

✝ HOLY HIGHLIGHTS FROM THE HILL OVERLOOKING ROBESONIA ✝

TRIAL BY FIRE – DECEMBER 1976

Reverend Edward Cloughen was barely into his third month as Pastor of St. Daniel's when catastrophe struck: a fire destroyed the church and Sunday School building in the early morning hours of December 8, 1976.

Reading Eagle newspaper coverage reported, "Historic St. Daniel's (Corner) Lutheran Church in Heidelberg Township north of Robesonia was reduced to rubble early this morning by a windswept fire that kept 150 firemen from seven companies busy for more than five hours in freezing temperatures."

Tragically, the fire had been spotted from Berks County Prison and Reading Municipal Airport, almost 15 miles away, but not reported because it was apparently mistaken for controlled burnings being conducted at the Blue Marsh project. Dale Hartman, church sexton, was the first to report the blaze, calling in to Robesonia's Pioneer Hose volunteer fire company. St. Daniel's member Harold Ranck, who was also Robesonia's Fire Chief, arrived on the scene at about 3 AM. Harold reported a "blazing inferno," with the front windows of the church already blown out before the firefighting crews arrived. In spite of the massive efforts of all surrounding area fire companies, firefighters were unable to save the church structures. Mark and Nancy Wolfskill arrived on the scene after Dale Hartman called Mark, who was Council President at the time. Richard and Joyce Hassler also rushed to the church after being awakened by a neighbor pounding on the door and ringing the doorbell at their home to let them know he thought the church was on fire. Even in 2026, nearly 50 years later, Nancy and Joyce vividly recalled the profound sadness and helplessness they felt as they watched the church burn.

The fire went through the roof of the church and the bell tower very quickly. The 65-year-old church bell, weighing 1800 pounds, fell into the basement – a truly awful sight to witness. The fire melted through the round stained glass window above the altar and then ignited the roof of the Sunday School building.

A very cold temperature of 8° F and a strong wind made the firefighting more difficult. Harold Ranck recalled, "I went into the sexton's house and when I went to take off my coat, it stood alone, frozen straight." Richard Hassler remembered the cold stating, "My pants legs were frozen stiff. The water froze instantly. I couldn't bend my legs."

Assistant Robesonia Fire Chief Larry Rentschler, also a St. Daniel's member, and other firemen assumed a post at the church pond along Church Street, pumping water to fight the fire. Despite their efforts, virtually none of the church structures could be saved.

"By the time the fire had reached the education wing, a lot of the Sunday School furnishings had been carried out. We were concerned with saving the Sunday School," said Harold Ranck, "but when the fire moved to the roof of that building and was above the firemen, we had to pull everybody out and fight the fire from the outside only."

Firemen and volunteers retrieved what they could. The church safe and Communion glasses were saved, along with tables, chairs, and kitchen equipment from the Sunday School and Fellowship Hall. Robert Koch remembered that some pieces of orchestra music had been collected, but most of Homer Landis's handwritten music arrangements for the Sunday School Orchestra were lost. Among the items rescued from the fire was the nativity scene, which the congregation still displays each Christmas. Look for this treasured piece of St. Daniel's history in the accompanying photo – and at church this Christmas season!

Earlier this year before her passing, Joyce Hassler told the story of the handbells. Harold Ranck and Richard Hassler were able to save the two-octave set of handbells from the Sunday School basement before that area had to be evacuated due to the spreading fire. Joyce recalled that, later on the morning of the fire, 4 students who were members of the bell choir had come to her at Conrad Weiser high school where she worked to ask if she knew the status of the handbells. When Joyce confirmed to Ann Bright, Cathy Bright, Lori Ranck, and Teresa Wolfskill that they had been saved, there were tears of relief all around – including in April 2026 with the retelling of the story!

Firefighters stayed on the scene virtually all day, then returned during the night and the next day to extinguish hot spots. Berks fire companies involved included Pioneer Co. of Robesonia, Wernersville, Womelsdorf, Bernville, and Mt. Pleasant. Lebanon County fire companies included Newmanstown and Keystone Fire Co. of Myerstown. With so many responding, other companies remained on standby to cover emergencies elsewhere. The Salvation Army canteen truck of Lebanon County and some of St. Daniel's churchwomen provided food and hot coffee for the volunteers. Because only portions of the church and Sunday School walls remained – and stood close to Church Street and St. Daniel's Road – the town called for the structures to be promptly demolished to protect passing motorists. Heavy equipment was brought in the next day and soon the rest of the walls came tumbling down.

