

NEWS

From Knoxville to Statesville: Crash connects communities



Front Street Baptist Church on Thursday. (SAUL YOUNG/NEWS SENTINEL)

Families, friends waited for updates

By *Gerald Witt* of the *Knoxville News Sentinel*

STATESVILLE, N.C. — In the previous major fire, the church only lost a building.

On Wednesday, Statesville’s Front Street Baptist Church lost six members of its congregation when a bus returning from Gatlinburg blew a tire and charged across lanes into the diesel tank of a tractor-trailer on Interstate 40.

Witnesses said the smoke was visible for miles. A passenger in an SUV involved in the accident and the tractor-trailer driver also died in the blaze.

That night, members of the congregation milled around the fellowship hall of the 102-year-old church.

In January 1945, the church sanctuary burned down, an event that brought support to rebuild from other churches in the community.

After Wednesday’s fiery crash, the church’s community of support extended from Front Street Baptist’s sanctuary to nearby neighborhood hangouts, over a mountain range to Knoxville and beyond via the Internet.

All night Wednesday and all day Thursday, supporters came to the church with food, flowers and prayer.

Worship Pastor Rick Cruz thanked God that six members of Front Street Baptist Church who died in Tennessee have gone to a better place.

Cruz, the church’s worship pastor, spoke just after dawn during a news conference. Eight had died. Fourteen were injured.

“We thank you for your prayers and support,” Cruz said. He then turned and walked back into the church.

The morning sky above was pale blue and dotted with clouds, a sunrise that seemed incongruous with news of a deadly crash.

Less than a day before, some of the church’s senior adult members were returning from a gospel retreat in Gatlinburg. The crash site was just past the I-40/I-81 split on an eastbound lane.

The scene in Tennessee was a scramble of burned, twisted metal over four lanes of interstate. A static-filled recording broadcast over AM 1640 told travelers traffic was diverted.

“All lanes are closed as emergency personnel clear a crash scene,” an anonymous voice repeated.

Cruz and next-of-kin were still gathering details and learning of loved ones that had died.

The bus riders were a group that included elderly and retirees who had active roles in the church.

“Many were members of the senior adult choir,” said Nancy Royall Ivey, the church historian. “We will miss them on several fronts.”

Others riding that bus work through a ministry in a middle school. The ties between the bus riders and local schools was so deep that Iredell-Statesville Schools sent counselors to high schools.

Ivey said the seniors’ energy level could shame the youth at the church.

“Young people in our church have a high level of activity,” she said. “You got to be way up there in age before you stop when you retire.”

The victims were members of a church with nearly 400 members in a city of more than 25,000 people in the eastern foothills of the Appalachian Mountains. Statesville sits at the crossroads of I-40 and I-77.

The county seat for Iredell County, Statesville is close enough to Charlotte to draw television crews from every major network, but far enough to be a community where everyone seems to know a cousin, brother, sister or friend who is a member of the church or involved in the crash.

At the Family Friendly Restaurant next door to Front Street Baptist, men who sit in back of the bacon-and-eggs diner talked about the crash Thursday morning.

Glenn Hedrick, 80, of Statesville has worked and owned businesses next to the church since he was 19 years old. Some of his customers were and are church members, he said.

He and his friend Tony Gardner spoke about bus driver Randolph Morrison and his wife, Barbara, who usually eat with them at the diner. They pointed to their booth.

Both were killed in the crash, their son Ronnie Morrison told reporters Thursday morning at the University of Tennessee Medical Center in Knoxville.

“Their house is right down the road,” Hedrick said. “She drives a school bus.”

A flip-phone buzzed in his shirt pocket. Hedrick got an update about two others he knew in the accident. One had a broken back, he said.

“His wife was dead on the scene,” Hedrick said, speaking of Marsha McLelland.

As names of victims were released after the deadly crash, pharmacist Donnie Bowers said, “There’s so much uncertainty.”

Some victims of the crash are customers of Cooke’s Pharmacy in Statesville, less than a quarter-mile from Front Street Baptist.

“It goes way back,” pharmacy tech Tammy Pope said about the church’s history. “Being that it was a lot of older people, it hits all areas.”

Bowers, Pope and others shuffled behind the chest-high counter in the pharmacy. Pills rattled out of bottles while the crew measured and filled prescriptions.

“With a small community like this, you know a lot of people,” she said. “And you love everybody.”

Television crews appeared to multiply overnight as vans from Charlotte, Raleigh and Greensboro, N.C., mingled with Knoxville reporters and national media.

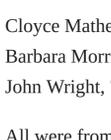
Meanwhile, the uncommon bond between Statesville and Knoxville appeared to deepen as reports continued out of both locations updating the world on the condition of victims, the details of the accident and other new information.

“The church family here are pulling together in a remarkable way,” said Darren Johnson, former pastor at Front Street Baptist. “We’re in a holding pattern, looking for information and allowing the families to release information.”

Then the names of the dead were released in Tennessee.

Cloyce Matheny, 95 years old. Brenda Smith, 69. Marsha McLelland, 62. Barbara Morrison, 66, and Randy Morrison, the driver, 66, who were married. John Wright, 73.

All were from Statesville, except for Wright, who was from Mocksville, N.C.



About Gerald Witt
Gerald covers Knox County government and politics for the News Sentinel. His background includes award-winning news, sports and investigative work.

Facebook @gwitt Gerald.Witt@knoxnews.com 865-342-6357

NEWS TOPICS

- Local
- State
- 2016 Election
- Strange News
- News Columnists
- Sam Venable
- Georgiana Vines
- Frank Munger
- Greg Johnson
- Send A News Tip
- Watchful Eye
- PolitiKnox
- My Kid, My School
- Health
- National
- National Politics
- World
- Databases
- Photo Galleries

LATEST PHOTO GALLERIES

Photos: 37th Tennessee Homecoming brings history to life



Photos: Hurricane Matthew evacuees find shelter in Knoxville

Photos: Knoxville celebrates 225 years

NOW TRENDING

Steps outlined for getting gas fireplace pilot light going

Posted: Oct. 03, 2013

0 Comments

SHARE



In this aerial photo, emergency workers respond to a crash involving a passenger bus, a tractor-trailer and an SUV near Dandridge, Tenn., on Oct. 2, 2013. Authorities said the bus, carrying members of a North Carolina church group, veered across the highway median and crashed into the other vehicles in a fiery wreck that killed eight people. (Paul Efrid/News Sentinel)



SAUL YOUNG/NEWS SENTINEL A wreath and flowers decorate a tree outside Front Street Baptist Church on Thursday.



A woman grieves outside Front Street Baptist Church on Thursday. Six members of the church died in a bus crash east of Knoxville the day before. (SAUL YOUNG/NEWS SENTINEL)

0 Share Tweet Email Print