

California Baptist churches respond to needs during wildfires

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OAKHURST, Calif. (BP)—The smoke surrounding Greg Kilgore's house is so thick he cannot even see the surrounding hills.

Kilgore, pastor of First Baptist Church in Oakhurst, Calif., is one of many pastors feeling the effects of the Creek Fire, a blaze contributing to the worst season of wildfires in California's history.

With the smoke from the surrounding fires drifting in, Kilgore said firefighters have been unable to maintain proper air support for aircraft to drop retardant on the fire.

Many in Kilgore's congregation have evacuated or are living in a high-level warning zone.

As the fire spreads, so do the community's needs, and Kilgore said Southern Baptists have been answering the call for help.

Mike Bivins, director of disaster relief for the California Southern Baptist Convention, said teams have provided meals to evacuated families in Monterey, offering personal property recovery services to more than 1,000 homeowners in and around Napa, working with the American Red Cross to serve communities near Fresno and are currently on standby to provide assistance to communities all the way from San Diego County up to the Oregon border.

However, with the restrictions due to the COVID-19 pandemic, face-to-face

aid has looked a bit different than usual. Bivins said disaster relief teams have been challenged to find ways to meet urgent physical and spiritual needs while maintaining physical distance.

“With limited face-to-face communication, it is difficult to assess needs and communicate the love and hope of Christ,” Bivins said.

He emphasized local churches like First Baptist Oakhurst are vital to the relief effort.

“One of California Southern Baptists’ best resources is our local churches,” Bivins said. “Many of our churches located near the fires are preparing and responding to the immediate needs of evacuees by providing water, snacks, gift cards, temporary evacuation points and coordinating with other organizations active in disaster.”

Specific to the Creek Fire, Bivins said local churches are sharing the responsibility of preparing and delivering meals as the fires continue to spread, and California’s disaster relief feeding teams are on standby with a mobile kitchen.

“I cannot express enough appreciation for the help we are receiving from the (California Southern Baptist Convention) and our disaster relief ministry,” Kilgore said, noting the state convention provided financial assistance.

“I was able to go to the hotel housing evacuees to pass out gift cards and pray with evacuees. Even this morning the Baptist Foundation of California has offered financial assistance to our churches,” he said on Sept. 9.