

## Florida City church picks up pieces after fire

By Jenna De Marco | May 28, 2010 {1176}

"The church fire only lasted a few hours, but the fire of Pentecost is forever."

The Rev. Audrey Warren spoke those words May 23 — Pentecost Sunday — just hours after a fire destroyed Branches United Methodist Mission in Florida City.

"The church is not a building; the church is not a resting place; the church is a people," said Warren, who has served as pastor of the church since July 2009.

Early Sunday morning, fire engulfed the main church building and an adjacent playground. A nearby classroom building did not burn, although five laptop computers were reported stolen from that location, Warren said.

News of the fire traveled quickly among church members, many of whom arrived before the blaze was extinguished, looking on in "absolute shock," Warren said.

Kim Torres watched as the fire burned.

"It was pretty amazing that in the midst of this incredible devastation, everyone was here," said Torres, a General Board of Global Ministries Church and Community Worker and director of the after-school tutoring and mentoring program at Branches. "God hasn't left. The building may be gone, (but) God hasn't left."

Although Warren and her congregation remain hopeful, "we do



**A fire burns the main church building at Branches United Methodist Mission. Photo by Megan McCarty. Photo #10-1451.** Click on picture for larger photo or view in [photo gallery](#) with longer description.

acknowledge the fact that, in our location, the loss of a building is huge," she said.

Structural engineers said the church building is a total loss, but the playground may only be a partial loss, according to Mark Thomas, director of Florida Conference Ministry Protection. The structures are fully insured through the conference's insurance program, administered through Ministry Protection, which began its damage assessment immediately after the fire, Thomas said.

"Ministry Protection was notified of the fire on the same day of the loss, contacted the pastor, and put the procedure in motion to respond to the insurance needs of Branches," Thomas said. "Within hours on the first business day following the fire, an adjuster who specializes in large loss catastrophe claims was on site at the church beginning his preliminary claim analysis."



**Structural engineers say the main church building is a total loss; the playground behind the church may only be a partial loss. Photo by Megan McCarty.**

**Photo #10-1452.** [Click on picture for larger photo or view in photo gallery with longer description.](#)

Numerous other catastrophe experts have also visited the site this week, including "cause and origin" officials and building consultants, Thomas said. Thomas serves as a liaison between the various experts and church staff.

"There's a lot of 'behind-the-scenes' that nobody really sees to coordinate any kind of catastrophic loss," Thomas said. "There's a lot of experts that converge to help the church and help the insurance company to come up with a (replacement) figure."

That number is still being determined, although the church will be fully compensated for the building and playground, as well as for expenses related to interim operations, Thomas said. Preliminary estimates are \$430,000 for the church building alone.

### **Ministry amidst the ashes**

Despite the loss, no church programming has been canceled, Torres said, so the children and adults who depend on the Branches ministry can continue to have the routine and continuity they know and need. In addition to Sunday worship, programs include after-

school tutoring, youth group and a thrift store.

"It's been so hard, and we don't want to make it any harder (for the families)," Torres said.

Using a temporary tent for shade, church services were held just hours after the fire, Warren said.

"On Sunday, I said, 'We don't know how this happened, but we know who's going to fix it, and it's God,' " Warren said.

The source of the blaze is still under investigation, although accidental causes have been ruled out, according to a statement from the Miami-Dade Police Department. Electrical causes were also ruled out, Warren said, and a \$2,500 reward is being offered by fire investigators for information leading to the arrest of the perpetrator.

On Sunday, Warren urged her congregation to prepare their hearts to forgive anyone who may have been involved in the fire's origin. She said she requested that people not comfortable with forgiveness should avoid participating in that Sunday's communion. But everyone at the service came forward, she said.



**Members worship by the bell tower hours after the fire. Photo by Megan McCarty. Photo #10-1453.** [Click on picture for larger photo or view in photo gallery with longer description.](#)

"(For) their willingness to forgive and their resilience, I can't think of a better community," Warren said.

The Branches congregation expanded its sense of community recently, spearheading the launch of The Coalition for a Non-Violent Florida City, a collaborative effort between local groups that endorses a message of community peace.

The church fire raises the "urgency for churches to continue to preach a nonviolent message and for us to be in the darkest spaces of the world," Warren said.

### **Rebuilding begins**

Rebuilding after the damage will take some time, but the process has already begun.

"The consensus is that everyone believes that God is bigger (than this) and something better will be built," Warren said.

With a capital campaign in place before the fire, renovations to the campus were already underway. Contributions to the capital campaign are being accepted at <http://www.sflum.org>, the website for South Florida Urban Ministries, which provides support to the Branches ministry.

Temporary campus plans include a 5,000-square-foot portable building with bathrooms and air conditioning as an interim office space and gathering place, Warren said. The portable could be in place as early as next week; demolition of the burned building may begin next week, as well.

Members of First United Methodist Church in Lakeland plan to build temporary playgrounds, which will likely be of the boxed variety, Warren said, and they will be donated to local families after Branches is finished using them.



**A structural engineer consultant retained by the Florida Conference Ministry Protection department inspects the remains of the church's main building. Photo by Mark Thomas. Photo #10-1454. Click on picture for larger photo or view in [photo gallery](#) with longer description.**

of a single, multipurpose structure.

"The next step is to figure out what the new building is going to look like," Warren said. "We are able to do things that are a little bit more logical ... (there are) great, wonderful ideas that we can work with."

More information about the Branches ministry is available by contacting Warren at [audrey.warren@flumc.org](mailto:audrey.warren@flumc.org).

As Branches adjusts to its altered setting, other local churches — Christ Church in Ft. Lauderdale, Perrine-Peters United Methodist Church in Miami, First United Methodist Church in Homestead and First United Methodist Church in Coral Gables — have helped with temporary needs.

For the long term, the remaining classroom building may be demolished to make room for construction

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