

Destructive Cleveland Church Fire Was Intentionally Set, Arrests Expected

A devastating fire that destroyed an “irreplaceable” historic Cleveland church has taken a startling turn as investigators now say someone deliberately set the blaze.

Cleveland Fire confirmed that the fire that tore through Friendship Baptist Church on Cleveland’s East Side was intentionally set and that arrests are expected, according to News 5 Cleveland.

The update comes just days after the church went up in flames around 2 a.m. on Aug. 21.

As Charisma previously reported, firefighters faced a massive inferno that sent flames and smoke high above the city. Crews surrounded the building and battled the fire from multiple directions, with at least four ladder trucks pouring water onto the structure. Ash and debris fell across nearby streets as the blaze became visible for miles.

Cleveland Fire Department Lt. Mike Norman previously told News 19 that the destruction amounted to an estimated \$500,000 loss.

“It’s a historic stone church, and it’s irreplaceable, really,” Norman said.

At that point, however, investigators had not determined what sparked the fire.

Now, the case has shifted dramatically.



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News 5 reports that investigators are examining a photograph circulated on social media showing the church engulfed in flames. Cleveland Fire confirmed the image is evidence in the investigation.

Professional photographer Johnny Joo, who photographed Friendship Baptist Church several years before its destruction, told News 5 that people began contacting him about the peculiar post.

"I guess the account that it was shared from was deleted right away, and it had one follower," Joo said.

The circumstances caught his attention.

"By that picture, it seems like an intentional fire, I mean," Joo said. "No one's starting a fire in a building in the summer to stay warm."

But for Joo, the destruction also represents the disappearance of another piece of Cleveland's history.

"It was really just beautiful architecture, just a really beautiful building," he said. "It is kind of unfortunate because we keep losing more and more of that in Cleveland."

The loss is personal for others, too.

Nearby resident Genevieve Mitchell returned to the ruins with flowers and a handwritten message after watching the church burn alongside her neighbors.

"This building is just such an amazing, sacred place," Mitchell told News 5.

Juanita Rucker's connection goes back even further. Her parents were married inside the church.

"Like part of me left with it," she stated.

Now, what began as an unexplained inferno has become an intentional-fire investigation, with Cleveland Fire saying arrests could happen within the next few days.

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