

In face of uncertainty, Temple church members cling to faith

January 21, 2010

TEMPLE—In the days following the Jan. 19 fire that destroyed the facility of [First Baptist Church in Temple](#), many things are still uncertain. But members insist some things are rock-solid sure—God is in control, he loves his people and there is power in prayer.

A team from the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms was called in to investigate the source of the fire, Pastor Martin Knox said. However, he added, that was not due to any overt evidence of arson.

An early morning fire on Jan. 19 consumed the 70-year-old sanctuary.

“The reason the ATF has been called in is because with a fire of this size, they have resources our local fire department doesn’t. Our fire chief has developed a good relationship with those folks, and it was an excellent opportunity to take advantage of that,” Knox said.

One piece of equipment the ATF brought in will reach over the external walls that survived the fire. It will scoop out debris to give investigators a better look at the interior of the building as they seek to find the cause.

While the equipment will reach over the walls, Knox does not believe any of the walls will be saved. “There’s no steel in them,” he said of the building constructed in 1939.

The fire destroyed the sanctuary and another building that contained the

church's offices, music rooms and some of the church's classrooms. In addition, all the adjoining buildings were smoke and water damaged. This has necessitated closing the church's Child Development Center's weekday education program until the building has been refurbished.

Included in the destruction was the pipe organ that included 2, 675 pipes.

The only building not damaged was the church's youth building. It is located on a corner of the property and was not connected to the other buildings. It currently is been used as makeshift office space until other office space can be secured.

One joint service will be conducted Jan. 24 at 11 a.m. at the Frank Mayborn Center in Temple. Current plans are for an 8 a.m. and two simultaneous 11 a.m. services —a contemporary service in the youth building and a traditional service at First United Methodist Church.

"The community has been just great in opening up to us and in helping in any way they can," Knox said. The Episcopal church that is across the street from First Baptist has allowed the church's staff to hold meetings on its property.

Many others have called from around the state and even from other parts of the country to lend solace, Knox said.

"We've received great support," he said. "With many of the pastor's the typical call is: 'How you doing? Are you OK? What happened to your library?'"

Two pastors who have experienced fires in their own churches have called, Knox said.

"One of them said: 'You're goingThe Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and to make it through this. It may notFirearms brought heavy equipment to

seem like it today, but you will First Baptist Church in Temple to reach and you're going to be stronger over the external walls that survived the fire, scooping out debris to give for it," he recalled.

investigators a better look at the interior All that caring is deeply of the building as they seek to find the appreciated, but that does not cause of the blaze. change the fact that the church building's destruction was a cause for turmoil for many.

"It's been emotional for many," Knox said. "For many, this was a place where their very precious memories occurred—baptisms, weddings, funerals—and besides that, where they met to worship God each Sunday."

Johnell Ellison and Bill Hart both were baptized in the building that burned in 1938, and said this building was just as meaningful.

"It's upsetting," Ellison said through tears. "When I go to church on Sunday to teach my 4-year-olds on Sunday, we don't have any place to be."

One of the hardest things is that even the parts of the building that did not burn have been cordoned off, and no one has been allowed inside to ascertain what can be saved.

"One of the ladies even baked a cake" that she offered to ATF agents on the scene, "but they still couldn't let her in," she said in a lighter moment.

Ellison, who also functions as the church historian, said some of the church's photo gallery was saved, but she doesn't know the state of the many others.

Pastor Martin Knox (2nd from right, looking at cell phone) noted the deep emotions of longtime members at First

"We've lost so much of our history," she said, "but we haven't lost our spirit. We've got a good

Baptist Church in Temple who lost their church building to fire. “For many, this was a place where their very precious memories occurred—baptisms, weddings, funerals—and besides that, where they met to worship God each Sunday,” he said.

preacher and a good staff, and I’ve been praying for them today. We have a loving church and all together, we’ll get through this.”

“It was the church I was baptized in, and it was hard to see it go,” Ellison said of the prior sanctuary. “But we were a better church afterward. We were going to need to rebuild, and Lord just planned it for that time. Maybe that was the same thing this time. We’ll just have to wait and see.”

Hart witnessed the burning of both buildings.

“But I didn’t see them start,” he added quickly.

In 1938, he was a 14-year-old boy with a paper route and he was on his bike going to get his papers when he saw the fire trucks trying to extinguish the blaze. He went on and got his papers, and brought them back to the church so he could watch their efforts while he rolled his papers for delivery.

“That was the one I grew up in, the one in which I was baptized,” he recalled.

There were a great deal more who came out to witness the burning of this building.

“It breaks your heart to see your church burn,” Hart said. “When your church burns down, it’s going to be different than anything else.”

What comes next has not been decided, Knox said. It is unknown how long it will take to reach a decision on the cause, and until that decision is made, insurance payments may be held up. Whether the amount insured will be adequate for the cost of rebuilding also is an unknown until a floor plan is drawn up.

The church already has a committee in place to make long-range plans for the church, and that committee probably will take the lead in helping to find the answers to the many questions that exist.

But in addition to those questions, "There is also faith, hope and prayer," Knox said.

"It was a great building, and an excellent tool for God to use to build his kingdom," Knox said. "We are appreciative that we had that building. But the church is the people, not the building.