

California congregations vow to help neighbors even as their buildings are lost to fires

by [Bob Smietana](#)

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A man walks in front of the burning Altadena Community Church, January 8, in the downtown Altadena section of Pasadena, California. (AP Photo/Chris Pizzello)

Like many of their neighbors, leaders of the Pasadena Jewish Temple & Center watched in horror this week as wildfires destroyed homes, businesses and entire neighborhoods in Southern California, with the destruction playing out on social media and television news.

On Wednesday, their temple, too, was counted among the losses.

“We are unable to access the neighborhood to confirm, so can only watch the news along with you, and hold each other tightly,” the temple’s leadership wrote in [a letter](#) on the center’s website. “We want to assure you that last night, we were able to rescue all our Torah scrolls from the sanctuary, chapel, and classrooms. They are safely in the home of one of our congregants.”

Many of those congregants had also lost their homes to the fire, according to the synagogue’s leaders. The temple’s cantor [told the New York Times](#) that she raced to the building to save the Torah scrolls before fleeing. “The smoke was so dense that we had to get out of the building,” she said.

The Pasadena Jewish Temple was one of a number of houses of worship lost to the infernos raging in and around Los Angeles—fires that have killed at least five people, destroyed 2,000 buildings, and forced 130,000 residents from their homes, according to the [Los Angeles Times](#).

Included in the losses are a mosque, a Catholic parish, and several Protestant churches, according to news reports.

In Altadena, the [Masjid Al-Taqwa](#) burned to the ground, with images of the still smoldering mosque site posted on [social media](#). A [GoFundMe page](#) to raise funds for rebuilding the mosque, which has been in existence for more than 30 years, had already collected more than \$90,000 by midday Thursday.

A pair of Protestant congregations, St. Mark’s Episcopal Church and nearby Altadena Community Church, across East Altadena Drive from each other on the same block, burned in tandem.

“It is with a broken heart that I share with you the news that our church building is lost,” Carri Grindon, rector of St. Mark’s, wrote [in a Facebook update](#) Wednesday. “It caught fire at around 6:30 this morning and is gone.”

Grindon added that church members also lost their homes to the blaze. The church lost two rectories as well.

“We will need one another in the days ahead as we face these devastating losses,” she wrote. “I am here for you, and I know our community will hold together, and love and support one another through whatever lies ahead.”

Altadena Community Church, a red-tiled roofed United Church of Christ known for its community outreach and its bell tower, also [burned in the fire](#). “It is with great sadness that we announce the loss of our church building to the Eaton fires,” the church’s [social media](#) announced Wednesday. “Many of our members have lost their homes too. Thank you to those who have reached out to us with prayers and help. We will regroup to find our path forward.”

Church leaders asked for prayers for the food pantry, preschool and chorale that used space in the church building, as well as for others affected by the conflagration.

“To all the faith communities, including Pasadena Jewish Center and St. Marks Episcopal across the street who also lost their buildings, we send our love and condolences and always our prayer,” a note on the church’s Facebook page read.

In Pacific Palisades, another community affected by the wildfires, Corpus Christi Catholic Church and its school were lost in the fire, [according to](#) the *National Catholic Reporter*. The church’s website features a photo of the burned-out frame of the church, accompanied by words of mourning: “I have no words. Our beautiful church in Pacific Palisades, as of this morning.”

According to *NCR*, nearby St. Monica’s Catholic Church was spared from the fire and served as a gathering place for people fleeing the destruction. Other parishes also offered shelter, reported [Angelus News](#), a news site run by the Archdiocese of Los Angeles, while 65 Catholic schools closed temporarily due to the fire. St. Andrew Catholic School in Pasadena also offered a gathering spot for those who have been displaced. The school’s principal, Jae Kim, offered a listening ear and a bit of comfort to those affected.

“You can hug them, pray with them, listen to them as best you can,” Kim told Angelus News. “What else is there to do?”

Pacific Palisades Presbyterian Church was also damaged in the fire, with photos of the smoldering church site [posted on](#) its Facebook page. While the church’s bell tower still stood, much of the rest of the building appeared to be in ruins. Grace Dawn Park, the church’s associate pastor, also posted [images](#) of the burned-out church building in her Instagram feed.

“My beloved church,” [she posted](#).

Eon Walk, a staffer at the Pasadena Church of Christ, recounted seeing the church go up in flames. Walk [told the *Christian Chronicle*](#) newspaper that she'd gone to check on the building and some burning brush nearby. Then the fire spread to the church itself.

"One of the windstorms blew, and it was like a fireball, and it blew straight toward me," Walk told the *Christian Chronicle*. "All I could do was just back up, and that was it. I had to get out of there." News cameras would later show the entire building ablaze.

At least two United Methodist churches were [destroyed](#): the Community United Methodist Church in Pacific Palisades, whose burning building was [photographed](#) by the *LA Times*, and the Altadena United Methodist Church, according to an update from the California-Pacific Conference of the UMC.

"Today we are facing trouble as fires rage in our cities," Bishop Dottie Escobedo-Frank said in a video message posted on the conference website. "As we work together to care for those who are fleeing for safety, we remember God's help and strength; we lean on each other for courage and encouragement; and we are grateful for every life saved and for the outpouring of love."

[The Salvation Army](#), the Catholic [Archdiocese of Los Angeles](#), the [Episcopal Diocese of Los Angeles](#), and [Atheists United](#) in Los Angeles are among the groups collecting funds to assist victims of the wildfires.

The [Mutual Aid of Los Angeles Network](#), a group founded during the COVID-19 pandemic to help coordinate donations and services to those in need, has also put together a [list of groups](#) offering help to those affected by the blazes. —Religion News Service