

'Ordinary Americans who have lost it all': LA church plant pastor shares about wildfire devastation, response

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Trenton Mueller, pastor of The Abiding Church, a young church plant in Los Angeles, joined "Around the Table" hosts Tanner Cade, MBCB Director of Communication Services, and Jon Martin, MBCB Chief Strategy Officer, and MBCB Missions Mobilization Director, Chad McCord, to reflect on the disastrous wildfires obliterating thousands of homes and businesses, displacing ordinary Americans, and leaving entire communities unlivable.

During the 2024 Southern Baptist Convention in Indiana last summer, Mississippi Baptist Convention Board (MBCB) Missions Mobilization Director Chad McCord made a connection with Trenton Mueller, pastor of The Abiding Church in Los Angeles, through a mutual colleague.

Mueller asked McCord about his position at the MBCB, to which McCord shared about the Missions Mobilization Department's purpose to equip local Mississippi churches for mission opportunities around the world and to invest in lasting relationships with cross-cultural missionaries, ministries, and church plants bringing the Gospel to their communities. Mueller was eager to have a group of Mississippi Baptists join The Abiding Church in their outreach, so a Vision Journey to Los Angeles was planned for February 2025.

On Jan. 7, however, wildfires started to rapidly spread around Los Angeles. McCord made a call to Mueller, expecting plans to be cancelled. "This could not be more perfect timing for you

to bring a group here,” a weary Mueller responded. “We pray the fire will be out a month from now, but there’s going to be a lot of work. We need a lot of partners to come.”

A week into the disaster, Mueller called into the “Around the Table” podcast to bring Mississippi Baptists up-to-date on the side of the crisis that the national news will likely not cover. “I don’t even know what day it is currently,” he admitted. “We’ve just been going, going, and going, and helping people.”

Mueller related what The Abiding Church is facing now. “Our church is about one and a half years old, and is located in northeast LA. We’re in the city limits, about a 15-minute drive from the Eaton fire in Altadena. Many of our people have been affected, and a massive number of our people know families who have lost everything. Though there is devastation, God is absolutely shifting things in a spiritual sense. People’s openness to hear the Gospel is like I’ve never seen before in Los Angeles.

“We have one family in our church with a one and three-year old daughters, Chris and Lauren Fordinal, whose whole home burned down. When they left, they really didn’t think it was going to reach them. Almost every victim I’ve talked to, over 30 families, told me they had dealt with fires in Eaton Canyon before and so just left with the clothes on their backs and drove down to wait it out, just to return to absolutely nothing. My wife is helping the Fordinals move in today and buying groceries for them.



The Abiding Church, Los Angeles, has temporarily turned its building into a supply distribution center for victims of the wildfires. (Photo credit: Trenton Mueller)

“Multiple of our families have been evacuated, and that’s one of the ways our small

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With counsel from other pastors who have dealt with times of crisis, Mueller and The Abiding have found a short-term way to help families receive funds they need with gift cards. While emergency funding opportunities like GoFundMe pages and FEMA are helpful, thousands of families have not been processed yet, waiting with no money. The Abiding continues to make lists of known people in need and have served 32 families so far.

“We served a family of 12 yesterday that were in a home with another 10 people,” Mueller shared, “and the one car the family of 12 has left, the dad needed for work, so the rest were stuck at home. One of our groups was able to bring them a huge load of supplies and give them a stack of gift cards, and that group came back happy and proud of our church.”

The Abiding has also turned their building into a temporary distribution center for families to receive the supplies they need, and the church has also distributed to first responders. In the last two days, they have delivered over 10 truckloads of supplies. A schoolteacher and member of The Abiding, Cassanda Navarez, has directed efforts to raise funds to replenish wardrobes for students who have lost everything.

Once the fires are extinguished, the mid-to-long-term aid will include cleanup in hazardous and contaminated conditions. The California Baptist Disaster Relief will properly train members from The Abiding, and many other churches, to help clean up

damaged properties.

“Our church is already committed to families for the long haul,”
Mueller



Members of The Abiding Church, Los Angeles, write notes of prayer and encouragement to be included with disaster relief supplies. (Photo credit: Trenton Mueller)

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As the mass media news outlets continue to cover the wealthy side of LA, Mueller emphasized, “You think of millionaires when you think of LA, but people have lived here a long time, and Altadena is not the rich part of town by any means. Altadena has a lot of impoverished people and is like a regular U.S. town.”

The Abiding has served a few families who have lost homes purchased decades ago at a low mortgage rate. With the economy

as it is now, these families question if they will even be able to continue living in the state. "I just don't know what these families are going to do," Mueller admitted. "So no, it's not all superstars' homes who have been burned. These are just ordinary Americans who have lost it all."

How Can MS Baptists Help?

When asked what Mississippi Baptists can do, Mueller responded with emotion in his voice, "Just pray for now. I have never seen anything like this. God positioned us here for this moment, so pray for endurance for our people who are all obviously emotionally drained and then pray for Gospel opportunities. We as Christians know that there's an eternal hope even in suffering. So pray for appropriate Gospel opportunities and endurance for us."

Mississippi Baptists can give directly to The Abiding Church, with 100% of the funds committed to wildfire victims this month by visiting <https://www.theabidingla.com/>.

Additionally, Mississippi Baptist Disaster Relief (MSBDR), through the support of Mississippi Baptist churches, has approved an initial gift of \$25,000 to California Baptist Disaster Relief ministry to assist in their response efforts.

Mississippi Baptist churches can designate on their Church Offering Reports an offering to Disaster Relief-California Wildfires as a part of their regular MBCB contribution or send a check payable to MBCB, with the designation in the memo line: Disaster Relief-California Wildfires. Individuals may send a check payable to MBCB, with the designation in the memo line: Disaster Relief-California Wildfires. All funds designated in this manner will be forwarded to California Baptist Disaster Relief for use in the response and recovery.

To listen to the entire podcast, visit <https://mbcb.org/podcasts/>.