

# **‘The woods exploded’ amid pastor’s fire rescue**

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MAGALIA, Calif. (BP)—When the deadliest wildfire in state history struck the Northern California town of Magalia, Pastor Doug Crowder didn’t get to preach his Veterans Day sermon about risking death to save others, but he had the opportunity to live it.

With the fire speeding toward Magalia in the early hours of the morning Nov. 9, Crowder, pastor of Magalia Pines Baptist Church, was loading into vehicles about 30 people who had been unable to evacuate the town. They had taken shelter at the church building with him and four other church members.

“We were in the driveway planning to leave, and the entire world erupted,” Crowder said in an interview.

There had been no fire in the adjacent businesses or woods, he said. But suddenly “the woods exploded,” he said. “The Subway restaurant across the street exploded, and on all sides of us was fire.”

Church members hurried people back inside the building and prayed—watching flames shoot horizontally between buildings and listening to thousands of gallons of propane detonate at a hardware store next door.

When they emerged the next day, everything around the church had been incinerated, but “we were totally unscathed,” Crowder said.

“The fall leaves were still on the trees” on the church’s property, he added.

The Camp Fire began Nov. 8 and quickly leveled Magalia, home to about

12,000 residents 90 miles north of Sacramento, and adjacent Paradise, where about 27,000 people live. The fire claimed at least 42 lives, making it the deadliest blaze in California history. It has destroyed more than 6,700 structures, most of them homes, according to media reports. As of Nov. 11, 228 people still were missing in the affected area.

## **Stayed behind to help**

Most Magalia and Paradise residents evacuated, but Crowder stayed behind to help the elderly, the homeless, those without enough gas for their vehicles and others who couldn't evacuate.

With the Magalia Pines church building among the only structures in town spared, the congregation hopes to turn the tragedy into a continued ministry opportunity.

"It will be years before it's a town again," Crowder said. "But all through that, our church will be standing, and our church will be ministering."

The church facility housed firefighters whose home was destroyed along with the homes of about 75 percent of the church's 100 attendees on Sunday night, Crowder said. With assistance from the California Southern Baptist Convention's disaster relief ministry, Magalia Pines plans to begin feeding the community and helping people clean up as soon as the public is allowed back in town, likely late this week or early next week.

"This is the worst fire impact" I have seen, said Mike Bivins, disaster relief director with the state convention, noting he has been ministering in California since the 1980s.

Disaster relief workers hoped to take supplies to Magalia, including water and generators. The goal is "to sort of be a community center as people come back in and survey their burned-out property," Bivins said.

Charles Woods, director of missions for the local Sierra Butte Baptist Association, reported three other Southern Baptist churches have been affected by the Camp Fire, with the death of a member reported by at least one of those congregations. None of the churches has lost its building, but all the pastors' homes were destroyed.

Still, the pastors all want "to be able to open those churches up in ministry to the people when they come back in," Woods said. He requested prayer for families of the dead, those who lost all their possessions and the safety of individuals still missing.

Crowder said he had planned to use as an illustration in his Nov. 11 Veterans Day sermon a pin on his military beret from his Air Force pararescue days in Vietnam. The pin said, "These things we do that others may live." Now the pin is gone along with his house, and the sermon never was preached.

"I didn't get to preach it," Crowder said, "but we got to live it."