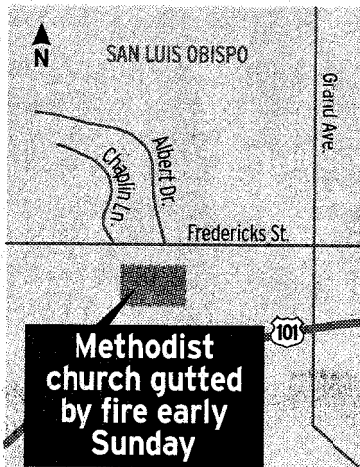


Lost to the flames

United Methodist Church of San Luis Obispo was destroyed just hours before Easter services, the second county church damaged by fire in two days.



TRIBUNE MAP BY MELEISA SHAFFER

SAN LUIS OBISPO

By RYAN HUFF
THE TRIBUNE

The United Methodist Church of San Luis Obispo was destroyed early Sunday morning by what police and federal agents are investigating as an arson fire.

San Luis Obispo firefighters were alerted to the blaze shortly before 5 a.m. by an alarm heat sensor inside the sanctuary. Within seven minutes, city Fire Marshal Darren Drake said, fire crews were on site battling a "very heavy fire in the front portion of the church."

"It was a fire that went to what we call 'flashover' very quickly," Drake said. "All of the contents in church were burning. We knew right away we would need a lot of water to control this fire."

No one was inside the building at 1515 Fredericks St. at the time of the fire and no injuries were reported, fire officials said, but the 40-year-old sanctuary suffered more than \$1 million in damage.

It took crews three hours to get the fire under control. Forty rescue personnel responded, including four city fire engines, one city fire truck and a county engine.

Drake said it was unknown how

long the fire was burning before the alarms sounded.

"This building is a complete loss," Drake said.

Sunday's blaze was the second time in as many days that a county Protestant church was damaged by fire. Cambria Presbyterian Community Church was charred by what Cambria Fire Capt. Steve Bitto believes was an electrical blaze.

San Luis Obispo Fire Marshal Drake said he sees no connection between the two fires.

San Luis Obispo police are looking into the Easter Sunday blaze, believ-

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TRIBUNE PHOTO BY JOE JOHNSTON

Church members head to Mount Carmel Lutheran Church for Easter service.

Even without a sanctuary, the faithful celebrate

SAN LUIS OBISPO

By RYAN HUFF
THE TRIBUNE

They marched triumphantly down Fredericks Street like a band in the Rose Parade singing "Hallelujah, Christ is Risen," as if the beautiful steeple was still intact above their 40-year-old church.

Carrying a 7-foot tall wooden

cross, Chris Cofer and two guitarists led a dozen United Methodist Church members from the smokey remains of their gutted sanctuary down the block to Mount Carmel Lutheran Church, where they joined members of both congregations for Easter Sunday worship.

The parishioners left behind the

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Fire

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ing the cause to be suspicious in nature. "The fire appears to be incendiary in nature," said police Detective David Darbyshire. "We are investigating this as an arson."

Although police are investigating, Drake said it is too early to speculate on the cause.

"I will not say this is an arson investigation," he said. "But I would call it suspicious, based on the speed of the fire and the fact it was fully involved when we arrived. At this point, we have not found anything that looks accidental."

Barbara SilverSmith, an associate pastor at United Methodist Church, could not think of anyone who would want to set fire to the church.

A federal Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms investigation team from Los Angeles and FBI officials from Santa Maria were also at the church searching for clues Sunday.

A dog trained to detect the use of accelerants — materials including flammable liquids used to hasten the spread of the fire — was brought in by the ATF to sniff through the ashes. Drake said the dog alerted officials to the front of the building, which is the side of the church closest to Fredericks Street.

Pieces of fabric and wood were sent Sunday to an ATF laboratory in Walnut Creek, where technicians will determine if an accelerant was used, Drake said. "One question they will ask is, 'Was there something to indicate flammable liquids were used?'"

The exact cause of the fire could be announced as early as Tuesday, Drake said.

The last time federal agencies came to San Luis Obispo for a fire investigation was in February 1995 when the Planned Parenthood clinic on Santa Rosa Street,

a birth control and health center where abortions were performed, burned. The cause was later determined to be arson.

On Sunday, few items remained inside the gutted sanctuary at United Methodist.

