

May 8 storms rock Southern Illinois

By Paul Black

Clean-up crews have been working the past three weeks after straight-line winds, severe thunderstorms, tornado and flash flooding pummeled a seven-county region in southern Illinois May 8, leaving 64,000 residential customers without electrical service for several days.

In a storm that one meteorologist called “an inland hurricane” and drew comparisons to the 1925 Tri-State tornado, the entire southern Illinois region was rocked by the one-two punch of the storm.

Snapped power lines and downed trees were reported in a seven-county region in southern Illinois. The National Weather Service did confirm two tornados with winds reaching a speed of up to 100 mph. Minor flooding occurred at several points along the Ohio River. The areas hardest hit included Carbondale, Murphysboro, Marion, Carterville, Herrin and Johnston City. Only one fatality in Herrin was reported as a storm-related death.

Cache River District Superintendent Greg Courtright began mobilizing disaster response efforts immediately and Rev. Pete Ryan, pastor of Joppa and Oak Grove UMC’s, continues to coordinate the United Methodist response. Bishop Gregory Palmer made numerous calls

and was kept apprised of the situation by those personnel in the district.

Herrin First UMC was established as a warming center for dislocated families and work crews. Marion Aldersgate, Herrin First and Carbondale First were set up as host sites for work crews May 18.

As of May 16, 613 sites had registered for assistance with debris removal just in Marion, Herrin, Energy, Royaltan and Carterville alone. Additional help was needed in Johnson City, Carbondale and Murphysboro.

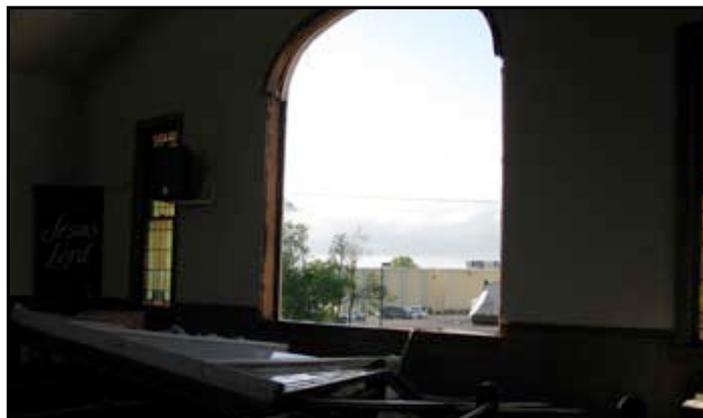
Teams were also requested at Little Grassy Camp. If you wish to work at Little Grassy and need lodging, please contact Ryan at 618-771-0366.

Cedar Grove UMC sustained the most damage of any United Methodist church with several of its stained-glass windows blown out. Crews have already begun the work of repairs.

At Little Grassy Camp at Makanda, trees were down on power lines and buildings. Camping Coordinator Peggy O’Neal said that camp staff were hindered in assessing the damage as roads in and out of the campsite were blocked by downed trees.

Illinois State Police received reports of major damage in Jackson and Williamson

See Storms on page 5 ...



Straight-line winds, severe thunderstorms, a tornado and flash flooding took its toll on southern Illinois May 8. Stained-glass windows at the Cedar Grove UMC, located in the Cache River District, took a direct hit from the storm. Volunteers are still busy engaged in clean-up work in the region.

Photo courtesy of April Turner



Volunteers are still needed in the Cache River District. If you have a team that wishes to volunteer for the clean-up, please contact Rev. Pete Ryan, the Cache River District Disaster Response Coordinator at 618-771-0366. It is important that he be contacted first in order that the clean-up be organized effectively.

Photo courtesy of April Turner

Medical marijuana puts faith groups at odds with each other

By Paul Black

SPRINGFIELD – Legislation working its way through the Illinois General Assembly that would legalize medical marijuana has found faith groups pitted against one another.

SB1381, which passed the Senate Public Health Committee on a 6-2 vote April 29, awaits a full floor vote. At the same time, more than 60 religious leaders in Illinois are calling on state senators to approve the legislation which would allow patients to use marijuana with a doctor’s recommendation and not be subject to criminal prosecution.

“Medical marijuana is an issue of mercy and compassion,” said Rev. Bill Pyatt, pastor of the Carthage UMC in an interview with the Chicago Tribune. “We pray that the Illinois legislature will have the compassion to stop this war on patients.”

