



## 175<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Moment

“He who promised is faithful” (Heb 10.23)

### THE CHURCH IS NOT A BUILDING: FIRST SAINT PAUL’S AND THE GREAT CHICAGO FIRE



*First Saint Paul's fourth building, destroyed Oct. 9, 1871*

As the city of Chicago pauses this week to remember the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Great Chicago Fire, we also recall God’s faithfulness to our congregation in the midst of this disaster. The fire, which began on Saturday evening, October 8, 1871, by Sunday morning had crossed the river and reached First Saint Paul’s, then located at Franklin and Superior. With the church in flames, at ten o’clock, according to Stella Wuerffel’s *City by the Sea*, the steeple “crashed into the roof” with a “sudden, fierce snap,” and the “entire roof collapsed with an ear-splitting boom.” The church, dedicated only seven years earlier, lay in ruins. Two items were saved from the burning church: the carved angel (now in the church lounge) and the church records (now at the Newberry Library).

Members of the church, most of whom lived nearby, fled the scene by any means possible. According to the church’s centennial publication, the fire destroyed the home of every member of the congregation except three. Wuerffel’s book identifies one of these as the Kopljen family, who lived outside the range of the fire. She notes that many First Saint Paul’s members gathered at the Kopljen home, in search of shelter and consolation. Many members, before fleeing the area, dug holes and buried valuables in their yards. The centennial book states that “some families can show proudly such pieces that were thus rescued from the flames.”

Above all, the day was one of panic for many members who were separated from loved ones and uncertain about their welfare. Despite the tremendous loss of property, there is no record of any member of First Saint Paul’s perishing in the fire. The centennial publication notes that, on the following Sunday, “though they had no earthly possessions to speak of, no homes in which they might dwell, no places of employment, the fathers of our church, led by their faithful pastor [Henry Wunder], resolved to rebuild the church building according to the same plans on the site of the ashes of the old.” In the midst of personal and civic chaos, the members prioritized their church community, trusting in a gracious God to bless their efforts. Contributions poured in from Lutherans throughout the country. One year after the fire, a replica of the old church was dedicated.