Damage was estimated at \$650,000. All furnishings and appointments were lost: pews, altar, a silver Communion chalice, Bibles, hymnals, and the beautiful stained glass window of Christ in the Garden of Gethsemane, among other things. The all-wood pipe organ was totally destroyed. Valued at approximately \$70,000, it had been recently restored at the cost of \$21,000. Along with the church proper, the red brick Sunday School building was also damaged beyond repair. It included classrooms, a library, Pastor's office, kitchen, and auditorium. It was difficult to assign a dollar value to the total destruction, but it was virtually impossible to express the sentiment associated with the loss.

The cause of the fire was never determined, although State Police Fire Marshall Edward Gleason suspected an electrical cause from a second floor source, likely the choir gown room, where most of the electric lines were located. Harold Ranck had been in the basement in the early stages of the fire, and it did not appear that the fire had started there. The basement of the Sunday School suffered only water damage. Harold remarked that the furnace boiler had still been running as the fire was burning on the floors above, until the falling bell tower caused the fire to reach the church basement, cutting off electricity.

St. Daniel's Church Council met that very evening, Wednesday, December 8, in the church parsonage on Big Spring Road. It was immediately decided that worship services would be held that Sunday and that St. Daniel's would rebuild. Soon after the fire, Dr. Walter Rohrbach, Superintendent of the Conrad Weiser School District, offered the high school as a meeting place for the St. Daniel's congregation.

As promised, the congregation conducted worship and shared the Sacrament of Holy Communion in the High School auditorium just 4 days later, on Sunday, December 12. The salvaged communion glasses were used in that first service after the fire. Larry Rentschler recalled, "The number of glasses was just right for the number of people at worship that day." An altar saved from one of the classrooms was refinished and used as the main altar for the church services. Communion ware was borrowed from St. Paul's UCC in Robesonia. Approximately 300 people attended the emotion-filled service, opening with "The Church's One Foundation" as the processional and with the hymn "My Hope Is Built On Nothing Less," sung from hymnals which had been donated by other congregations. The choir, in borrowed gowns, led the music under the direction of Miriam Borkert. The Sunday School Orchestra, under the leadership of George Koch, was appreciated as never before. The set of handbells rescued from the Sunday School basement took on added significance in the services following the fire. St. Daniel's members rallied to support one another with precious few of the physical elements that had accompanied their worship in the former church.

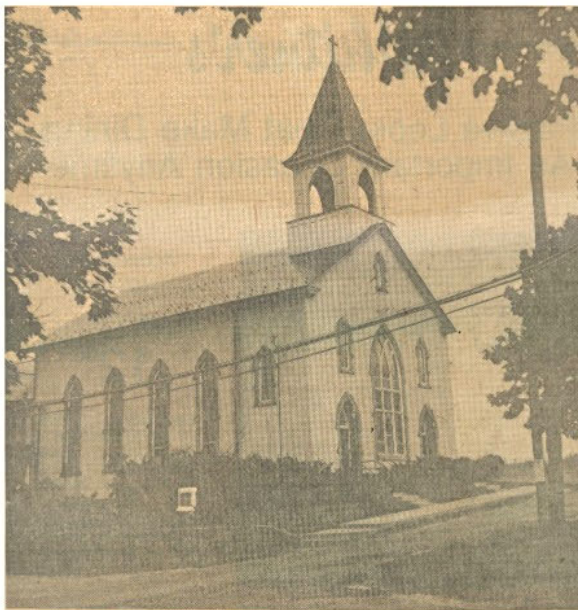
The sermon focused on the church – not the building, but the people. Pastor Edward Cloughen emphasized in his message that though the church building had burned to the ground, the “Church with a capital C” would remain. Stewardship, cooperation, and mutual support for one another were also stressed in that message. “We have a big job before us,” said Pastor Cloughen, “but we have a God who is even bigger, and who offers us His strength and wisdom to complete that job. **Let’s get to work!**”

What an amazing and enduring history we share!

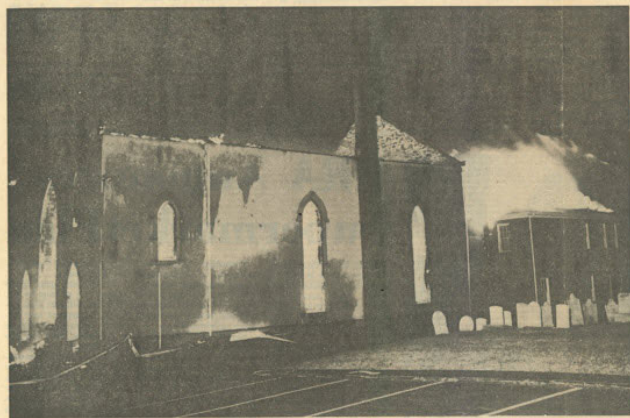
Follow this space throughout the year for snippets of St. Daniel's history from 1751 to 2026.

