and the state by September of this year, or sooner. We have asked the architects to keep in mind, as they draw up the plans for our new building, that we want to materials with low maintenance costs. After we have accepted the architectural blueprint, we will have to quickly obtain and decide on bids from contractors. And then I will pray for a dry winter, so construction can proceed without interruption.

A few additional observations:

- The insurance process can be extremely slow. Don't be afraid to ask your union or local conference to urge the insurance company to finalize on a settlement in a timely manner. Try to be reasonably patient in your expectations about their timelines.
- If you don't currently have a fireproof and wind-proof storage area for important documents and computer back-up disks, be sure to remedy this immediately. We had to ask the insurance company for a copy of our policy, since we lost ours in the storm.
- It's important to plan ahead and to practice disaster drills for a variety of likely (and some unlikely) events. If your area is subject to tornadoes and other dangerous storms, you should build a "safe room" in the building or construct an in-ground shelter.
- Check to be sure that your teachers and school board members keep up to date on their paperwork and send a copy to the local conference, especially items such as inventory lists.
- Develop an ongoing, cordial working relationship with your local newspaper and television reporters as well as church media sources. We are keeping these folks regularly informed about what

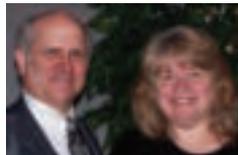
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is happening and about our plans during the rebuilding process. This has prompted an outpouring of support in cards and letters, and even funds from across the United States—one church-related school even supplied our students with paper, pencils, crayons, etc., that will last well into the next school year.

• And perhaps the most important lessons, which have been reinforced throughout the whole ordeal, is to pray for the Lord's guidance, and to depend on the wisdom of a "multitude of counselors" (Proverbs 11:14; 15:22).

One final, personal note: Don't forget to express a big THANK YOU to everyone who helps you through a crisis by their emotional and practical support of the teachers, students, and the school, especially their holding up your needs to the Lord in prayer. We are most grateful for all the help and support we've received throughout this difficult time. ☺

The author expresses his thanks to the people who contributed to this article.



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