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Fire destroys historic sanctuary of First Baptist Church in Jasper

By George Henson

Staff Writer

JASPER—The building is gone, but First Baptist Church in Jasper is alive and well, Pastor Ron Vickers reported.

“Memories and things are lost, but the church is the people,” Vickers said.

Flames roared through the multi-floored building in the early morning hours of June 17. An early investigation pointed toward an electrical cause, possibly because numerous renovations had tied various systems of wires together.

An education building not connected to the sanctuary was not damaged.

A firefighter rests on the front steps of First Baptist Church of Jasper as he aims a water hose inside the demolished sanctuary. The building was destroyed by fire June 17, but Pastor Ron Vickers said the church remains alive and well. (Dave Ryan/Beaumont Enterprise Photo)

The congregation and members of the Southeast Texas community met on the grounds that evening for a service and to comfort one another. Vacation Bible School, which began the evening prior to the fire, probably will not be rescheduled this year, the pastor said.

Among the most cherished items lost in the blaze were the church's stained-glass windows, imported from Germany when the building was constructed in 1943. Vickers estimated their value at about \$2 million due to their age and craftsmanship.

The windows could be replicated with modern technology for about \$160,000, he added, "but the value to the people here was much more than that."

First Baptist Church is rich in history. It has been holding services at the same location since Christmas morning 1855. On the Sunday after the fire, First Baptist held its services and Sunday School at First United Methodist Church, about a block away.

About 300 people attended Sunday morning services, 100 more than most Sundays, and then walked over to the Baptist church grounds.

"There had been a service there every Sunday since that Christmas morning in 1855, and we weren't going to let that tradition come to an end," Vickers said. "We sang a song and said a prayer, and that was important to a great many people. The traditions we're able to keep alive, we're going to keep."

Minister of Music Tracy Speed led those gathered in singing three songs—"God is So Good," "Oh, How I Love Jesus" and "Alleluia."

"We just wanted to remember how good God has been to us even in this time that many people consider a disaster," Speed said.

Many people have come by the church to offer their sympathies or leave a small gift, he said. "Many of these are members of other churches, but some are not. It just goes to show how God has impacted so many lives through the ministry of this church over the years."

Seeing the charred remains of the building has been hard for many church members, but Vickers believes it has brought his congregation closer together.

"There's been a lot of tears shed, and a lot of reminiscing of memories, but

as a whole they've rallied together very well," he reported. "There have been some long hours on the phone and in person talking, and it hasn't just been from the pastor to the people; they've also been very supportive to me through this time."

First Baptist has received support from the entire religious community in Jasper, Vickers said. Every church in Jasper joined the Methodist church in offering use of its facilities, he added.

"Jasper has had some bad publicity, and a movie said that there were two Jaspers—a white one and a black one. Well, I told my people, 'There may be two towns in Jasper, but there's only one church.'"

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