Historical details taken from the 'St. Daniel's Evangelical Lutheran Church "Eck Kirche" 1751-2001' church history book written by the St. Daniel's History Committee in celebration of the 250th anniversary. More details regarding this topic are found in Chapter 2 – The Church Grows. Additional details from member interviews for the 250th anniversary and from 2026 conversations with Joyce Hassler and Nancy Wolfskill. The majority of photos and newspaper clippings from albums owned by Margie Baerncopf, Joyce Hassler, Nancy Wolfskill, and Deanie Yoh. Remaining photos from St. Daniel's archives or as noted.

**#StDaniels #StDanielsLutheranChurch #EckKirche #CornerChurch
#OnTheHillOverlookingRobesonia #RobesoniaPA #1751StDaniels2026 #275thAnniversary
#HolyHighlights #History #OurHistory #ChurchFire #8December1976
#ReverendEdwardCloughen #WorshipAtCWHS #LetsGetToWork #ALotHappensIn275Years**



St. Daniel's Lutheran Church, before and after the fire.
Joyce Hassler clippings.



Fire Feasts On Structures

The hollow shell of St. Daniel's (Corner) Lutheran Church in Heidelberg Township, north of Robesonia, glows with burning embers from a mammoth blaze that destroyed the historic western Berks County church early this morning. At left, Womelsdorf Fireman Donald Ebling, one of more than 150 firemen from seven companies to battle the inferno, is coated with ice, the result of spray from the hoses and subfreezing temperatures. The blaze was discovered shortly before 3 a.m. by Dale Hartman, the church's sexton, who was alerted to the fire by his barking dog. The building aflame in the rear of the church, top photo, is the Sunday School building. Other photos on Pages 3 and 12. —Eagle Photos by Owen C. Stout.

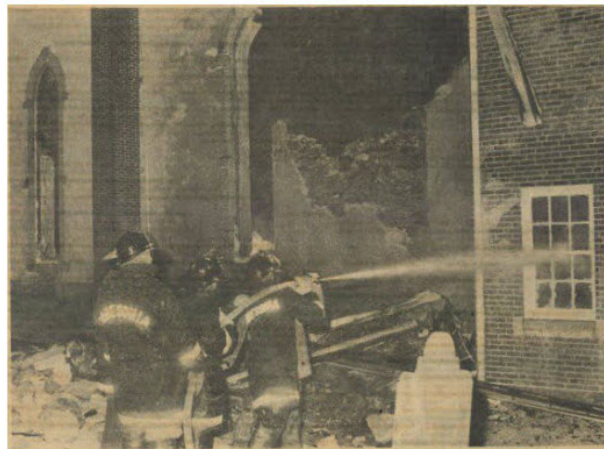


Reading Eagle article
from Joyce Hassler's
scrapbook

Color photo from St. Daniel's
1978 Church Dedication / Directory



Color photo from St.
Daniel's archives



GUTTED CHURCH — Firemen stand in one of three cemeteries surrounding St. Daniel's Lutheran Church, as they try to cool down the remainder of the structure. Sections of wall were all that remained of the main church structure and an attached newer Sunday school building. Seven fire companies, including two from Lebanon County, fought the blaze for five hours. The Richland Fire Co. also stood by and

the Lebanon County Salvation Army canteen was at the scene. (Daily News Photo). 12/8/76

Lebanon Daily News photo
from Joyce Hassler's
scrapbook

Lebanon Daily News 12/10/76

Damage In Fire Said \$600,000

Damage is estimated at \$600,000 in a fire that destroyed St. Daniel's Lutheran Church near Robesonia Wednesday morning.

Robesonia Fire Chief Harold J. Ranck and state police fire marshal Edward Gleason were slated to meet this morning at the ruins of the church to attempt to probe the cause of the fire.

Chief Ranck said he and Gleason will be trading ideas on how the blaze might have started.

Meanwhile, members of the church council and the Conrad Weiser School Board will be meeting in hopes of making arrangements for Sunday services in the high school auditorium.

The church will hold its services in the auditorium this Sunday at 10:30, according to the district superintendent, Dr. Walter A. Rohrbach.

Rohrbach said he took it upon himself to allow the use of the auditorium this Sunday, but future arrangements will have to be made by the council and the board.

