



Strengthened BY FIRE

By Justin Owens

Early one Saturday morning in October 2010, my wife answered a phone call from the ward Relief Society president. My wife's face showed deep concern as she mouthed to me, "The church burned down!"

Stunned by the news, we drove to our church building in Mukilteo, Washington, USA, and assessed the damage. Where once had stood a beautiful building in which two wards met, we saw only pillars of smoke and charred brick walls. The roof had collapsed, and we soon learned that the building could not be salvaged. The fire began during the night when the building was empty, so thankfully no one was hurt. But since our meetinghouse was not equipped with sprinklers or fire alarms, the fire went unnoticed for hours. By the time the fire department arrived, any hope of saving the building was lost.

Realizing Good Could Come from This

Members in the area initially met the news of the burned building with a mixture of sadness, frustration, and even some anger. The media were following the event closely and eagerly awaited responses from Church members, particularly because, as we soon learned, the fire was no accident. Later that Saturday, however, our members received a timely and inspired email from the stake president, who wrote, "The Lord is watching, and just as He has done so many times in the past, He will cause good to rise up out of what appears at the moment to be a great loss." He stressed the importance of rebuilding and moving forward. While the building was important to us, he explained, the strength of our wards was manifest in the individual lives of members, not the building.

When our meetinghouse burned down, our stake president told us good would rise up out of our great loss. He was right.

Following the stake president's email, I witnessed a transformation among our members. We decided that while we could not completely control our trials, we could control our response to them. The next day, a few local news reporters met with us to hear our reactions. To the reporters' surprise, the members remained positive—and the town took notice.

An Outpouring of Kindness

Almost immediately after the fire, we saw an outpouring of kindness from the community. A nearby Lutheran church graciously offered weekday use of their building, which we used for some of our Scout meetings. Likewise, the local YMCA opened their doors to us, and we held seminary and other meetings in the space they offered. For most other meetings, our ward met in an available building within the stake, while the other displaced ward used a meetinghouse in a nearby stake.

We also witnessed several small but appreciated mercies in the following weeks. For example, shortly before crews demolished what was left of our building, a sister in our ward requested permission to salvage a few items. She was pleased to find, among other things, the unharmed plaques containing the names of those who had received the Young Womanhood Recognition and the



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Eagle Scout Award over the last several years. We took such experiences as evidence of the Lord's love for us in this trying time. We never felt alone.

Rising Up from the Ashes

Our building was soon demolished, and plans went forward to construct a new meetinghouse on the same site. Another brother and I had been called to serve as new counselors to our bishop the day after the fire. With the completion date for the new building approaching, we felt prompted as a bishopric to use the occasion as an opportunity to invite our less-active ward members to worship with us again. We decided to send an invitation, along with a picture of the new building, to all the households (about 450) on our ward list. We also encouraged home teachers to invite all of their assigned families to join us for services in the new building.

Our stake sponsored an open house, which included a ribbon-cutting ceremony, stations explaining the

various priesthood auxiliary functions in the Church, and plenty of refreshments. The open house was a wonderful event that helped us show our appreciation to the community and share with them what we believe and how we worship.

Stronger from the Refiner's Fire

Though our building was destroyed, our ward continued to grow and become stronger. During construction of the new building, more than a dozen baptisms took place, a few families were sealed, and miraculously our youth attendance nearly doubled. We now enjoy a new meetinghouse that fits our two wards and a new Spanish branch very well. We feel blessed to have a new building and to have been the recipients of love and support from members and from those not of our faith. From our experience, we learned that the strength of the Church is not determined by its buildings but by the Christ-centered lives of its members. As our stake president foresaw, good did come from the tragedy of losing our building. We were refined by fire and sanctified by trial. ■

The author lives in Washington, USA.