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Church that survived Great Chicago Fire survives another

Grace Aduroja and Jon Yates, Tribune staff reporters CHICAGO TRIBUNE July 26, 2003

More than a century ago, Holy Family Church survived the [Great Chicago Fire](#). Friday, the West Side sanctuary survived the not-so-great fire, a small but fierce one that was confined to the church's basement.

"This church is blessed," said Chief Tedd Korbos of the [Chicago Fire Department](#)'s 4th battalion, located directly across Roosevelt Road from the church. "I think it was a miracle it didn't spread."

Holy Family, at 1080 W. Roosevelt Road, is the city's second-oldest church, built in 1857, 14 years before Chicago's legendary fire. The 4th battalion firehouse, which houses Engine Company 18, was built two years after the Great Fire and is the city's oldest active firehouse.

Had the two buildings not been tied so closely, Friday's blaze fire probably would have been much worse.

A woman walking past the church about 7:15 a.m. saw the fire and crossed the street to tell a firefighter, who quickly sounded the alarm. Within minutes, crews had loaded the fire engine for the short trip.

"Twenty seconds, maybe thirty seconds," said Lt. Donald Leigh of Engine 18. "It's right across the street. We had no problem getting there."

Had it taken longer, the church might have been destroyed, firefighters said. Because of its age, and because the interior is mostly wood, the structure is like a tinderbox, church officials said.

"We were minutes away from a catastrophe; that's how intense the fire was," said Rev. Jerry Boland. Although the basement was severely damaged, the upstairs sanctuary was saved, and services will be held there on Sunday.

The city's Office of Fire Investigation is looking at whether a fan or dehumidifier placed in the basement after a recent flood might have shorted out and caused the fire.

None of the church's artifacts or restored material was damaged, officials said.

At its peak, the church had a membership of about 25,000. But membership slowly shrank, and by 1990, with the building in disrepair, there was talk of demolishing the Victorian Gothic sanctuary.

Determined to keep the church, parishioners raised almost \$5 million for restoration. Membership, which less than a decade ago had dipped below 200, has rebounded, Boland said. On an average Sunday, about 400 parishioners attend services, he said.

Firefighters, too, have stood by Holy Family, and the Chicago Fire Department now holds its monthly mass in the sanctuary. About 200 Chicago firefighters attend on the third Sunday of each month, fire chaplain Tom Mulcrone said.

"They know this church like the back of their hands," Mulcrone said. "They know every inch of this church."

The chaplain said Holy Family is symbolic for the Fire Department, and firefighters were proud to save it.

"I've been the fire chaplain for 16 years," Mulcrone said, "and there hasn't been a basement fire in a church that hasn't burned down the entire church."

Until Friday.