

Church Housing New York Liberty Bell Burns Down

A historic church in lower Manhattan that houses New York's Liberty Bell and whose congregation dates to the city's earliest days was gutted by a massive fire early Saturday that sent flames shooting through the roof.

The Middle Collegiate Church in the East Village burned before dawn Saturday after a fire spread from a five-story vacant building adjacent to the church around 5 a.m. Flames shot from the roof and the church's stately front window glowed from the conflagration inside.

"We are devastated. We are gutted like our building is gutted; our hearts are crushed like our doors are crushed," said the Rev. Jacqueline J. Lewis. "But we know how to be the church, and we know that God is God, yesterday, today and tomorrow."

The fire department said in an Instagram post that there were four minor injuries to firefighters and that marshals were investigating the blaze.

Built in 1892, the church is home to the oldest congregation of the Collegiate Churches of New York, which date to the Dutch settlement of the island in the 1620s, according to the church's website.

The Middle Collegiate Church had been in two other locations in Manhattan since 1729.

The bell tower houses New York's Liberty Bell, which pealed to mark the birth of the nation in 1776 and has since been rung for the inaugurations and deaths of American presidents and events such as remembrance of the Sept. 11 attacks, according to the church.

Lewis believed the bell survived the fire but was not certain. Church minister Amanda Ashcraft told WABC that the Tiffany stained glass windows were gone.

Mayor Bill de Blasio tweeted that the fire was “heartbreaking” and pledged: “We’ll do whatever we can to help Middle Collegiate rebuild.”

The fate of the church building is unclear, Lewis said, but the ministry will continue.

“Our church has been worshipping digitally since March 15,” Lewis said. “And that’s what we’ll be doing tomorrow.” {eoa}

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