Offers From Churches

Many local churches have made offers for the use of their facilities, according to the board.

(Continued on Page 4—Col. 2)

Damage In Fire

(Continued from Page One)

Rev. Edward W. Goughen, pastor of St. Daniel's.

The church members are planning to start a cleanup campaign in an effort to salvage anything of value that might remain buried in the rubble, after insurance investigators complete their survey.

The church council has decided that a new church will be built, possibly on the same spot.

Above: *Lebanon Daily News* article, December 10, 1976. Joyce Hassler clipping.

Below: December 8, 1976 *Reading Eagle* photo of the burned Sunday School building. Geraldine Yoh clipping.

12 Reading Eagle, Wednesday, December 8, 1976

BUILDING BURNED — A group of weathered tombstones, some of them dating to pre-Revolutionary times, stands vigil over the burned out remains of the education annex of St. Daniel's (Corner) Lutheran Church in the aftermath of a mammoth blaze that struck the church shortly before 3 a.m. today.

14 SHOPPING DAYS TILL CHRISTMAS

FIRE BURNS OUT CHURCH — Flames shoot up from St. Daniel's Lutheran Church, above, early today and quickly spread to the Sunday school behind the main church building. Below, firemen, their coats covered with small icicles, wage a four-hour battle. Mark Worksell, right, president of the church council, views a blackened chalice and cross that was damaged by the raging fire. — Eagle Photos.

Above: A *Reading Eagle* article with a collage of photos contains a somewhat cruel reminder that it was only 14 shopping days till Christmas. The editor might have chosen a different location for that filler graphic! Joyce Hassler clipping.



MODERN DAY BUGLES — The walls of historic St. Daniel's (Corner) Lutheran Church in Heidelberg Township came tumbling down Wednesday afternoon, but congregation members are reading plans to build a new church. The trees and bushes surrounding the church are still covered with ice from the water firemen used to extinguish the four-hour blaze Wednesday morning at the church.

Reading Eagle photos – December 9, 1976. Marge Baerncopf clippings.
The remaining walls are being knocked down.



REMOVING HAZARD — A bulldozer knocks down the walls of St. Daniel's (Corner) Lutheran Church in Heidelberg Township following Wednesday morning's fire. Mark Wolfskill, church council president, said the church hired a contractor to topple the walls so they wouldn't pose a hazard to passing motorists.



Above & Below: Before the walls of the Sunday School building were knocked down.



Above & Below: Heavy equipment knocks down walls of the church and Sunday School building.



All photos in this grouping: St. Daniel's archives.

Fire wrecks church; members will rebuild

Less than 24 hours after St. Daniel's Lutheran Church in Heidelberg Township was destroyed by fire, the church council Wednesday night decided to rebuild.

More than 150 volunteers from seven fire companies battled five hours in freezing temperatures to subdue the wind-fed blaze.

FIREMEN REMAINED on the scene all day Wednesday, pouring water on hot spots in the smoldering rubble.

Although no damage estimate was available, the historic 162-year-old edifice was considered a total loss, according to Robesonia Fire Chief Harold J. Ranck.

"When we first arrived about 3 a.m.," Chief Ranck said "the stained-glass windows had been blown out by the intense heat generated by the fire."

The flames, fanned by high winds, were blown to the Sunday School, an addition added to the church in 1961, which ignited and was gutted in the fire.

IN ADDITION to the wind hampering the firefighters, water poured on the structure's slate roof, simply flowed back to the ground and froze, causing another handicap.

The only person injured was Chief Ranck who twisted a knee when he fell through a hole while exploring the ruins Wednesday afternoon.

He was treated in Reading Hospital for bruises.

CHIEF RANCK said the volunteers from Pioneer Fire Co. received assistance from Womelsdorf, Wernersville, Newmans town, Myerstown, Mount Pleasant and Bernville. The church is located about one-half mile north of Robesonia.

All of the church property and equipment, including pews, organ, chairs, altars, Bibles, books, hymnals and a sterling silver chalice for communion were ruined in the inferno.

Even the church bell, which weighs about one ton and dates back to 1911, toppled from the steeple and is buried somewhere in the rubble, Chief Ranck said.

HOWEVER, THE church safe, several chairs and desks, choir bells, and much of the equipment from the kitchen, including a refrigerator and stove, were salvaged.

Another item recovered was a corner stone, laid in 1911, which contains a box filled with material from that period, including a Bible, a newspaper, communion bread and wine and a magazine, according to church secretary Rod E. Small.

Still buried in the rubble is another corner stone, laid in 1814.

