

As Lava Overtakes Hawaii's Big Island, Residents Cling to Psalm 129

Crisis-trained Billy Graham Rapid Response Team chaplains are on Hawaii's Big Island to offer emotional and spiritual care to residents who have been displaced by eruptions from the Kilauea volcano.

A small group of chaplains was already in Hawaii ministering to flood victims in Kauai when Kilauea erupted on May 3, forcing thousands of residents to evacuate.

While Kilauea is known to be an active volcano that has erupted continually for many years, the latest eruptions have been unusually destructive. Lava has taken out several dozen houses, and thousands of people aren't sure if or when they'll be able to go home.

Aside from the dangers of the lava flow, unpredictable fissures have opened up in the ground, and harmful sulfur dioxide is spewing into the air in some places.

Phil and Pam Rhodes, who live in California, spent the last few weeks with Kauai residents dealing with the aftermath of devastating floods. On Mother's Day, they flew a few hundred miles southeast to begin a deployment in Pahoa, where the volcano has caused the most damage.

"I think the uncertainty of how long they're going to be impacted by it is the thing that weighs on people," Pam said Tuesday, after spending the last couple of days talking and praying with residents.

"We've had a lot of opportunity for ministry with the people in the community," she said. "They're so receptive to the fact

that we're here, that we love them, that God loves them. The name of Jesus is being lifted up, so that's really great."

The Rhodeses, who are ministering along with another chaplain couple from California, said they've seen a strong sense of community and resolve among the people of the Big Island, many of whom have had ancestors living in the area for hundreds of years. But even though volcanic activity is part of life for many Hawaiians, there's still anxiety about what could happen next.

"For those who have Jesus, they seem to be putting one foot in front of the other and trusting Him," Phil said. "For those who don't, they're concerned about their food and shelter, their physical, their immediate needs. It's the end of the year at school, so families are concerned about the completion of the school year that's been disrupted."

Whenever Phil and Pam have the chance to spend time with a resident, they ask God to reveal the love of Jesus through them as they "gently come alongside people and just be here to hold their hand."

"Jesus lives in our hearts," Pam said. "And the Bible tells us that because He lives there, we can be that comfort. We want to come in with gentleness and with love and to be a comfort."

The team of chaplains has experienced what can only be called "divine appointments" during their time on the Big Island, including an encounter with a young man who suffered from a visual impairment that distorted his face. Phil and Pam were in a McDonald's when the man told Phil that people can be incredibly mean. He asked Phil what it feels like to be "normal."

"Phil touched his shoulder, and he took him and hugged him and said, 'You're beautiful in God's eyes. He sees the inside of your heart,'" Pam said.

The man knew Christ but needed encouragement in that moment. He asked the chaplains about the Bible verse that talks about God searching and knowing him. Phil and Pam identified Psalm 139, and he asked them to read it to him.

“We just got to pray with him and share the Word of God with him,” Pam said. “It was just a ‘God moment.’” {eoa}

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