



As everyone knows, the Black Forest Fire has been affecting thousands of people here in the Pike's Peak Region. My church, Tri-Lakes UMC, is on the edge of the mandatory evacuation zone. From the hill in front of the church we can see the smoke and the fire movement. Many people in the area have stopped by our church to take a look.

At present (editor's note: this letter was written on 6/13 and therefore these numbers have increased since then), some 15,000 acres have been consumed and 360 homes have been confirmed as destroyed. Additional homes have been damaged and there are some 70+ homes that have not yet been reached to confirm their status. The fire continues to grow and has zero containment right now. The forecast for today is for more hot, windy weather, which means the likely expansion of the fire into other areas or the fire blowing back through previously impacted areas and destroying houses previously bypassed.

We have numerous families impacted by the fire. One family has confirmed that their home was destroyed and many others are fearfully concerned about their homes. Last night TLUMC resembled an RV park as many people brought vehicles here for staging. The smoke is very thick and with the evacuation zone creeping toward us many have moved elsewhere this morning.

My associate, Joe Iovino and I along with the church staff have been doing our best to facilitate communication and get people connected to places of refuge. We had one family in the church

offer pasture land for those with horses (many responded as Black Forest is also horse country). We've had numerous offers of lodging for evacuated persons. Both Joe and I and our families are under pre-evacuation notices, but if the fire jumps west to our neighborhoods (close to I-25) we will have an even bigger disaster as those neighborhoods are densely packed with homes. We are packed and ready and already have places to stay outside the fire zone.

Today has been all about coordinating things by phone and internet. Our senior and middle high youth were scheduled to leave for mission trips on Saturday, but we have multiple adult leaders who are evacuated. We are hoping to have a service here on Sunday if the fire doesn't directly impact the church. We will likely just do one service (we normally do three) so that we can gather our whole community together to share stories, pray, grieve, and worship together.

Right now, the fire has only destroyed property so far as we know. Still, the loss that many people will experience is very significant and will impact this area for a long time to come. We ask you to pray for us. What else do we need right now? Truth is, we don't really know at this point. We will know more when the fire is (hopefully) out and we can assess the damage. We will keep you posted. Donations to the Red Cross and our local service agency Tri-Lakes Cares (<http://www.tri-lakescares.org/>) will go a long way. As always, donations to UMCOR will also be helpful.

As I think about my sermon for Sunday, the words of Isaiah 43:1-3 come to mind. Written to people in exile, God promises restoration and redemption. As many of us here drive away from our homes with our cars filled with belongings, it's easy to feel like an exile or refugee, at least for a time. And so these words, written to a people living under a cloud of fear, speak to us of God's presence even in the midst of the smoke: "But now thus says the Lord, he who created you, O Jacob, he who formed you, O Israel; Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name and you are mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you; when you walk through the fire you shall not be burned, and the flames shall not consume you. For I am the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior..."

Lord, have mercy

Rev. Dr. Bob Kaylor
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