AT A MEETING of church council Wednesday night, it was decided to rebuild, possibly in the same spot.

Mark A. Wolfskill, council president, was appointed chairman of the building fund. The church was reported to have been 90 per cent covered by insurance.

Also, arrangements are being made to hold Sunday services at Conrad Weiser

High School, but the plans weren't final as of late Wednesday night.

Demolition crews moved in Wednesday afternoon and pulled down the stone walls of the structure as a safety measure.

ALSO POLICE stood guard through Wednesday night and into the early morning hours today to prevent any vandalism.

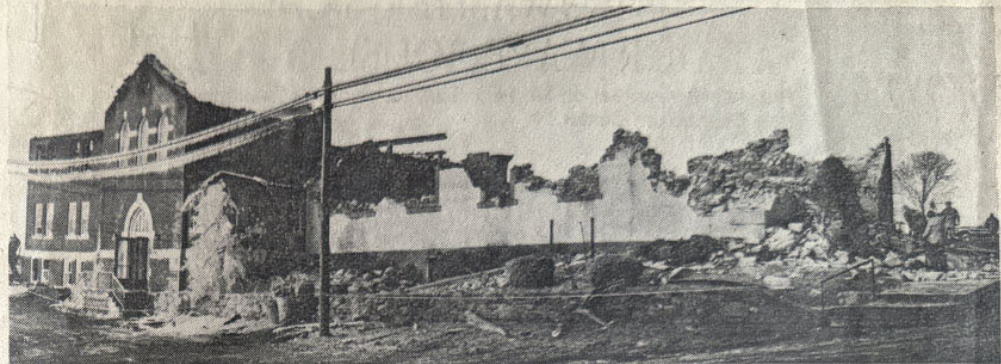
"Some people even wanted a stone from the old church as a souvenir," Chief Ranck said.

State police fire marshal Edward F. Gleason sifted through the wreckage Wednesday afternoon trying to determine the cause of the blaze, but as of Wednesday night, it was still a mystery.

THE FIRE was the first blaze to hit the church, according to church council members and there reportedly had been no problems with the electrical or heating systems.

There had been no services or meetings in the church in the past few days and the last time anyone was in the building was believed to have been Tuesday afternoon when the wife of the church sexton, Dale A. Hartman, made a customary inspection.

"It's only been in the last few years that we have even started locking the doors," said Chief Ranck, who is also one of the church's 550 members.



Photographer: Richard J. Patrick

Rubble, above, is all that remains of St. Daniel's Lutheran Church in Heidelberg Township, although walls of the Sunday school building remain standing at left. Below,

Robesonia Fire Chief Harold J. Ranck views ice-coated interior of Sunday school.



Reading Times article - December 9, 1976
from Geraldine Yoh's scrapbook

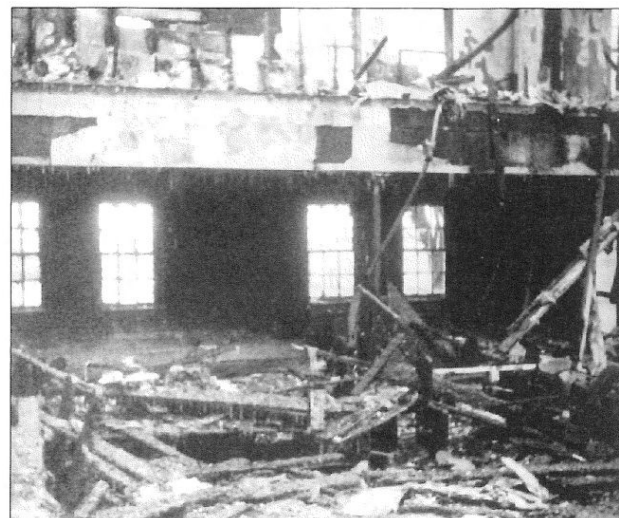
Even among the ruins, the round opening makes the location of the Garden of Gethsemane window unmistakable.



