

Billy Graham Chaplains Head to Deadly Ariz. Wildfire

Billy Graham Rapid Response Team chaplains are en route to Prescott, Ariz., where a wildfire has killed 19 firefighters—members of an elite “Hotshot Crew” working to stop the spread of a massive blaze 100 miles northwest of Phoenix.

“Our hearts go out to the families of those firefighters as well as the fire station,” says Jack Munday, international director of the Billy Graham Rapid Response Team. “Firefighters are like brothers.”

The firefighters were killed Sunday night while battling the Yarnell Hill fire in central Arizona. The loss of 19 crew members made Sunday the deadliest day for firefighters in the U.S. since the 9/11 attacks in 2001.

“We just lost 19 of some of the finest people you’ll ever meet,” Prescott Fire Chief Dan Fraijo told reporters in Arizona. “Right now, we’re in crisis.”

Two crisis-trained chaplains with the Billy Graham Rapid Response Team will arrive in Prescott Monday evening to offer emotional and spiritual care to the community.

One of the chaplains is a retired police officer from Florida; the other is a longtime firefighter from Colorado who currently serves as a fire chaplain. In the coming days, they’ll be joined by five more chaplains, all of whom have firefighting backgrounds.

Munday says the ability to send chaplains who have experience on the fire lines is an asset, because it could make it easier for first responders in Arizona to talk about what they’re going through.

“The need for emotional and spiritual care is critical,” Munday says. “They need to talk. They don’t want to put a burden on their family. It’s easier for them to talk to someone who’s a peer.”

The situation in Prescott is especially difficult because the firefighters who lost their peers on Sunday still have a raging wildfire to battle.

“They’re still in the midst of all this chaos,” says Jeff Naber, manager of chaplain development and ministry relations. “There are firefighters who are friends of the ones who were lost, who are probably on the front lines right now. So, we just need to be praying for God to be with them.”

The Yarnell Hill fire was still blazing out of control Monday night. At least 100 buildings have been destroyed, and several towns outside Prescott were evacuated.

In addition to Prescott, the Billy Graham Rapid Response Team currently has chaplains deployed to Colorado Springs, Colo., following a deadly wildfire that destroyed hundreds of homes last month. Crisis-trained chaplains are also serving in Moore, Okla., following this spring’s devastating tornadoes.

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