

Just after midnight Friday morning, June 20, I received a call that did not seem real: “Pastor Butch, Zwingli is on fire!” Arriving 15 minutes later at Zwingli United Church of Christ in Souderton, where I serve as Senior Pastor, I was taken aback by the sight of numerous fire companies on the scene. In all, 16 fire companies would arrive to battle the blaze that consumed the education wing, nearly destroyed the administrative wing and left smoke, water and minor fire damage to the sanctuary. Watching from the back of the parking lot, several Zwingli members and I, as well as neighbors, stood in disbelief. As we watched firefighters from Bucks and Montgomery Counties fight valiantly to put out the fire and save the sanctuary, we cried and laughed, were silent and in awe, comforted one another and whispered, “we’ll be OK, it’s just a building, God is with us.”

It is difficult to put into words the range of emotions that we have felt that evening and in the past few weeks. What is certain is our deep, heart felt gratitude and appreciation for those who fought the fire for over four hours. The dedication and care of the volunteer firefighters and support personnel was and is, quite simply, extraordinary. “Thank you,” somehow, does not seem enough to express our feeling of gratitude for the efforts of these men and women, many who risked their lives. Nonetheless, we want to thank, especially, the Souderton Fire Company and their chief, Al Sergio, Jr.

We have also been astounded by the outpouring of support. Although it’s not surprising, for we live in a very caring community, the notes, calls, letters, contributions and offers of prayer, encouragement and assistance have been remarkable. We want to thank the churches, community groups, neighbors, friends and others for their words of comfort and concern as well as their help. We especially want to thank Jake Dawson and the Board of Directors at the Boys and Girls Club in Souderton for space to worship; Univest National Bank for office space; Dimpler Woodworking for the beautiful cross that was made for our worship space; to the media for their empathetic and sensitive reporting...the list could go on and on.

This is indeed a tragedy and yet we are filled with hope – hope because of the spirit we have seen in the response of the community; hope because of pastors, priests, rabbis and members from many faith traditions reaching out in prayer, encouragement and other ways of support; hope because of the deep faith, commitment and resiliency of the Zwingli membership; hope because this is, in an odd way, an opportunity.

Even though we have suffered this set-back, we are firm in our belief that “God is still speaking” in the life of our church and its members. We know that God’s grace will continue to surround us and will help to bring about something new in our midst. We also know that God was speaking and acting in all who walked with us that fateful day and who will inspire us to look to the future.