

# The Dallas Morning News

## Church's spirit survives blaze

Late-night fire damages sanctuary, but officials pledge to rebuild

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By SERGIO CHAPA / *Al Día*

Note: I was the first reporter on the scene because I live five blocks away from the church and I was out eating tacos with a friend of mine down the street. We were able to get quotes from officials and parishioners at the scene and turn around a web version by 1:30 a.m. This is the full-story and some photos that ran on Sunday morning.

Less than 24 hours after a late-night fire wilted the hearts and spirits of the members of St. Cecilia Catholic Church in north Oak Cliff, the dedicated congregation showed signs of its resilience Saturday.

St. Cecilia officials quickly moved Mass and other events – including a Saturday afternoon wedding – to the church's gymnasium, while vowing that Friday night's five-alarm blaze would not be the end of the 74-year-old sanctuary.

"We will rebuild, and we will be back," said the Rev. Edmundo Paredes, rector of the church. "We are people of hope and people of prayer, people of strong faith."

Contractor James Coleman inspected the damage with church officials Saturday afternoon. Although some steel roof beams were warped by the heat of the fire, Mr. Coleman said they could be easily replaced and the church rebuilt.

That news gave hope to members of the venerable church that has been a staple in the community for seven decades.

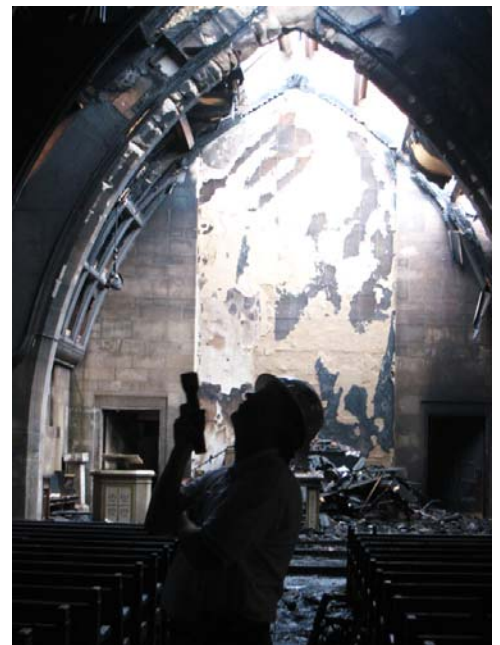
St. Cecilia has served as a sort of community center for residents of north Oak Cliff, a place where many of them baptized their babies, held quinceañeras, weddings, funerals and other important life events. It also was home to several after-school programs and sports programs, and it housed a traditional Mexican folklorico dance company.

In April, the predominantly Hispanic church also served as the staging ground for a pro-immigration rally where thousands of people marched through the streets of Oak Cliff in support of immigration reform.

"It's more than just a building for a lot of us," Maricela Alba, the church's Spanish-language Sunday school coordinator, said as she watched the flames late Friday night.

The cause of the fire remains under investigation, and Dallas Fire-Rescue officials played down speculation that it was arson. A K-9 search unit found no trace of accelerants.

The fire was reported at 10:16 p.m. Friday. It quickly spread inside the sanctuary of the church. As many as 16 fire engines and a helicopter joined the effort to put out the fire, which continued through early Saturday morning. More than 200 neighbors and parishioners gathered to watch firefighters battle the blaze.



Police closed several blocks of West Davis Street as flames shot through the roof and smoke billowed high into the sky.

Fire department spokesman Paul Lara said the firefighters tore a hole in the roof of the church to put out the fire raging inside the sanctuary.

He said the fire proved difficult to put out because the church's roof had several layers, allowing the flames to spread between them and slow firefighters' efforts.

"We had to use foam to get into the cracks and crevices," Mr. Lara said. "It's lighter than water, so it seeps through the rafters."

The fire did not damage St. Cecilia Catholic School or other surrounding buildings. Mr. Lara said Saturday that he did not have a damage estimate.

Mr. Paredes said there was a wedding rehearsal inside the church Friday night, but no one was injured in the blaze.

### **Fond memories**

According to the Diocese of Dallas' Web site, the church has an average Sunday attendance of 5,780. Some parishioners said that Sunday morning Mass is often standing-room only.

Celia Serrato and Crystal Cerda could not hold back tears as they approached the church Friday night.

Both attended St. Cecilia Catholic School from pre-kindergarten to eighth grade and later got jobs working as secretaries for the church. Ms. Cerda said she also had her 15th birthday celebration, or quinceañera, there.

"It hurts because we have a lot of memories here," she said.

Ms. Alba said she began attending the church 25 years ago and started teaching Sunday school there 15 years ago. She said St. Cecilia paved the way for two other Catholic churches to open in the area.

She said it was distressing to watch flames roar through the church, which she described as a "second home."

"It's hard," Ms. Alba said as she stood in the building's rear parking lot late Friday night. "This is the church where I teach, where I grew up, where I received my sacraments. It's hard to see something like this happening to our church."

*WFAA-TV (Channel 8) contributed to this report.*

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