

Fires erupt as Mississippi mission team serves Los Angeles

LOS ANGELES – When Steven Smith and the group of college students he was leading began their mission trip to Send Relief’s Ministry Center in Los Angeles, they had no idea they would soon be serving a city facing some of its most challenging days.

“On Tuesday (Jan. 7), we became aware of the fire situation. We were there when it got on the radar of the city that it was out of control,” said Smith, associate pastor of college, young adults and discipleship at First Church, Jackson.

Smith and his team were in North Hollywood and East LA, miles from the worst of the fires. So, they carried on with ministering to people alongside Darryl Speers, the Ministry Center director, and others on the Send Relief team.

When they went to minister on Skid Row, a part of Los Angeles with one of the largest homeless populations in the United States, Smith said there were fewer people out and about than usual. He described the scene as surreal.

“There was a haze everywhere,” Smith said. “You could smell the smoke because the winds had stopped by Thursday, so everything had settled on the city. There was ash falling everywhere.”

So, Smith and his students were passing out masks to those in need to help keep them from inhaling so much of the ash and smoke.

“As we were going on about our normal business, especially at night, we could see flames miles away,” Smith said. “We could

see the smoke and the haze from every direction we were in, during the day and the night. Even though we weren't in immediate danger, we could still see every bit of it."

As they served around the city, one of the tasks they accomplished was helping clean up wind-damaged neighborhoods. Gusts of up to 100 mph, which spurred the rapid spread of the Southern California fires, downed power lines and trees.

"You had people without power. You had powerlines down in the streets. You had trees falling on houses and cars," Smith said. "So, our students went around on Wednesday just picking up trash and helping folks clean litter and debris out of their yards."

California Baptist churches, including churches recently planted through the North American Mission Board's (NAMB) Send Network, have already been helping their neighbors as California Southern Baptist Disaster Relief (SBDR) and Send Relief facilitate a broader response.

Send Relief is supporting a California Baptist SBDR kitchen that has begun providing meals for those responding to the fires.

The fires have killed at least 25 people and destroyed thousands of homes and tens of thousands of acres. As wind gusts began picking back up, Associated Press reported that more than 90,000 households were without electricity as companies cut power to prevent power lines from igniting new fires.

Those realities hit home for Smith who has family in the area.

"One of my close cousins, he and his wife live in Altadena, and they lost their house and everything," Smith said. "Being from Mississippi and being out there, it's crazy how – a world away – it still hit our family."

Smith and his church have regularly ventured to Los Angeles to meet needs and share the Gospel there. Now, he said, his prayer is that God will raise up the church even in tragedy to be the hands and feet of Jesus.

“We really do have an opportunity as Southern Baptists,” said Smith, “to make more of an impact on that state than we ever thought we could if local churches are committed to come to their aid, to show them what Christianity is all about.”

For more information on how to help and pray, find the latest updates from Send Relief [here](#).