

Vietnamese Baptist Church burns amid Philadelphia unrest

October 29, 2020

PHILADELPHIA (BP)—The Vietnam Baptist Church in Philadelphia building was burned Oct. 27 during the second night of unrest in the city after the police shooting of a Black man.

Pastor Philip Pham received a call Tuesday night from a church member whose friend had seen the flames and seven fire trucks surrounding the church.

“I have no idea why they attacked our church,” Pham said. “They burned it from the roof. They threw flammable chemicals on the roof and [flames] burned through the roof” and down through the rest of the building. He said the facility is a “total loss.”

Of primary concern to Pham were three hard drives. Since before purchasing the building in 2005, Vietnam Baptist Church has served as something of a community center each weekday, providing help with immigration paperwork, taxes and even marriage counseling.

More than 15 years’ worth of information about hundreds of clients is on hard drives kept at the church. Pham said when he got the call about the fire, he immediately began praying that the data would be spared.

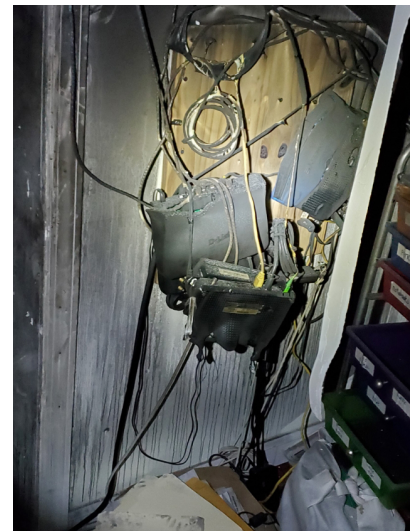
“I prayed right away: ‘God, please protect the hard drives,’” Pham recalled. “Other stuff can be recovered. But those files will never be recovered.”

When firefighters finally let him in after the blaze was extinguished, Pham said he was amazed.

“I saw the routers and modems and things surrounding the hard drives all

burned, melted,” he said. “But that piece of hard drive, no harm. No harm at all. Just two feet above that, all melted. ... That is amazing how God knows our needs and answers our prayers. He is an almighty God. He granted our prayer.”

The church is meeting mostly online due to strict pandemic-related restrictions in the city, Pham said. On Oct. 28, he was calling



Fire destroyed almost all of the church’s technological equipment. Miraculously, just two feet below the melted modem in this photo, three hard drives remained untouched by the flames (Photo from Pastor Philip Pham)

nearby schools to find a place to host the church’s leadership team as they broadcast its next livestream worship service.

“Remember us in your prayer in time of need like this,” he requested. “The church members here need encouragement. The majority of us have very strong faith in Christ, but a minority, a few new believers, they need their faith to grow. Pray for their faith to take deep root in the love of God so they can be steadfast in him. Not focus on the problem, but focus on Jesus. Please remember us in your prayers.”

Peter Yanes, executive director of Asian American relations with the SBC Executive Committee spoke with Pham shortly after the fire and prayed over the phone with church members as they gathered at the charred remains of their building.

Yanes said he was “compelled to reach out right away and find out more of the heartbreaking incident” after seeing videos Pham posted to social media Tuesday night.

“You can sense the heartfelt frustration and concern,” Yanes said of church members’ reaction to the fire. “I have encouraged [Pham] and prayed with his family that God has a higher purpose of them rising to the occasion with a testimony of hope in Christ Jesus.”

The turmoil in Philadelphia, sparked by the shooting of Walter Wallace Jr. by police, has at times seen violence and looting and led to a clash between demonstrators and officers at police headquarters, The Associated Press reported. It is not known if Vietnam Baptist Church is the only incident of arson.



One of three hard drives containing irreplaceable information that was spared by fire (Photo from Pastor Philip Pham).

According to AP, police—who were sent to Wallace’s home on Monday after his brother called 911—said Wallace ignored multiple demands to drop a knife he was holding and that when he advanced toward the officers, they opened fire. Wallace’s family maintains they had placed the emergency call because of Wallace’s mental state and had requested medical assistance and an ambulance.

In light of the violence in his city, Pham encouraged youth pastors to stress to young people the words of James 1:20: “The anger of man does not bring about the righteousness of God.”

“You cannot use your anger and be justified,” he said. “I would like to bring this message to all the young people.”

Pham said some of his church members are afraid because of the violence and looting, but he is encouraging them to keep an eternal perspective.

“So many things we don’t know, but God knows, so just trust God,” he said

he told them. “Just do right. Don’t copy [those who practice violence], but do what the Bible says and what he wants us to do. Love them and pray for them that they may know Christ, that the Holy Spirit may convict them and they may seek God.”