Nine dangling, charred roof support beams were all that remained standing above 6-foot concrete piers. Some of the piers themselves buckled under the intense heat, forcing 2-inch cracks to run up the length of the concrete piers.

The only objects that remained outside in their original state were a "United Methodist Church" sign and a 50-foot tall cross, blackened by the blaze but still standing resolute.

Walking through the church some 12 hours after the fire's start, metal chair frames and melted overhead lights were seen in the foot-deep debris.

In a basketball-sized puddle, created by water used to fight the fire, burnt hymnal pages swirled.

Firefighters were quick to douse little flareups that erupted among the charred remains of the wooden pews and the church pipe organ inside the sanctuary.

Firefighters Devin Reiss and Jim Neel stood atop fallen roof material as they performed mop-up duties.

"This is the worst church fire I've ever seen," said Neel, a 21-year veteran of the city's fire department.

Late Sunday afternoon, a 6-foot tall chain-link fence was erected around the church sanctuary to keep away the public.

City building department officials are expected to issue a demolition notice to the church today.

Dave Smiley, campus minister at Cal Poly, surveyed the damage later Sunday.

"The most beautiful sight from the freeway just became the biggest eyesore," he said.

Aftermath

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gloomy surroundings of their charred church to walk into uplifting sounds of "Jesus Christ Is Risen Today," which filled the nearby Lutheran church to the top of its 40-foot-tall vaulted ceilings.

"God's house is your house," the Rev. Russ Gordon of Mount Carmel said to the standing room-only crowd of some 350 people. "This is a good thing to come together."

When Gordon received an early morning call from Methodist church members informing him of the fire and asking if they could borrow chairs for a makeshift parking lot service, he said, "No, you're not getting our chairs. You're coming to worship with us.

"You are not only our neighbors, but our brothers and sisters in Christ," Gordon said.

With both churches so close by and being of similar Protestant faith, congregation members said it seemed only natural to come together during the tragedy.

"We have a lot of similarities, and we celebrated Ash Wednesday together," said Bob Grosse, a Mount Carmel congregation member. "It just seemed like the right thing to do. That's not (just) Lutheran, that's not (just) Christian — that's just people helping out."

The Rev. Nelson Stringer, United Methodist pastor, said he felt a terrible loss after seeing the smoldering remains of the church. And although a 30-foot-tall stained-glass window and the congregation's historic pipe organ were destroyed, Stringer found ways to rejoice on the day Christians around the world celebrate the resurrection of Christ.

"We're grieving, but at the same time, it's Easter. God redeems everyone," Stringer said to the Easter Sunday crowd's applause.

At the end of the 11 a.m. service, the congregations sang "Church's One Foundation," a hymn harmonized by some who now only have nine vaulted support beams and truckloads of debris to show for what was once their hallowed house of worship.

But the rebuilding has already begun.

On a pine needle-sprinkled hill some 50 yards from the gutted remains of the Methodist church, parishioners planted the cross Cofer carried earlier in the day along Fredericks Street. It was draped with a white cloth — a sign of new life.

"In all my experiences and years, (the fire) is the worst thing that's happened to me," said 91-year-old Evelyn Dirkes, a long-time member of the congregation. "It's a deep loss. But you know, it's Easter Sunday and it will rise again."

Dirkes said the 300-person congregation is made up of many families, but "a large percent" of the parishioners are over 80 years old, and many have been members since the church relocated to Fredericks Street in 1961.

The brotherhood was evident after worship services Sunday.

Mount Carmel member Suzy Trandem offered a ride home to her neighbor, Dirkes.

"I think there's always been a real sense of fellowship (between the two churches)," Trandem said. "We've always been there for each other."

The Rev. Gordon said the respective church boards will discuss how to handle future services, and whether Mount Carmel will become the Methodist church's temporary home. "We will do whatever we can to help," Gordon said.

After listening to the Easter Sunday sermon, Stringer said he approached the fire incident like how he would counsel a person who has experienced a death in the family.

"We just have to remember the good times and good stories," Stringer said. "We'll have lots of stories to share."

Gordon also said there is light to shine on this dismal disaster.

"St. Paul said, 'When one part of the body hurts, the whole body hurts. And when one rejoices the rest rejoices.' So we did both. We hurt together on this Easter day and we rejoice together," Gordon said.

"Out of death comes new life; out of ashes comes hope."