

From Devastation to Hope: Reflections from the Placedo Tornado Response

On May 1st, while attending the Synod Assembly at Triumph Love Lutheran Church in Austin, severe weather was impacting communities across Texas. As heavy rain fell outside during the assembly, reports of tornado activity slowly began making their way across the room. Among the hardest hit areas was Victoria County, where a powerful F1 tornado had caused major damage in the small community of Placedo.

During the assembly, I reached out to Pastor Johnene Cunningham, who was sitting only a few tables away from where I was running the Zoom room for Synod Assembly. She mentioned hearing there had been a tornado in the area, but at that point no official reports had made it her way. Little did she know that the tornado had passed less than a mile from her residence — the same home she would return to after assembly concluded.

In the days that followed, I was contacted by the Victoria County Emergency Management Coordinator asking if our disaster response team could remain on standby due to the amount of damage that had occurred in Placedo. Hearing the scope of devastation, my response was immediate:

“Yes, we will help.”

You could hear the relief in Mr. Partida’s voice.

As more information began coming in, I sent out an all-call across the Synod seeking volunteers. The response was incredible. Throughout the day my phone continued to ding with new volunteer sign-ups. Every notification brought a little more confidence and reassurance:

“We’ve got this.”

A few days later, Mr. Partida and I conducted a drive-through assessment of the impacted community alongside reports gathered by United Way from homeowners requesting assistance. Initially, we believed there was enough work for four full days of deployment. But even before we arrived, the Placedo community had already begun rallying together in remarkable ways.

Still, the devastation was overwhelming.

Trees were twisted like bird nests or completely uprooted. Trailers had been flipped over. Homes were heavily damaged or wiped away entirely, with belongings scattered across open fields. Even with the progress already made by residents and volunteers, the scars left behind by the tornado were impossible to ignore.

Because of the rapid effort local response, our deployment shifted from a four-day operation to one concentrated workday focused primarily on chainsaw work, tree removal, and debris cleanup. The workday was scheduled for May 14th.

The day before deployment turned into a full sprint to get everything ready. Support from the community immediately started pouring in. Niagara Bottling generously donated a full pallet of water to volunteers and relief efforts. I picked up additional pole saws and loppers while also trying to get our disaster response trailer back from the repair shop after a few minor repairs.

By the time I finally hooked up the trailer, filled the truck with diesel, topped off all the gas cans, and returned home to begin checking equipment, it was already after 8:00 PM. I'm sure my neighbors were thrilled hearing three chainsaws running at the same time late that night, but I needed to know everything was operational.

Even after everything checked out, sleep was hard to come by. My mind kept running through an endless checklist:

“Did I pack this?”

“Did I check that?”

“Did I mix the fuel correctly?”

Then suddenly, the alarm went off at 3:30 AM.

It came early, but I knew we were ready. More importantly, I knew something good was going to come from the day ahead.

As I made the two-and-a-half-hour drive south and stopped at Buc-ee's for ice, people gathered around the trailer asking questions about where we were headed. It gave me a chance to explain the mission and the work we were preparing to do.

I arrived in Placedo around 6:00 AM and staged near the grain mill. At first, it was just me, the trailer, and a few local dogs wandering nearby. But by 6:30 AM headlights began appearing one after another.

The first volunteers to arrive stepped out wearing LyondellBasell shirts with chainsaws and pole saws already in hand. I learned the local refinery had given employees a paid volunteer workday to help their own community recover. To me, that was one of the most powerful parts of the entire response a company investing directly back into its people and neighbors.

By 7:00 AM more volunteers arrived, including pastors, spouses, congregation members, and community volunteers. After discussing the situation, reviewing safety concerns, and outlining the scope of work, we divided our volunteers into four teams and dispatched them throughout the area.

Even by early morning the humidity was intense, so cases of water, PPE, gas cans, chainsaws, bar oil, and tools quickly disappeared from the trailer as teams headed into the field.

While I remained at staging handling state-required documentation and calling homeowners, the sound of chainsaws echoed throughout the neighborhood. Honestly, it was an incredible sound — the sound of people showing up for one another.

Our volunteer crews worked at an incredible pace. Nearly every call back to staging came from a team ready for another assignment after finishing the first. At one point, I watched the LyondellBasell crew fell, cut, and stack a massive tree in less than 20 minutes. Their teamwork and efficiency were remarkable.

By lunchtime, all assigned work orders were complete.

As crews returned to staging, we gathered under the trailer awning for lunch and fellowship. The Salvation Army generously served a hot meal of chicken, green beans, bread, and cookies, just what we needed after a long, humid morning.

The day ended with tired bodies, full stomachs, new friendships, and a deep sense of accomplishment. As volunteers packed up and began saying their goodbyes, I loaded the trailer and started the drive home.

The radio never even came on.

On the drive home, I reflected on all that had happened over the previous several days. What stood out most was not the debris cleared or the trees removed, but the people. Volunteers, churches, emergency management, businesses, and neighbors came together as one team with a shared purpose: helping a community recover.

Moments like this are a reminder that disaster response is about far more than chainsaws and cleanup work.

It is about showing up.

It is about restoring hope.

And it is about reminding people they do not have to walk through the wreckage alone.