

## **No words big enough for Greensburg Mennonite's gratitude**

*by Laurie Oswald Robinson for Mennonite Church USA Executive Leadership*

GREENSBURG, Kan. — Jeffrey Blackburn, pastor of Greensburg Mennonite Church, searches for words big enough to convey the gratitude for Mennonite Church USA's support after a May 4 tornado last year destroyed their church.

As he struggled to find language to reflect this past year's experiences during an April 2 interview, Blackburn looked out the study window of his newly-built home in Greensburg. He seemed to riffle through a thousand emotions as he looked at twisted trees and empty lots.

What words are big enough to tell how it felt to have strangers help stunned homeowners pick through shreds for any last thread of family photos and favorite things?

What words are big enough to tell how it felt to receive letters, e-mails and phone calls from Mennonites and others across Kansas, the United States and around the world offering prayers and emotional support?

What words are big enough to tell how it felt to receive monetary gifts totaling about \$100,000 and countless volunteer hours from Mennonite Church USA constituents since the tornado ravaged 90 percent of the town (population 1,500) and killed 12 residents?

"I simply say 'thank you,' knowing those are small words for something so big," he said. "But that's what we have in our English language to convey our gratitude.

"We realized we have a support network that we didn't dream existed. I'm not the first to say it, but in all of this, you learn to hold things loosely and hold people close. When things are all gone, you cope with the tragedy by having those relationships."

This network is what sustains Greensburg Mennonite members as they struggle with the rest of the town to rebuild streets, homes and churches and to rebound in persevering faith. Greensburg Mennonite is rebuilding its church on its original foundation. Construction began in March on the rebuild and should be complete by October.

The church plans to use the Mennonite Church USA monetary gifts received from numerous members and congregations for the expected \$300,000 shortfall that will exist after the excellent insurance covers main costs, expected at about \$1.25 million. The church is adding new handicapped accessible features that were not part of the original building and not covered by the insurance package.

"We had tons of volunteer help in initial clean up from Mennonite Disaster Service (MDS), and from Mennonites from South Central and Western District conferences and

beyond,” Blackburn said. “And now we’ve hired a contractor to rebuild. MDS is rebuilding with those who didn’t have insurance coverage, or other resources.”

When it comes to resources, Greensburg Mennonite counts itself rich. The independent, pioneering spirit, so much a part of rural Kansas mentality and Mennonite ethos — coupled with the work of God’s Spirit — is helping the community recover. The original church was built in 1978, and post-tornado has about 65 to 70 members. About 30 percent of the church body relocated and now live too far way to attend. Many of those who remain are not only rebuilding the church but also their homes.

Consider Paul Unruh, a farmer, and his wife, Shirley. They are rebuilding their home and farm seven miles south of Greensburg. Theirs was one of the first properties in the church family to be hit by the 1.7-mile-wide tornado that pummeled western Kansas for nearly two hours.

In some ways, rebuilding structures is the easier part of their recovery, Unruh said. The harder part has been reprogramming oneself to be a gracious receiver. As a service-minded Mennonite, he’d believed it is more blessed to give than to receive. But after 9:55 p.m. on May 4, 2007, his property was ravaged and his perspective rearranged.

“One thing we don’t talk about much at church is how to be good recipients,” Unruh said. “In the early days of cleanup, I had to apologize a lot for being a lousy receiver. I’ve canned a lot of meat for others through Mennonite Central Committee. But never in my wildest dreams did I think that Shirley and I would be eating MCC turkey ourselves.

“When I first walked out of the basement and saw the roof gone, I thought that I would repair the roof and be on my way. It took awhile to sink in that this was no do-it-yourself job. It’s pretty overwhelming to suddenly be the needy one.”

Blackburn agreed that being gracious receivers has challenged the entire church family. No members lost their lives, but about 60 percent of the congregation lost their homes.

“Mennonites are very good about going and doing for others,” Blackburn said. “We have all had to learn to receive gratefully. It’s really uncomfortable to need help. We’ve had to humble ourselves. It’s our time to be helped.”

Though the refining fires of humility have been hot, they have produced some new gems. The church has always enjoyed good relationships, but now there is a new quality to their fellowship, Blackburn said. The church family has gathered in Mullinville High School Auditorium for worship since the disaster. After worship, the place hums.

“It’s taking us 35 to 40 minutes to get out of church,” Blackburn said. “We are much more likely to linger and to catch up and to do the relational thing. I think we’re prone to take it less for granted that tomorrow or next week we’ll see each other again.”

These days, Blackburn takes nothing for granted. All around him, he is reminded of how fragile earthly life is compared to the foundations of life in God. In September 2007, Greensburg Mennonite quietly celebrated its 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary, and hopes to mark the building dedication in a bigger way. In the meantime, he is grateful for every little sign of progress, as the tornado’s first anniversary comes over the horizon. This May, he believes horror is being replaced with hope.

“We have all lived with destruction for so long — the empty lots, piles of trash, the trees with their fuzzy little green leaves on top of shaved branches that look like they are straight out of Dr. Seuss books,” he said.

“But I am glad my study window looks to the east. I see the sun coming up and see the town waking up. I see construction going on, and it’s encouraging to me. The town is coming back. We are all going on.”