

Church Fire – 1991

The Westwood Hills Church of God is an offspring of Gainesville Church of God, which was located on the Hawthorne Road at the time, and was organized and set in order in August of 1967. The first services were held in the home of Abe & Etoile Painter and were soon moved to the band room of the Westwood Middle School. The services were held there until the new edifice was occupied in March of 1968. On Thanksgiving Day of 1967 six journeyman block masons and numerous laborers and helpers, both members and friends of the church, volunteered their time and labor to begin the construction of the exterior walls. The ladies of the church prepared and served and served it to the workers on the construction site.

It was an atypical Sunday evening service on the night of November 10, 1991 as Pastor Ron Peoples and Georgia had left earlier in the day to begin a much needed vacation. A visiting lady minister from California, Kay French, delivered the message in the evening service and challenged the parishioners with the question, “Are you willing to surrender your whole heart and pay the price for the cause of God?” Mrs. Kay indicated that it would be costly but the church body responded in the affirmative in unity. After the service the parishioners departed for a day of remembrance of the service and celebration of Veteran’s Day on Monday.

At approximately 12:40 A.M. a deputy sheriff slowly drove through the parking lot of Westwood Hills Church of God checking the facility and area for any disturbances or anything unusual. The previous months the City of Gainesville had experienced the late night torching of several churches resulting in major damage to most of these sanctuaries. The concern of many of the churches was significant enough to have voluntary parishioners, in turn, holding vigil in the sanctuaries to guard against possible arson attacks to their churches even though it was not recommended by the county Sheriff’s Department. It was not recommended as they were concerned for the safety of the volunteers and the fact that a deputy could not distinguish the silhouette of an arsonist from a volunteer. At 12:50 Highway Patrolman Jim Bond traveling south on NW 34th Street noticed smoke coming from the openings of the church building as he passed through the intersection at NW 16th Boulevard and immediately called the fire department as he instantly knew what had happened—the arsonist had struck again; this time at Westwood Hills Church of God.

The fire department responded very quickly and when the first truck arrived on the scene three minutes later the building was so engulfed in flames that smoke had filled the parking lot and surrounding area that the building was not visible from the road about 40 feet away”. This greatly impaired the vision of the 40 firemen in getting onto the site and impeding their ability to fight the fire. It was apparent that the arsonist had used an accelerant to start the fire and was likely he was in the building when the deputy drove through the parking lot. The building was a total loss and the masonry walls that were left standing and the new foyer addition had to be torn down because of the fire damage.

Rev. People’s son, Todd, called his parents who were only a few hours into their vacation and had stopped for the night in South Georgia. Rev. People’s said that when he got the news in the early hours of the morning that his legs became weak like rubber, but they repacked their bags and drove back to Gainesville arriving on the scene before dawn. It was a devastating blow to the church body but with the quick action of some of the church leadership the city was canvassed for a place to hold services and Sunday School and regular services were resumed in a vacated Super X Pharmacy the following Sunday. This pharmacy was located in the now razed Gainesville Mall which stood where the new Lowe’s Building Supply Store recently opened and was quickly equipped with a sound system and some borrowed folding chairs. Upholstered chairs were later borrowed from the State Campmeeting Tabernacle in Wimauma for the duration of the tenure in the pharmacy. To obtain these chairs two trips were made on an enclosed truck to pickup the chairs, the last run being started around 10:00 Saturday night. The mall had been closed for some time except for the two major stores on each end of the mall and just a few in the middle so parking was not problem and the distractions from mall activity were minimal.

The community rallied in support of the church, school, and day care center, sharing their facilities and providing other means of support such as school supplies, monetary donations, and assisting with a yard sale to raise money for the church.

The Westwood Hills body worshipped in the pharmacy for about a year until the Ridgeview Baptist Church opened their doors and permitted them to hold services in their facilities before the Baptist services began; this meant starting Sunday School at 8:30 in the morning and no Sunday night service.

Soon the plans for rebuilding were begun and available property was scouted as an alternative building site for the sanctuary itself. Eventually the decision was made to rebuild on the present site in spite of the fact that it offered limited potential for expansion. A local architect volunteered his services at no cost to the church and the drawings were started. Construction of the existing multipurpose building which serves as a sanctuary, day care center, school, and gymnasium was started utilizing both volunteer labor and services and professional contractors. In 1994 the lower level of the building was occupied with the upper level remaining as an open shell. This was necessary as there were not sufficient funds from the insurance for the completion of the entire facility since it is a significantly larger facility. However, through much effort and dedication, the second floor was completed and occupied in 1998.

Westwood Hills now stands as a monument to the fact that even though Satan tried to destroy this movement in the body of Christ that Christ reigns victorious as it sprang back with a newer and larger facility. Though the building was destroyed and some members opted not to continue to attend Westwood Hills following the fire, the church body continued on—it flourishes today.

The time lapse from when the deputy drove the parking lot and observed nothing unusual until the first fire fighters arrived on the scene was approximately 13 minutes; by this time the fire had accelerated beyond any hope of salvaging the any part of the building for reuse, including the new foyer.