The 2008 General Conference reaffirmed its stance on medical marijuana.

Resolution 3042, which also addresses alcohol and other drugs states, “Recently, some states in the United States have passed legislation permitting the medical use of marijuana. The medical use of any drug should not be seen as encouraging recreational use of the drug. We urge all persons to abstain from all use of marijuana, unless it has been legally prescribed in a form appropriate for treating a particular medical condition.”

Protestants for the Common Good, a Chicago-based umbrella organization of Protestant denominations, also is supporting the legislation, which if passed, would create a three-year pilot program that would allow the Department of Public Health to issue registration cards to persons with doctor’s recommendations for cannabis. The law limits individuals to seven cannabis plants and 2 ounces of

See Medical Marijuana on page 12 ...



Rev. John Hauck calls on a member of the Reynolds Elementary Bible Bowl team for a response during a match between Reynolds and Decatur Sharon at the Conference Bible Bowl May 3. Photos of all of the competing teams in the elementary, middle school and high school division are found on page 8 of this issue of The Current.

Photo by Paul Black

Camping and Congregational Development

Camping curriculum to focus on Heroes of the Faith

Over the years the camping ministry of the Illinois Great Rivers Conference has purchased its curriculum and adapted the materials. After feeling that the options were becoming more scarce and harder to adapt easily, the camping ministry program staff wrote their own materials for the 2009 summer camping season.

After the rough draft was completed a team of volunteers, including youth workers, children's educators, seminary students, and United Methodist clergy, met to edit the curriculum.

As a result of the reviewing process the

curriculum was rewritten to be age-specific, one for elementary children and one for middle school/high school students. This change allowed different activities to be included so as to better address different learning styles and to ask more age-appropriate questions.

Heroes of the Faith is this year's theme. This five-day curriculum invites students to come to camp, and on their first day create their ideal superhero. Campers will share their superheroes including the hero's name, special powers, and gadgets. The remainder of the week includes wor-

ship sessions, activities, and devotions that focus on internal characteristics of biblical heroes. Those persons being studied are all mentioned in the "Hall of Faith" from Hebrews 11. They include - Trust: Moses and David (David and Goliath), Obedience: Noah and Abraham, Courage: Joshua and Rahab, and Love: Jesus.

Campers will evaluate the characteristics throughout the week and will culminate the re-evaluation on their last day of camp by recreating their superhero with consideration of the internal characteris-



tics that each person possesses. The goal is to help campers and teens realize that if we choose to let God use us we can all be members of the Hall of Faith.

An Unbinding Focus: one church's experience of using *Unbinding the Gospel*



By Roger Ross

After many years, Polaroid finally stopped making their "instant picture" cameras. I loved those things. Decades before

the digital age, I remember my Uncle Carl showing off this cutting edge technology that allowed him to take a picture, print it out on the spot, and watch it develop in real time. At first, the picture was blank. But after a while fuzzy outlines emerged, and then colors appeared until finally the whole picture came into focus. The process seemed magical, and it brought delight to young and old alike.

When I first arrived at the church I serve now, we needed a clear picture. After 187 years in the community, our ministry had gotten a little fuzzy. So we conducted a comprehensive survey and discovered what many people already knew. While we had significant strengths, our weakest link was our ability to share our faith with others. Our long term attendance figures bore that out. Reluctantly, we faced a hard reality: our "don't ask, don't tell" evangelism program wasn't working.

At the same time, Mike Crawford, our Conference Coordinator of Congregational Development shared with me a series of books by Martha Grace Reese called, *Unbinding The Gospel*. Reese, a pastor and former corporate attorney, directed the only major, national study of effective evangelism in mainline churches. She discovered the most pressing need in most mainline churches was to help people discover the joy of prayer and faith sharing.

Reading through the first couple of chapters, it was as if Reese had been to our church. So we connected the dots and began an experiment. We decided to take our staff and the leadership of our congregation through a study of *Unbinding The Gospel* in the fall. If that went well, we

would hold an all-church study of the same material in the spring during Lent.

The study in the fall was so surprisingly eye-opening and life-changing for our staff and leaders, we knew it had the potential to transform our congregation. We just didn't know how powerful those forces of change would be. That first group launched us on a prayer and small group journey for almost a year. The staff and teams from our church prayed and fasted, organized, and studied the books. They cast vision and helped the rest of the congregation get excited about being a part of a small group during Lent.