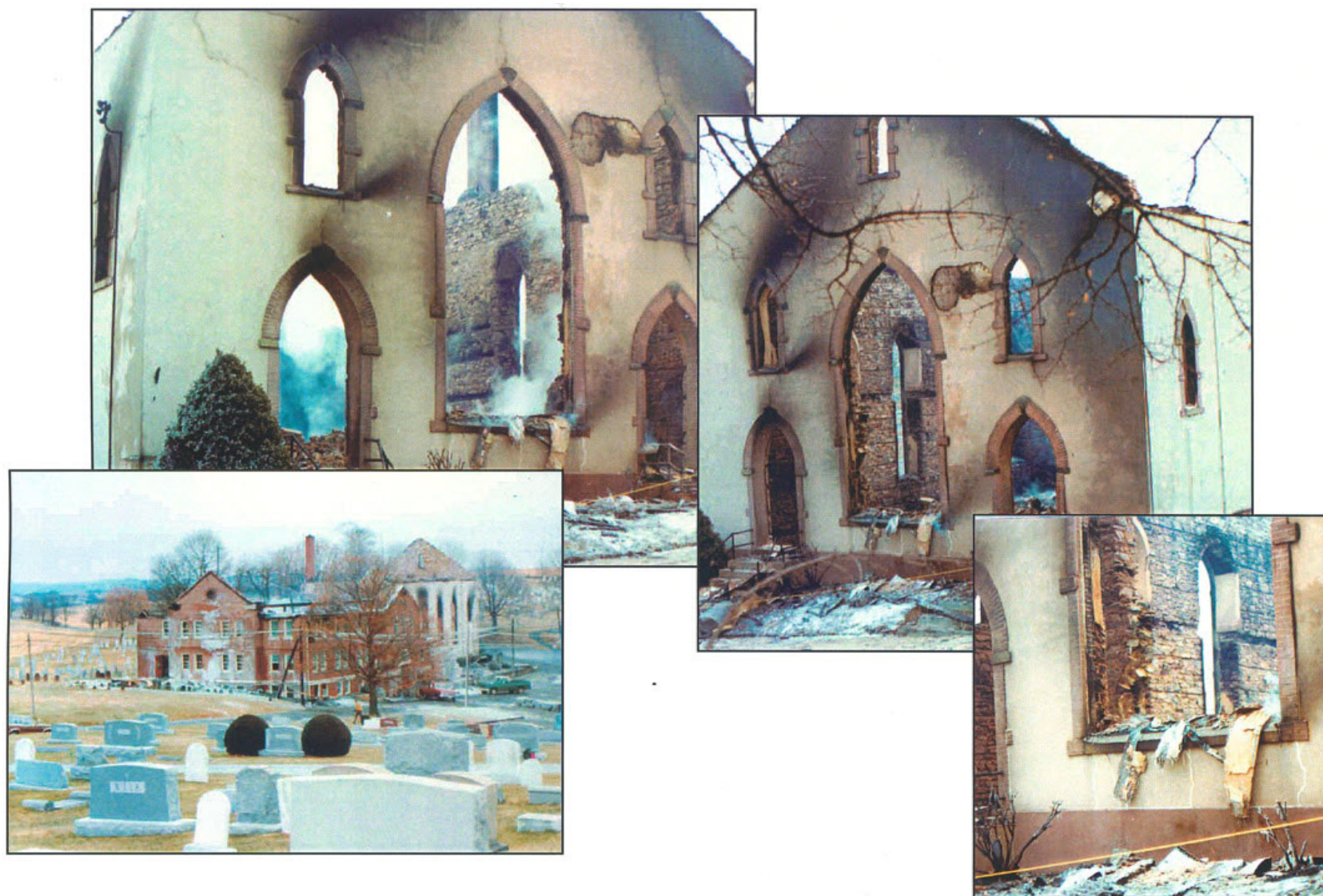
Top left and bottom right photos: St. Daniels' archives
Bottom left photo: Joyce Hassler; Top right photo: Nancy Wolfskill



The church ruins as seen from the left and right sides. The stone wall (L) and the parking spaces (R) seen in the photos still exist today at the Memorial Garden. Joyce Hassler photos.

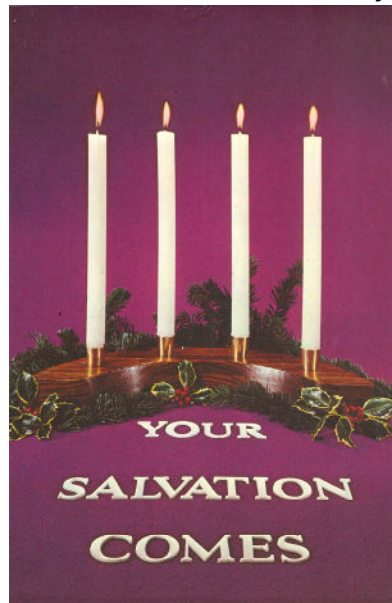


In the ruins. Photos from St. Daniels' archives.



From a 250th Anniversary calendar of church history published in 2001.

The bulletin from Sunday, December 12, 1976 – 1st worship service after the fire, held at the high school.



