

NEWS

# Notre Dame fire: New Jersey, New York houses of worship know the struggles of rebuilding

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The Rev. Marc Oehler once heard a startling statistic: 90% of churches that burn down do not rebuild.

It made sense, Oehler said. Rebuilding requires a large investment of money, grinds the work of the ministry to a halt and asks for a great deal of patience from a congregation.

The willingness to take on such a challenge is one of the reasons Oehler came to West Side Presbyterian Church in 2010. The Ridgewood, New Jersey, church was destroyed by an electrical fire that gutted its sanctuary in 2002, and the congregation spent four years and more than \$30 million raising it from the ashes.

“I’m a big believer that it’s through these moments of suffering that we have an opportunity to grow and deepen our faith,” said Oehler, now the church’s pastor. “It was very moving to me that a community had gone through this major crisis together and come through it.”

As France embarks on the monumental task of stabilizing and reconstructing the fire-scarred Notre Dame Cathedral, burned-out churches in New Jersey and New York are also working to recover and rebuild.

**Notre Dame Cathedral:** It's not just a building, it's part of humanity

**Fundraising:** Clifton dentist’s Easter mannequin display helps collect funds for Notre Dame Cathedral

The Rev. Dr. Reginald L. Hudson, servant pastor of Union Baptist Church in New Rochelle, New York, said church fires are unfortunately common. His experience restoring a historic church led him to develop a support network that can offer guidance for other faith leaders “so when these things happen, they have a resource.”

And three years after flames tore through First Presbyterian Church in Englewood, New Jersey, just a few days before Easter, the 150-year-old Gothic revival stone church is preparing to solicit bids for reconstruction. The design for its new sanctuary is not a replica of the original but a more modern and functional version, said the Rev. Richard Hong, the church's pastor.

“To rebuild it to what it looked like before the fire would effectively erase the fire from the story told by the building,” Hong said. “The mindset I was striving for is not to rebuild what we had but to use this as an opportunity to improve on what we had.”

The 19th-century stained-glass windows lost in the fire, including one made at Tiffany Studios in New York, are gone forever. In place of one of them, the church will create a new entryway that leads to the parking lot and accommodates the many more parishioners who now arrive by car rather than on foot, Hong said.

All three of Notre Dame's famed stained-glass rose windows have been spared from Monday's inferno. The oldest of them, the North Rose Window, was built around 1250.

The entire interior of First Presbyterian will be rotated 180 degrees to create a more natural entrance to the church and reconfigured to bring the pulpit closer to the pews, Hong said. The pews will be curved into semicircle at the request of parishioners who came to like the design at Temple Sinai, which hosted First Presbyterian in the months after the fire, he said.

Chandeliers destroyed in the blaze will be replaced with more efficient light fixtures. The church's 4,114-pipe organ — the largest in Bergen County at the time of the fire — will be replaced with a hybrid organ, one that is a digital and pipe organ. Purchasing a full-pipe organ would cost \$2 million, compared with less than \$500,000 for a hybrid one, Hong said.

“We had lots of considerations going forward, and one was not to saddle the congregation with a significant amount of debt,” Hong said. “We vowed that we would only build what we could afford to build with the insurance settlement.”

Construction is expected to cost upward of \$10 million, begin in September and be completed in 14 months.

Evidence of the fire will be woven into the new sanctuary through small details. Stone walls exposed by the flames will be left exposed. A brass cross recovered from the chancel table has been varnished to preserve the soot and debris in which it was found.

“To polish it off would be to deny that the fire had happened,” Hong said. “It’s part of the story of this building, it’s part of the continuity, so when it’s in the new space it becomes this symbol of this thing we went through and moved beyond. It’s particularly moving that it’s a cross that survived, the central symbol of our faith. It survived the worst thing that could have been thrown at it, which is to be thrown into the middle of that inferno.”

A similarly charred wooden cross hangs in a room connected to the rebuilt sanctuary at West Side Presbyterian Church.

Seventeen years after the fire, there are parishioners who do not know they worship on the ashes of a burned-down sanctuary, Oehler said. The congregation’s sense of loss is now gone.

“Life goes on,” he said.

Recovery continues at the 161-year-old Serbian Orthodox Cathedral of St. Sava in Manhattan, which burned down in 2016, and two churches in New Rochelle: the 95-year-old Zion Evangelical Baptist Church, which suffered heavy fire damage in December, and the 115-year-old Union Baptist Church, which was destroyed in a fire in 2011.

As flames engulfed the steeple of Union Baptist Church, church members stood across the street holding hands and singing hymns.

But sometimes the sight of a house of worship on fire — Oehler likened it to a sense of being violated — can drive parishioners and employees to extreme action. West Side Presbyterian’s associate music director ran into the burning church to save a piece of Bach music and was hospitalized for smoke inhalation as a result, Oehler said.

Firefighters in Rockland County, New York, learned about that passion during a 1966 blaze at the main synagogue in New Square, an all-Hasidic village in the town of Ramapo. Firefighters had to restrain a group of young men from running into the shul to rescue Torahs, said Gordon Wren Jr., a former director of the county’s emergency services, who was at the scene.

When a 2009 fire burned West Clarkstown Jewish Center in New City, New York, firefighters went in and rescued the three Torahs. A year later, when the synagogue was rededicated, the volunteer firefighters carried the Torahs in the procession.

Firefighters are now trained to ask where Torahs and other religious texts are kept so they can retrieve the items for a panicked congregation, Wren said.

“We train our firefighters to be respectful of religious books,” he said. “We carefully carry them out.”

Rockland's Fire Training Center also periodically offers a course through the New York State Association of Fire Chaplains Association on responding to fires at houses of worship, said Chris Kear, director of Rockland County emergency services.

“Whether it’s a chalice in a Catholic church or a Torah in a synagogue, every effort is made to secure those items and make sure they’re preserved,” Kear said.

At the burning Notre Dame, the Paris Fire Department’s chaplain raced to save a crown of thorns said to have been worn by Jesus, the tunic of Saint Louis and a piece of wood and a nail believed to have been part of the cross used in the crucifixion.

The artifacts were taken away by a human chain of emergency workers, employees of the city and the church. Firefighters held two training exercises at the cathedral last year focused on saving its most prized possessions.

Annabelle Radcliffe-Trenner, a principal at the Trenton-based preservation firm Historic Building Architects, said much of the fire damage suffered by houses of worship is caused by efforts to extinguish the blaze. The firm offers trial runs to fire departments to show them what is important to save and not ax down, she said.

Preservation must begin immediately to salvage the historic elements of a house of worship, Radcliffe-Trenner said. Stained-glass windows that escaped the flames, for example, can still erode from carbon emitted by the fire.

Union Baptist Church decided that a more modern church would reflect the church's new mission, Hudson said. The church, since its fire, has expanded both its congregation and its community outreach.

Hudson said the cost of constructing the church as it was would be in the tens of millions of dollars. The building plans, now before city land-use boards, include incorporating some of the salvaged marble from the main structure into walkways. The church will also keep its iconic red doors, Hudson said.

“What hit me was the emotion from the community, from all walks of life, mourning the church with the red doors,” Hudson recalled of the neighbors who showed up to the fire and later to share their sense of loss with the congregation.

Hudson said he is well aware that most churches destroyed by fire never recover.

“I’m grateful to say that we, by the grace of God, are defying that statistic,” he said.

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