To receive the full benefit of the experience, we asked people to do four things: 1) Buy a book and read it—a chapter a week for the six weeks of Lent, 2) Engage in the daily prayer exercises in the back of the book, 3) Join a class or a small group during the study, and 4) Commit to attending worship each week.

During Lent, the weekend worship services were tied directly to what the small groups and classes were discussing that week. We intentionally designed the worship experiences to set the stage for the study, including a testimony from someone in the congregation each week.

Finally, after all the prayer, planning and organizational work, God showed up in ways we had never seen before. Over half of our adult worship attendance got involved in a small group and discussed Reese's book, week by week. For 40 days, hundreds of people participated in prayer exercises that wooed us to communicate with God in fresh ways. Many people read scriptures on a daily basis for the first time in their lives and experienced what it was like to do life with a few others in a small group or class. There were direct answers to prayer, new spiritual bonds created, and vivid, personal experiences of the presence of God that brought healing and hope. It really was transformative. To top it off, we found ourselves sharing these experiences with others. We really didn't plan to say anything. It just bubbled out of us. We became evangelists—through the back door.

At a celebration dinner held for the leaders 10 days after Easter, I asked everyone to focus for a couple of minutes on the one experience that spoke to them the most. Perhaps it was a new truth they discovered or a prayer that was answered unexpectedly. It may have been a personal message from God or something that happened in their group. When I reflected for a moment, there was no question what captured my heart.

On Easter Sunday morning, there was electric excitement in the air as people kept pouring in. Although we had a full house all morning, it was standing room only at 9:45. We brought in every chair we could find and prayed the fire marshal went to the Baptist Church that day. Things went as expected in the services until it came to the invitation. At each service I asked everyone to remain in an attitude of prayer and invited those who had prayed to receive Christ to lift their heads and look at me. I wanted to pray for them individually. Each time I was overwhelmed by the number up people who looked up. I thought, "Did you understand the instructions?" But the look on their faces told me they did. I began praying for them one by one and then realized there was not enough time. I had to resort to praying for sections. "God bless you in the balcony on the right. Let the seal of the Holy Spirit be upon you in the middle at the back."

In 25 years of ministry, I have never had that happen to me. The Spirit of God was palpable. I just wish I would have had a better sermon that day. It was clear they were not responding to what I said. They were responding to the prayer and fasting that many people had been offering for months. And they were responding to their friend or family member, their schoolmate or co-worker, who shared some God story in a casual conversation.

I have heard a lot of colleagues wonder if focusing on evangelism and prayer doesn't draw attention away from social action and truly serving others. That's not what Reese discovered in the evangelism study. It's not what happened in our con-

gregation either. When we focused on evangelism the Spirit opened us to the things of God in all ways. We improved our conscious contact with God through prayer. We invited friends to worship resulting in 30 percent more people attending Easter services than last year. Members and friends prayed to receive Christ into their lives. And on Easter we received a special offering to build a much needed high school addition to the John Wesley School in Liberia. Our sisters and brothers in Liberia needed a huge amount to raise in one offering. Many people thought we would not receive that much. They were right. We raised \$13,000 more than necessary to build the addition. In the long history of this congregation, we have never had that "problem." I also announced during Lent that I felt led to run the Chicago Marathon (my first) as a way to raise money for the people of Liberia. When I asked the congregation to run it with me, I thought maybe 2 or 3 might bite. We now have 42 people training to run the Chicago Marathon in October as a fundraiser to lift up our friends in Liberia. If interested, track our progress at www.mercymarathon.org.

It sounds so simple, but miraculous things happen when we pray and share our experiences with God. To the outside observer, it is almost magical. But it is happening in churches all over the country that are choosing to "unbind" the Gospel. Imagine what a picture of new life could look like in your church. Then ask God to bring it into focus.

See, I am doing a new thing! Now it springs up; do you not perceive it?

— Isaiah 43:19

Martha Grace Reese has offered to host a conference call for a group of Illinois Great Rivers Conference pastors who might be interested in trying a "test" study of *Unbinding the Gospel* in their congregations (www.GraceNet.info). First step: read *Unbinding the Gospel*. Do you like it? If you're interested in participating in a phone call, call Mike Crawford, 217-529-3120.