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Arsonist torched Trinity Baptist Church

'ISIS' spray-painted on outer rear wall of house of worship

by John Bkila
Burlington Post Staff

Wednesday's fire at Trinity Baptist Church was the work of an arsonist, according to Ontario's Office of the Fire Marshal.

Despite the fact 'ISIS' had been spray-painted on an outer wall of the church, Halton police aren't saying whether they are treating it as a hate crime.

When Trinity Baptist Church Pastor Carl Muller arrived on scene at 2 a.m. Wednesday to find the place of worship engulfed in flames, he was "awestruck."

But Muller wasn't talking about the fire itself, which engulfed the 1890s church located on 4372 Appleby Line, just south of No. 2 Sideroad.

"I was awestruck by the bravery of these firefighters," he told the *Post*. "I've never seen something like that before. I'm very thankful for the work they do."

While the church's roof was gutted, its charred frame is all that remains, firefighters managed to keep the blaze from spreading to the church's adjacent newer building, which opened in 2004 and is where weekly services are held.

"There's some water and smoke damage, but we're told it's still in good shape. So, we're very thankful to the fire department," said Muller.

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Ontario's Office of the Fire Marshal has confirmed Wednesday's early-morning blaze that gutted the original 4372 Appleby Line home of Trinity Baptist Church was arson. The building had been the former Zimmerman Methodist Church built in the early 1890s. According to Trinity Baptist Church's website its congregation purchased the property from the United Church in 1975. | photo by Graham Paine - Burlington Post (Follow on Twitter @halton_photog)

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Fire investigators confirm 127-year-old church deliberately set ablaze

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The 127-year-old structure housed a church library, Sunday school classes and a meeting area for the more than 200-member congregation. Muller said the Christian ministry Crossroads has offered its chapel, at 1295 North Service Rd., for Trinity's Sunday services for as long as it is needed.

The Burlington Fire Department was summoned to the rural scene shortly after 1 a.m. Firefighters encountered heavy smoke and flames. The blaze quickly spread to the attic of the church where flames shot through the roof.

According to the department's preliminary report, crews then switched to a defensive operation, as the building was deemed unsafe to enter. Approximately 40 firefighters and 12 fire vehicles were on scene battling the blaze with Hamilton and Milton fire crews offering tanker support to assist in shuttling water to the site, located about two kilometres north of the 407-ETR.

At 7 a.m., there were still hot spots reportedly being extinguished. A section of Appleby Line in front of the church was closed for the rest of that day.

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Pastor Carl Muller and Elder Mark Hudson stand in front of the fire-ravaged Trinity Baptist Church at Appleby Line and No. 2 Sideroad on Wednesday morning. Built in the early 1890s, at a cost of \$2,900, the church was originally home to the Zimmerman Methodist Church. According to the Trinity Baptist Church website, the building was acquired in 1975 for an asking price of \$30,000, purchased from the United Church, which owned the property at the time. Extensive renovations took place within the building and a completely new section was added to provide washrooms and nursery facilities at a cost of \$58,000.

| photo by Nikki Wesley - Burlington Post (Follow on Twitter @halton_photog)



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'ISIS' spray-painted on outer wall

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A representative from the Office of the Fire Marshal arrived on scene shortly after 11 a.m. Wednesday to begin an investigation.

By Thursday, the provincial office was calling the blaze the act of an arsonist, but provided no other details about how the fire was set.

Graffiti on outer church wall

On a back, outside wall of the church, the word "ISIS" was clearly visible in large, black spray-painted letters.

Halton police said it was aware of the graffiti, but stated it was too early to know if it was directly related to the fire.

"As it stands now, it is a fire investigation," said Halton police media relations officer Sgt. Dana Nicholas.

Pastor Muller said there's no doubt in his mind the graffiti was not on the church wall as recently as last Sunday evening.

"(But) I don't think it's a religious hate crime," he noted. "My impression is if this ends up being arson, my suspicion would be there's a malevolent character who did this; to add insult to injury, writes a provocative word on the wall."

"So, on one level you ask, 'Why would someone do this?' And there might be an ideological reason; there might just be a pure malevolent, mischief reason," he said.

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"But at the bottom of it all, it's human sinfulness... and because we see ourselves as sinners, we have no malevolent response to whoever did this. It's our hope and prayer that something good might come out of all this."

Standing across the street, looking at what little was left of his church, Muller said it just brought about feelings of utter sadness.

"We love this building. We'd hate to see it crumble. It means a lot to us because... we've been blessed here. It's not that the place itself is sacred, but sacred things have happened here and so, it breaks our hearts to see it go up in flames," he continued, his voice a little choked up.

Muller was originally an assistant to the founder of Trinity Baptist Church, Pastor William Payne.

The church was founded in 1972. Muller became its pastor in 1998.

Pastor Carl Muller
Trinity Baptist Church

Zimmerman Methodist Church

The building itself was built as a Zimmerman Methodist Church in the early 1890s, costing approximately \$2,900, at the time.

Stone for the foundation was cut from the Niagara Escarpment, just north of the site, and hauled down during the winter by farmers with teams of horses and sleighs, according to Burlington Historical Society records.

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'Our church is still here, even though the building may be gone'

9 | Friday, August 18, 2017 | **BURLINGTON POST** | www.insideburlington.com



The Zimmerman Methodist Church was built in the early 1890s at a cost of \$2,900. Stone for the foundation was cut from the Niagara Escarpment to the north and hauled down during the winter by farmers with teams of horse-drawn sleighs. | **Burlington Historical Society Digital Collections**

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Sometime between then and 1975, the building switched hands and became a United Church. It was during that year, Trinity Baptist Church acquired the building at a cost of \$30,000.

According to Trinity's online historical timeline, church officials already had \$23,000 in a building fund and an additional \$8,000 came in from the small congregation during a special offering drive in July 1975. Extensive renovations were made inside the building and a new section was added to provide washrooms and nursery facilities at a cost of \$58,000.

When asked what the church's next steps were, Elder Mark Hudson said it was too early to say.

If the church is still structurally sound enough to be rebuilt, Hudson and Muller said the plan would eventually be to renovate.

"If the building is recoverable, then down the road, this will hurt less. But if it's permanent, it will have a serious impact on our hearts and anyone affected by it," said Hudson.

Muller noted a church is its people; the building is simply something they walk into to share a spiritual moment.

"Our church is still here, even though the building may be gone. Church, in a real sense, is indestructible," he added.

Reporter John Bkila can be reached at jbkila@burlingtonpost.com or on Twitter @NewsHooked.

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