

# Send Network church plant meets needs in aftermath of L.A. fires

PASADENA, Calif. – When Trenton Mueller moved from Tennessee to Southern California to begin the church planting process, he never would have imagined his journey would intersect with one of the greatest tragedies Los Angeles would ever face.

Mueller was attending his grandmother's birthday celebration in Albuquerque when fire evacuation notices started going out in L.A. Then, he received word that key members of his new church plant, Christopher and Lauren Fordinal, lost their home to the flames.

Mueller began making phone calls while still in New Mexico, so he could hit the ground running to begin meeting the needs of the members in his church and their neighbors.

Because of their relationships in the community, his recent Send Network church plant, The Abiding Church, was able to quickly connect with survivors.

"It's like God positioned us for this moment to be helpful," Mueller said. "Most of the people we're connecting with drove off their property with just the clothes on their backs thinking, 'It'll pass,' and then lost everything."

Thousands of families lost homes as the Eaton fire and the Palisades fire consumed tens of thousands of acres in Los Angeles County, claiming the lives of at least 28 people.

Mueller posted videos to social media, encouraging his friends and ministry partners to give to support the church's compassion ministry efforts.

"We know people who have lost everything, who've lost their

homes," Mueller said in one of his first videos. "They have nothing left. This has been a big deal for community, and God has placed us here for such a time as this."

Early on, the church put together bags of toiletries, toilet paper, water, blankets and food and distributed them from the building where their church gathers. They have now connected with 100 families who lost their homes and have provided gift cards to meet immediate needs. In some cases, they were able to cover the cost of housing.

One of those families is a Honduran family whose shop, Bessy's Boutique located close to the Eaton Canyon fire, survived, but the smoke damage rendered all their inventory unusable and damaged the facility.

Mueller and a group of volunteers from the church and another local ministry met to clean out the store, and now The Abiding has arranged to host its supply distribution out of the facility for the next couple of months.

"Now, we're two minutes from where the National Guard block off zone is," Mueller said. "So, we're in Altadena now, God willing, for the long haul there to continue to meet needs."

All of this has been made possible through The Abiding's connections through Send Network, the North American Mission Board's (NAMB) church planting arm, as well as through Southern Baptists from around the nation, including from California, Mississippi, Tennessee and South Carolina.

"How awesome it is that the Church, the 'big C' church, is showing up in a profound way in this moment," Mueller said in an Instagram video. "I'm so proud to be a part of the Church."

Tony Wolfe, executive director of the South Carolina Baptist Convention, was visiting California Baptists and stopped by to check in with Mueller.

“South Carolina Baptists ... you have been giving to Trenton and other church planters in the Los Angeles area [and] are continuing to do so. ... This is not just Trenton’s work,” Wolfe said in a video with Mueller. “This is not just The Abiding’s work. This is your work.”

Mueller, his wife Kellie and their three kids moved to Southern California from Tennessee, where he was on staff at Long Hollow Church in Hendersonville, to plant a church. He served on staff with pastor and Send Network planter Jason Polk at Echo Church in Anaheim before he was sent out from Echo to start The Abiding.

The combined ministry efforts of Southern Baptists have allowed Mueller and his church to be a focal point for Gospel advance in Los Angeles in the aftermath of tragedy, and they plan to be there for the long haul as their community recovers, even after the spotlight on the tragedy starts to fade away.

“We are committed to this and committed to people,” said Mueller. “Everyone’s barriers – all the barriers that I’ve cried out to the Lord saying, ‘Remove this so the Gospel can get in’ – all their barriers are down, every single one of them, and they’re open to the Gospel and open to good news.”

Tragedy has yielded opportunity.

“This is the Church’s time to make a huge impact in Pasadena, Altadena, East LA, and we’re honored to be a part of it,” Mueller said. “I really believe this is grounds for revival for our part of the city.”

Mississippians will soon have the opportunity to join in that revival as the Mississippi Baptist Convention Board (MBCB) Missions Mobilization department will lead a team to Los Angeles from Feb. 25-27 on a Vision Journey to see how they can partner with NAMB church planters, including Mueller.

MBCB's Arounds the Table podcast recently hosted Trenton Mueller for a discussion about his church's response to the wildfires and how Mississippians can get involved. To listen to the entire podcast, visit <https://mbcb.org/podcasts/>.