

Church volunteers flock to help tornado victims

By JERISTUDT

One of the many irreplaceable items the tornado stole on its devastating path through the city was the steeple from Peace Church of the Brethren. Understandably, church treasurer Vena Walters' first reaction was to worry about the damage done to her own church home, but service went on as usual.

"It was kind of warm without electricity," she laughed, but it went on.

Walters then turned her attention to the damage done to houses and yards throughout Council Bluffs. As disaster coordinator for her church, she was responsible for coordinating and dispatching disaster teams to needy residents. The teams offered assistance — not only to their own congregation members, but to anyone needing aid.

The disaster crews worked "doing anything that needed to be done," but most devoted themselves to the heavy labor of removing downed tree limbs from yards and streets. The crews worked in conjunction with city crews — who helped remove debris from the streets — and the Salvation Army and the American Red Cross — who relayed the requests from stricken home-owners.

While the disaster teams cleared wreckage from front yards throughout the city, most concentrated on the west end, where the tornado struck hardest. Most busied themselves removing downed tree limbs, but clean-up was far from the church's only self-appointed duties. Walters relayed requests from a disabled man who needed his chimney rebuilt, from senior citizens who needed debris taken from their roofs, and from one family who needed help putting plastic on their leaking roof.

When the calls first came in, Walters dispatched only members of her own congregation,

but 48 hours after the tornado struck, helping hands came pouring in from throughout the Midwest.

The immediate response may impress some, but to church members, it was business as usual. Church of the Brethren is known for its disaster teams,

said pastor Charles Lunkley. The Council Bluffs Church has sent teams to disaster areas as far as Texas and Tennessee. In wake of the destruction of the tornado, the teams were needed in Council Bluffs. The response from fellow churches was

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Residents line up behind a Salvation Army emergency relief truck seeking food and refreshments along Avenue D near North 28th Street a few days after the storm. Many residents were without power for several days. — Photo by Dan Koenig.