

Dry walls of Grace United Methodist were easily ignited, fire marshal says

Heater sparked church fire



Shmuel Thaler/Sentinel photos

Church trustee Ericka Carter walks through the rubble of Grace United Methodist Church with insurance investigators Tuesday.

Churches - 200
By **PETER BRAND**

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SANTA CRUZ — An initial investigation into the fire that destroyed Grace United Methodist Church Saturday night has determined the blaze was sparked by a large gas heater in the basement.

The report was released Tuesday night by the Santa Cruz Fire Department.

Mark Latham, city fire marshal, said that heat from the unit's exhaust pipe apparently ignited an adjacent wooden wall. The fire moved through the church walls, eventually consuming the entire Soquel Avenue structure.

Officials said that after years of use, the heater had left the wood "easily ignitable."

"You don't even need a Bic lighter to ignite wood that dry," Latham said.

The Eastside landmark, built in 1917, was one of the oldest churches in the county. Its neoclassical style and six-column facade made it a local architectural rarity.

The church did not have an interior sprinkler system.

Fire department officials said such a system might have saved the building.

Investigators said a final report would be issued in about two weeks.



Twenty-foot-high flames explode through the front wall of the Soquel Avenue church Saturday night.