ST. DANIEL'S LUTHERAN CHURCH
Robesonia, Pennsylvania
The Rev. Edward W. Cloughen, Pastor
Telephone: 678-2362
Mrs. Miriam Berkert, Organist and Director

THE THIRD SUNDAY IN ADVENT
December 12, 1976

PREPARATION IN WORSHIP
The Prelude . . . "Nodal Air"
"Joyeaux" . . . Senior Bell Choir
The Prayer
The Processional Hymn No. 149
The Invocation
The Confession of Sins Celebrate

PRaise IN WORSHIP
The Psalterody Celebrate
The Gloria Patri Page 17
The Kyrie Page 18
The Gloria in Excelsis Page 19
The Prayer of the Day Celebrate

INSTRUCTION IN WORSHIP
The First Lesson Zechariah 3:14-18a
The Second Lesson "Rise Up, O Men of God"
The Gospel Lesson Philippians 4:4-7
The Alleluia Page 21
The Apostles' Creed Page 5
The Announcements
The Hymn No. 385
The Sermon Pastor Cloughen

DEDICATION IN WORSHIP
The Offering
The Anthem "I Ring My Praise to God"
The Offertory Page 27
The Prayer of the Church Celebrate
The Lord's Prayer Celebrate
The Benediction

The Three-Fold Amen
The Recessional Hymn No. 150
The Silent Prayer
The Postlude

THE FLOWERS in our Altar vases this morning are presented by Mr. and Mrs. Larry Rentschler.

THE BULLETIN for our service this morning is presented by Mrs. Warren Haffelfinger in memory of her husband.

CALENDAR OF EVENTS:
Today - 9:00 a.m.--Senior Bell Choir
10:30 a.m.--The Service
2:30 p.m.--Christian Education Meeting
6:30 p.m.--Senior Bell Choir at Friedens-Charlottesville
Monday - 7:00 p.m.--Adult Bible Study
Thursday - 7:00 p.m.--Chorus Choir
7:30 p.m.--Junior Choir
8:00 p.m.--Senior Choir

ALL SUNDAY CHURCH SCHOOL
teachers and members of the Christian Education Committee are reminded about the meeting to be held this afternoon at 2:30 p.m. at the parsonage. Please bring a chair.

MEMBERS OF THE ADULT BIBLE STUDY
group will meet as usual on Monday evening at 7:00 p.m. in the basement of St. Paul's UCC, Robesonia.

MEMBERS OF OUR CHOIRS are reminded that their rehearsals will be held in Trinity Church, Robesonia, on Thursday evening.

THE SENIOR BELL CHOIR will be performing for the Friedens-Charlottesville Christmas Social tonight at 6:30 p.m. in their church. The choir will be leaving Dale Hartman's residence at 5:30 p.m. for this performance.

ALL HEADS OF ORGANIZATIONS and various departments of our congregation are asked to make up lists of furnishings in their areas of activity in the old church. This will assist us in our insurance claims.

 A SINCERE "THANK YOU" is extended to all members and friends of St. Daniel's for their efforts during the past week. With the continued efforts and dedication by all of our members, our congregation will serve our Lord to an ever greater extent in the future.

IF YOU WOULD LIKE to provide Communion bread for services during the coming year, please contact Mrs. Linda Rentschler, who will be keeping the schedule.

IF YOU HAVE NOT as yet received your 1977 offering envelopes, please inform Mrs. Gleaver Warbluft. New envelopes must be ordered.

 LORD, USE ME

BEGINNING JANUARY 1, the cost of sponsoring the bulletins for one Sunday will be raised to \$7.00. This increase is to cover the actual expense of the bulletins, which has been double the stated price for several years. If you have agreed to sponsor the bulletin for one or more Sundays next year and wish to change your mind in light of the increase, please inform Mrs. Rachel Stump. If you would like to sponsor the bulletin (and sponsors are needed), please inform Mrs. Stump.

LAST WEEK'S STATISTICS:

	1975	1976
Church Attendance	205	206
Church and Church School Offering . . .	\$1,119.00	
World Hunger Appeal Offering	\$45.00	



When you leave the service this morning, please deposit your hymnal in one of the cartons found at the exits. If you wish to purchase a hymnal for your own personal use, please inform one of the members of the Church Council.

The following devotion may help you during our period of silent prayer at the conclusion of our service:

O God, our heavenly Father, and the tragedy which has struck our congregation, give us the vision and understanding to see the true joy of the Christmas season. So inspire us with love for you and faith in your eternal promises that we may daily strive to be your Church wherever we may be. This we ask in Jesus' name.



