

Joplin Express

On May 22, 2011 at approximately 6:15 pm a devastating EF5 tornado struck Joplin, Missouri. The tornado reached a maximum width in excess of 1 mile with winds over 200 mph destroying over 2000 buildings, killing 162 and injuring over 990. The cost to rebuild Joplin could reach \$3 billion. The May 2011 tornado was the deadliest tornado to hit the United States since 1947 - the seventh-deadliest single tornado in U.S. history, and 27th-deadliest in World history.



With this tragedy in the news and much talk about the destruction and the lives affected, an idea was born. Calvary Lutheran Church in Concord, NC, partners with Good360©, an organization that partners groups with retail merchants to obtain their returned and closeout items at no cost. The only requirement is that the items must be given away to those in need. Calvary partners with two Bed, Bath, and Beyond stores in Matthews and Concord. Household items are collected and then given away to those in need in the community. Typically, Calvary holds two Great GiveAways a year for this distribution. So, we asked, “What if these items could somehow be transported to the families in need in Joplin, Missouri?”

The logistics of making this happen seemed overwhelming but we knew that God will work all things good for God’s purpose. Calvary had been collecting items since its last GiveAway in January and had amassed over \$150,000 retail value of items including sheets, towels, comforters, blankets, pillows, small household appliances, lamps, and kitchen items. An appeal was made to the congregation to help with this project by providing funding to help in transporting these items to Joplin and to get their support and commitment to help with bringing the items down from the attic, sorting through hundreds of boxes, organizing and re-boxing, labeling what was in each box, and then preparing the boxes to be loaded onto a truck.

The next big hurdle was making contact with someone in the Joplin area to arrange for storage and distribution of the items once they were delivered. This proved to be challenging because of the massive destruction in Joplin. No one there was equipped to handle the storage and distribution. After numerous phone calls explaining our idea, contact was made with Pastor Dan Friberg of Messiah Lutheran Church in Springfield, Missouri. Pastor Dan asked for several weeks to see what could be arranged. He began searching for a warehouse near Joplin and recruiting volunteers from his church who would be willing to assist in this undertaking. A big part of the scheduling had to be timed as to when outside help would be allowed into Joplin following the search and rescue phase. Working with the Catholic church in Joplin, a warehouse was found and a date was set so that the items could be received during the week of June 26th.

This left a little over two weeks to get everything organized and to figure out the logistics of trucking the items to Joplin. Plans were made for Calvary volunteers to begin the sorting and re-boxing following worship on June 26. Initially, Calvary planned to rent two 24' rental trucks and drive them to Joplin. Again, God provided. One of Calvary's members, Tom Czoka is the transportation manager for Red Bull Racing. After hearing of the plan, he contacted management at Red Bull and they agreed to provide a pick-up truck and trailer and the fuel cost for the trip. The pieces of the plan were falling into place.

Beginning on June 26, the items were brought down from the attic and the sorting and re-boxing began. Over 75 volunteers began this process on Sunday and worked again on Monday to have items ready for loading the truck on Wednesday. After everything was re-boxed and labeled another obstacle was encountered: the boxes would not fit into the trailer that was being used. Tom went back to Red Bull and they graciously volunteered the use of a 53' tractor-trailer. Again, God provided. On Wednesday, volunteers came to Calvary and the loading process began. After several hours, the truck was packed full and the door was closed. The trip to Joplin was about to begin.

On June 30 at 6:00 am Tom Czoka, his wife Laurie and co-driver Bill Edwards left on their way to Joplin arriving 18 hours later. Early on the morning of July 1, volunteers from Messiah Lutheran began unloading the items into a warehouse located in Joplin. The warehouse had its roof torn off by the storm but it had been replaced in preparation for the items arriving. The Messiah volunteers expressed again and again that they were amazed that a church over 1200 miles away in North Carolina cared enough to put something like this together. On Friday morning the truck was unloaded and the return trip back to Concord began. The group from Calvary arrived back in Concord at 6:00 am on Saturday, July 2. The Joplin Express trip was a total of 2049 miles and 36 hours of driving. We are truly grateful to Red Bull Racing for the donation of the tractor-trailer and \$1,441 of fuel. It would not have been possible without them and the Czokas.

Only five weeks after the massive destruction from the tornado, household items began being distributed to the people of Joplin. Initially bedding items were distributed to the shelters where many people were still staying after their homes had been destroyed. In the weeks following, several distribution points have been established around Joplin and much needed items are being given to our brothers and sisters in Christ in Joplin. This trip began as a dream and God made it into a reality blessing those in need in Joplin and blessing all the volunteers who made it happen.