

Billy Graham Chaplains Respond to Worst Wildfire in Colorado History

When retired fire captains Chuck Bender and Ray Thompson arrived in Colorado Springs, Colo., Saturday, they were welcomed by first responders working the perimeter of the massive Black Forest fire.

“We were here last year for the fires,” said Bender. “They know who we are. They know what we’re about. When we walked in there again, they said, ‘We’re really glad to have you guys.’”

As members of the Billy Graham Rapid Response Team, Bender and Thompson are crisis-trained chaplains who are there to offer spiritual and emotional support to the thousands of people affected by the most destructive fire in Colorado’s history.

This time last year, the team deployed to wildfires in Fort Collins and Colorado Springs. The Waldo Canyon fire that tore through the Colorado Springs area in June-July last year destroyed 350 homes, making it the worst fire in the state’s history at the time. Just one year later, the Black Forest fire has surpassed its predecessor, destroying more than 480 buildings and killing two people.

As firefighters work to contain what’s left of the blaze, the chaplains are working to build relationships with first responders, disaster assistance groups and residents—many unsure of what’s next.

“A lot of these folks don’t know whether their house has burned or not,” said Bender. “One day the fire may have skipped their house, and then the next day the winds changed. So they may have some indication through word of mouth, but they’re just not sure.”

After 33 years with the Los Angeles County Fire Department, Bender knows what it looks like when a family pulls up to a pile of rubble that used to be a home.

“When they drive up that driveway and they see charred ruins with a chimney sticking out of it, they’re in total shock,” said Bender.

The chaplains know they can’t bring anyone’s house, car or family photo album back. What they can do is listen, pray and gently guide homeowners to take the first step in picking up the pieces.

“Show up and shut up,” said Bender. “It’s a listening thing. We’re the hands and the feet of Jesus. Jesus loved on people and listened to their stories. We’re good story listeners. And in the process, there might be a time when we can pray for them. If they don’t have a church or a pastor to talk to, we can steer them in that direction.”

At least four more chaplains will head to Colorado Springs in the coming days. In addition to manning a table at the disaster assistance center, they hope to be close at hand when homeowners return to their houses for the first time.

“There are a lot of homes affected,” said Bender. “It’s bad.”

Bender and Thompson have already prayed with half a dozen people in the area. They know there will likely to be many more opportunities in the days ahead.

In the meantime, they’re thanking God for downpours that knocked back the fire and are asking Him to comfort the loved ones of the two people who died. They’re also praying the Lord will calm the anxious hearts of those who have been displaced, as they wait to hear news of their homes.

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