

A BUILDING FIRE HAS CAUSED EXTENSIVE DAMAGE AT
MAGNOLIA PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

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At around 7pm on Dec. 23, multiple fire stations responded to a report of a fire at Magnolia Presbyterian Church at 7200 Magnolia Ave, Riverside, CA 92504. Upon arrival, they found smoke exiting the sanctuary building wherever it could (at the seams, through creases, and through the stained glass that adorned the front of the sanctuary. They made entry and began to put out the fire. They were successful, but needed to cut holes into the roof to let smoke and heat out. A story is told that when the firefighters shot water into the air towards the roof of the sanctuary, it never came back down; it was so hot the water evaporated. One firefighter estimated the temperature to be about 2,000 degrees at the apex of the ceiling.

The firefighters listed the cause of the fire as undetermined, but individuals and firefighters preliminarily identified a back room/alcove as the ignition point. The room had HVAC runs and the compressor for the organ. One surmised that the compressor may have been shot and created sparks that smoldered for a few hours before exiting that room and burning through portions of the chancel, choir loft, and communion prep room.

I haven't seen the report, but believe the fire fighters estimated \$300,000 in fire damage, \$450,000 in content damage, and \$2,000,000 in structure damage.

The session of MagPres met on Monday, Dec 24 at 10am and chose to have the 7pm Christmas eve service in our Fellowship Hall, which is the historic (Riverside Historic Landmark #4) sanctuary. We normally have our 9am contemporary worship service in that space and were able to make that space adapt for the 200+ who attended the worship service. The service was also attended and documented by multiple news stations. The Rev. Timm High (Presbytery Leader for Mission and Vision/Stated Clerk) was present at the Session meeting and the worship service. He offered a helpful pastoral voice to the meeting and even helped set up chairs for the service.

The support of the community and particularly local area churches was felt and appreciated. Rev. Erin Thomas, from Calvary Presbyterian Church, was present, offering support while the firefighters put out the blaze. Calvary, Victoria, as well as other churches, offered space for us to host our Christmas Eve Service (including Harvest, The Grove, Sandals and others). Harvest solicited ways they could help and purchased LED candles to help us create luminaria to light the parking lot and the sidewalk path from the parking lot to the Fellowship Hall. Home Depot, the Flower Club, and an anonymous member from a Riverside Presbytery congregation, donated poinsettia and decorations to adorn our space. One of the things lifted from this situation are people, who through social media and verbally, talked about role that Mag Pres had played in their formation, having attended

youth group, a wedding, baptism, etc. It was a reminder to me personally about the heritage and legacy this faith community has had in affecting the world positively for Christ.

I penned the following statement which was read during the Christmas Eve service:

On a night just like this one
 When the darkness lasted too long
 When shock and grief were all too common
 When current circumstances made the future bleak and uncertain

On a night just like this one
 The world paused
 And even skipped a breath
 Because God showed up
 As a baby wrapped in swaddling clothes
 Laying in a manger
 And the world was changed for the better

We gather tonight
 to pause
 Maybe even to skip a breath
 To meet the God who showed up in an unconventional way
 So that our world will be changed for the better

We gather tonight to celebrate, for it is indeed, a Merry Christmas

The plan for now is to have Sunday worship services in the historic building. We had been anticipating building an ADA compliant ramp into that building and had been soliciting bids; we are considering erecting a temporary ramp imminently to facilitate entry into that building by people of all abilities, as it is now our primary worship space.

We are waiting for contact from our insurance company to determine next steps for the sanctuary, which has not yet been cleared for entry.

So much is going on and continued prayers are coveted.