

Churches Unite in the Aftermath of the California Wildfires

When wind-driven wildfires tore through parts of Southern California in January 2025, more than 19,000 structures were destroyed, most of them homes and businesses. Among the losses were several churches and synagogues, leaving faith communities grappling with devastation even as they worked to help others recover.

Calvary Church of Pacific Palisades was among those hardest hit. Fire officials believe a burning palm branch lodged in the church's eaves, igniting the roof and collapsing the sanctuary. The building was declared a total loss, with rebuilding costs estimated at up to \$15 million.

The timing made the loss even more striking. Pastor Justin Anderson had been appointed just days earlier. The fires began two days after his first sermon.

"Right after it happened, we immediately pivoted to, 'Where do we go? What do we do?'" Anderson said.

As Calvary searched for space, nearby Bel Air Church was facing its own disruption. Evacuation orders forced its congregation to flee, finding refuge after a local rabbi at Valley Beth Shalom synagogue opened the doors and provided meals and meeting space for weeks.



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"That changed everything," said Bel Air Church Pastor Drew Sams. "Being on the receiving end of hospitality gave us opportunities later to turn the tables and be hospitable to

others.”

That opportunity came when Sams reached out to Anderson, even though the two pastors had never met. Bel Air offered Calvary use of its historic chapel – once attended by President Ronald Reagan – and went further by refurbishing the space to make it ready for weekly worship.

“They repainted, re-carpeted, pulled a bunch of stuff out and got it ready for us,” Anderson said.

For months, Bel Air Church became a temporary home for Calvary Palisades, an act of generosity that Anderson described as overwhelming.

“There was no relationship, no prompting – just the grace of God and being the church for each other,” he said.

One year later, evacuation orders have been lifted, but recovery remains slow. Calvary Palisades now meets in a local school gym, while nearly 90% of its surrounding community remains displaced.

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