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Blaze kills evangelist, three sons

By William Harms

A RELIGIOUS leader and three of her sons died Monday in a fire at a Chicago Heights church building that state officials had declared "not fit for human occupancy."

Two other sons of the woman were injured in the fire, as were a visitor and three firefighters.

The cause of the fire was not immediately determined. Lt. Kenneth Johnson of the Chicago Heights Police Department said it could have started from portable heating units used on the second floor where the people lived.

Pronounced dead on arrival at St. James Hospital, Chicago Heights, were Marie Jones, 36; Tyrone Mays, 14; Clarence Mays, 10; and Willie Mays, 9.

REPORTED IN FAIR condition at the hospital were James Mays, 11, and Brian Mays, 15, who were treated for smoke inhalation. The boys escaped from the second floor on a firefighters' ladder.

Gloria Pickens, 21, Rockford, was also listed in fair condition at the hospital, where she was treated for smoke inhalation and a cut on her knee. She apparently walked away from the fire, officials said.

David Hudsteth, 30, a Chicago Heights firefighter, was released from the hospital after treatment for frostbite. Also released after treatment was Lt. Michael Wojslaw of the Chicago Heights Fire Department. He was treated for an elbow injury. Chicago Heights fire Capt. Saloy Bonadona was treated for injuries at the scene.

"Mrs. Jones always said the Lord wanted her to be there [in the church]," said Rev. Ricke Singleton, whose mother, Rev. Juanita Singleton, is pastor of the Church of God, a nondenominational congregation that used the building at 1524 Shields Ave. as a church.

The group heated the area with electrical space heaters and used the building's kitchen and restrooms, he said.

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In this situation, I want us to look at the case as if we were members of the Board of Trustees of the church building that burned down. In trying to decide what the proper action was, let's think of ourselves as being at a meeting of the Board just after finding out that it had been declared "unfit for human occupancy."

Some of the questions I think we should be asking ourselves would include:

1. Considering the hazards, should we completely vacate the building, leaving many with no place to gather together to fulfill the requirement of Hebrews 10:25 which says (in the KJV), "Not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as the manner of some is; but exhorting one another: so much the more, as ye see the day approaching"?

2. What are our responsibilities towards those who also have living quarters in the building? Can we just throw them out with nowhere else to go? Should we allow them to continue to live in the building despite the declaration?

3. Do we fix the building? If so, where does the money come from to do it with? Would a temporary expedient of just installing some fire alarms and detectors without doing any other repairs be okay until some more money became available?

4. If we do decide to fix the building, do we continue to try to use it while the repairs are going on? If so, do we do so at the same level of activity or at a reduced level? If not, what do we use for temporary facilities instead?

5. Should we rely on the Lord to protect us despite the building being unsafe? Would not doing so be acting faithless? Or, would doing so be improperly "tempting" God?

What other questions do you think might be pertinent? This case seems awfully mundane to be a case about Christian Love, but think: is it not with just such prosaic responsibilities that we must learn to apply love in a practical way?