News
EarthBeat
Bishop J. Mark Spalding of Nashville, Tennessee., talks with James and Patsy Bradley of Wave

Bishop J. Mark Spalding of Nashville, Tennessee., talks with James and Patsy Bradley of Waverly, Tennessee, Aug. 24. The parishioners of St. Patrick Catholic Church in McEwan, Tennessee, said their home was destroyed by the Aug, 21 flooding. (CNS photo/Katie Peterson, Tennessee Register)

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Waverly, Tennessee — August 26, 2021
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Henry Kersten was pacing back and forth inside his family's home in Waverly Aug. 21 when he saw the backyard shed being carried off by the flood waters. His wife, Leslie, was trapped inside.

"It was amazingly fast," Kersten said. "She was trying to save some things [in the shed]. We never knew the extent that was going to come because we were going by the last flood that we had two years ago."

The water "started to seep into the shed, and then it came so fast that she didn’t feel safe coming out," he recalled in an interview with the Tennessee Register, newspaper of the Nashville Diocese. "She called me on the phone, told me that she

loved me and our children."

"As I was pacing, I saw the shed get washed away and watched her go by," he continued. "It took about five hours, but by God’s blessing, a former neighbor ... was able to find her."

Leslie Kersten, who was a parishioner, along with her family, at St. Patrick Church in McEwen, Tennessee, was one of 20 people confirmed dead in the flooding that washed through Humphreys County Aug. 21. Up to 18 inches of rain fell in the area in less than 24 hours, breaking the Tennessee record for one-day rainfall.

When planning for Leslie's funeral the morning of Aug. 24, Henry Kersten said they chose a quote from the Gospel of Mark for the program cover: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength. The second is this: Love your neighbor as yourself." (Mark 12:29-31)

"That's Lesley's life in a Bible verse. She loved the church. ... The church has been so important in our life," Kersten said. "She was the epitome of God's greatest commandment."

Bishop J. Mark Spalding of Nashville, Tennessee, visits flood victims in Waverly, Tennessee, A

Bishop J. Mark Spalding of Nashville, Tennessee, visits flood victims in Waverly, Tennessee, Aug. 24. (CNS photo/Katie Peterson, Tennessee Register)

In the darkness of tragedy, Kersten still finds the light of God's grace.

"God sends his toughest challenges for his strongest soldiers," Kersten told Nashville Bishop J. Mark Spalding, who visited victims of the Waverly flood Aug. 24.

As Spalding visited flood victims at relief shelters and their destroyed homes, he brought with him a message: "You're not alone."

"In times of profound tragedy, presence is the most important thing," Spalding said. "No matter what crisis we face in life, just knowing another is there with you and for you, especially in our context of faith, to know that God is with us and for us as well is what people need to know."

On Aug. 20, downpours of rain reaching more than 18 inches hit Humphrey County, about 60 miles west of Nashville. By 8:30 a.m. the next day, the rapidly rising flood

waters were crashing through Waverly, wreaking havoc on homes and businesses. Hundreds of homes were damaged or destroyed.

"It just came in as an influx," said Grey Collier, public information officer for the Humphreys County Emergency Management Agency. "Within just 10 to 30 minutes, people went from dry floors to having to climb in their attics."

Barbara Hooper, flood relief coordinator for the Society of St. Vincent de Paul at St. Patrick Church and conference vice president, said this was the worst flood the community has ever experienced.

"This is like a tsunami in a foreign city, and we're in a little town in Tennessee," Hooper said. "Now we're seeing what they go through all the time."

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On the morning of the flood, Jackie Tate, a middle school language arts teacher at St. Patrick School, and her family were at home and had their bags packed and ready to go.

They were keeping an eye on the back door, where they expected to see the waters rise. But after her husband, Christian, took their dog out in the front yard and saw the rising water headed their way, he rushed inside to warn them to evacuate.

The Tate family was unable to leave in their truck, so they sought shelter at their neighbor's home on higher ground.

"We knew we might get into the flooding area, but I've never seen anything like that," Tate told the Tennessee Register.

The St. Vincent de Paul Society at St. Patrick helped Tate and her family secure a rental property while they wait for government aid.

"They have been an absolute godsend," Tate said of the parish. "They're my people."

On Aug. 24, President Joe Biden approved a major disaster declaration for Tennessee, making assistance available from the Federal Emergency Management Agency to supplement state and local recovery efforts, including in Humphreys

County.

FEMA assistance can include grants for temporary housing and home repairs, low-cost loans to cover uninsured property losses and other programs to help individuals and business owners recover from the effects of the disaster.

Despite the devastation, victims and volunteers said the way the community has come together with clothing and food collections in McEwen and Waverly has been overwhelming.

"The outpouring of support has been phenomenal," Collier said.

"This is what humanity is," said Margaret Loose, family friend of St. Patrick parishioners James and Patsy Bradley, who also lost their home.

"This is what the Volunteer State truly means," Waverly Vice Mayor Mike Goodman added, referring to the state's nickname.

Tate's family has already benefited from the collections of food, clothing and supplies.

"It is really amazing to watch, but I'm not surprised," Tate said. "[This community] will give you the shirt off their back."