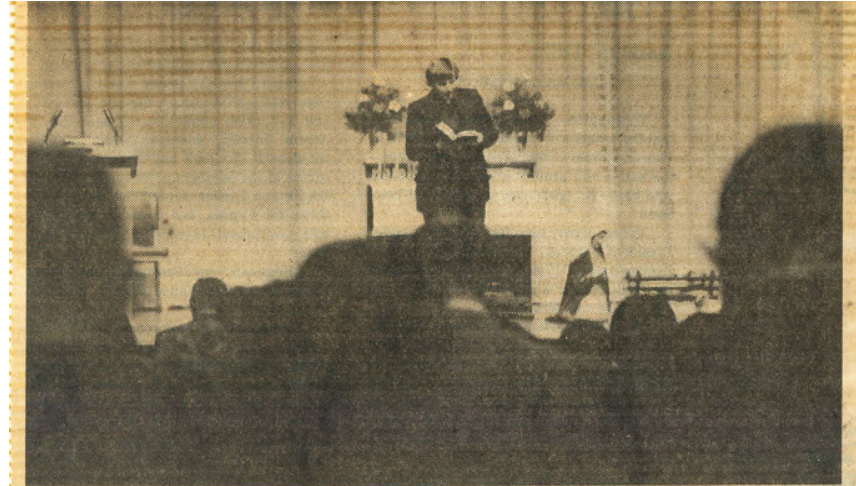
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CHURCH SERVICES —
About 300 members of St. Daniel's (Corner) Lutheran Church attend church services at the Conrad Weiser High School auditorium. It was the first Sunday service since the congregation's church was destroyed by fire last Wednesday. — Eagle Photos.

Reading Eagle
December 13, 1976
From Joyce Hassler's scrapbook

Below:
Christmas at St. Daniel's 2025
The nativity was saved from the 1976 fire.
Photo by Kim Henning



PREACHES SERMON — The Rev. Edward W. Cloughen of St. Daniel's (Corner) Lutheran Church in Heidelberg Township preaches to about 300 members of the congregation in the Conrad Weiser High

School auditorium Sunday. The congregation is using the auditorium until it can rebuild the church which was destroyed by fire last week.

Reading Eagle
12/13/76

Cause Not Known

Church Fire Probed

Edward F. Gleason, state police fire marshal, said this morning he still has not determined the cause of a fire that destroyed the St. Daniel's (Corner) Lutheran Church in Heidelberg Township last week.

Trooper Gleason along with Robeson Fire Chief Harold Ranck and insurance adjusters have already inspected the site three times since the early morning Wednesday blaze, but they have not been able to determine a cause of the fire.

"We are still checking," Trooper Gleason said. There is a lot of debris out there which makes it difficult and there are still some people we want to interview," Trooper Gleason said.

The state police fire marshal said some of the people yet to be interviewed "might have seen something" in the early morning that could help determine the cause of the fire.

At this point, however, Trooper Gleason said he would not have a report on the blaze until Wednesday.

Meanwhile, the congregation of the church held its first Sunday service since the historic church was destroyed, in the auditorium of the Conrad Weiser High School.

About 300 church members attended the service, during which the Rev. Edward W. Cloughen preached on the theme that a "church is more than a building."

"It was a very emotional service for quite a lot of people, especially for older

church members who identified strongly with the church," the Rev. Mr. Cloughen said.

The Rev. Mr. Cloughen said the congregation would use the high school auditorium throughout the Christmas season, adding that a building committee has already been named to plan for the construction of a new church.

A St. Daniel's Building Fund has also been established and donations for a new church can be sent to the church's mailing address in Robeson R.D. 1, the Rev. Mr. Cloughen said. Members of the building committee are: Mark Wolfskill, chairman; the Rev. Mr. Cloughen, Thomas Alexander, Randall Bright, Richard Faust, Richard Hassler, Robert Koch, Carl Labe, Mrs.

Linda Preston, Harold Ranck and Mrs. Linda Reutschler.

The Rev. Mr. Cloughen also announced that the following church activities planned for the Christmas season will be held:

The Adult Bible Study group will meet tonight in St. Paul's United Church of Christ in Robeson.

Regular Sunday School services will be held at 9:15 a.m. in the Conrad Weiser High School auditorium.

A children's Christmas program will also be presented Sunday, Dec. 26, at 9:15 a.m., at the high school.

And choir rehearsals will be held at Trinity Lutheran Church, Robeson Thursday at the following times: Cherub choir at 7 p.m., junior choir at 7:30 p.m. and senior choir at 8 p.m.