

Spring floods cause 'heartbreaking' damage to Fort McMurray church

Having lived through their share of disaster, Fort McMurray Catholics are reeling in the aftermath of flooding that forced thousands to evacuate and damaged many buildings, including St. John The Baptist Church – their most central place of worship.

Restoration crews continue to clean up the basement of the 50-year-old church, and the basement of the adjacent office building, after it filled with more than six feet of water and raw sewage April 26-27. Both buildings had been renovated recently.

A damage estimate isn't available because it's still unsafe for insurance adjusters to enter the buildings. The cleanup and restoration is expected to continue until the end of May.

The pastor called the situation "heartbreaking."



Rev. Augustine Joseph

"We could never dream in a million years that the water could come up to the church," said Rev. Augustine Joseph, the pastor of [St. John The Baptist Church](#), in his first interview since the disaster.

"We're not looking too far down the road, but we're focusing currently on what we can do for our people, for our church," he said. "We will rise back to life. We will rise back to life, because the people of Fort McMurray are pretty

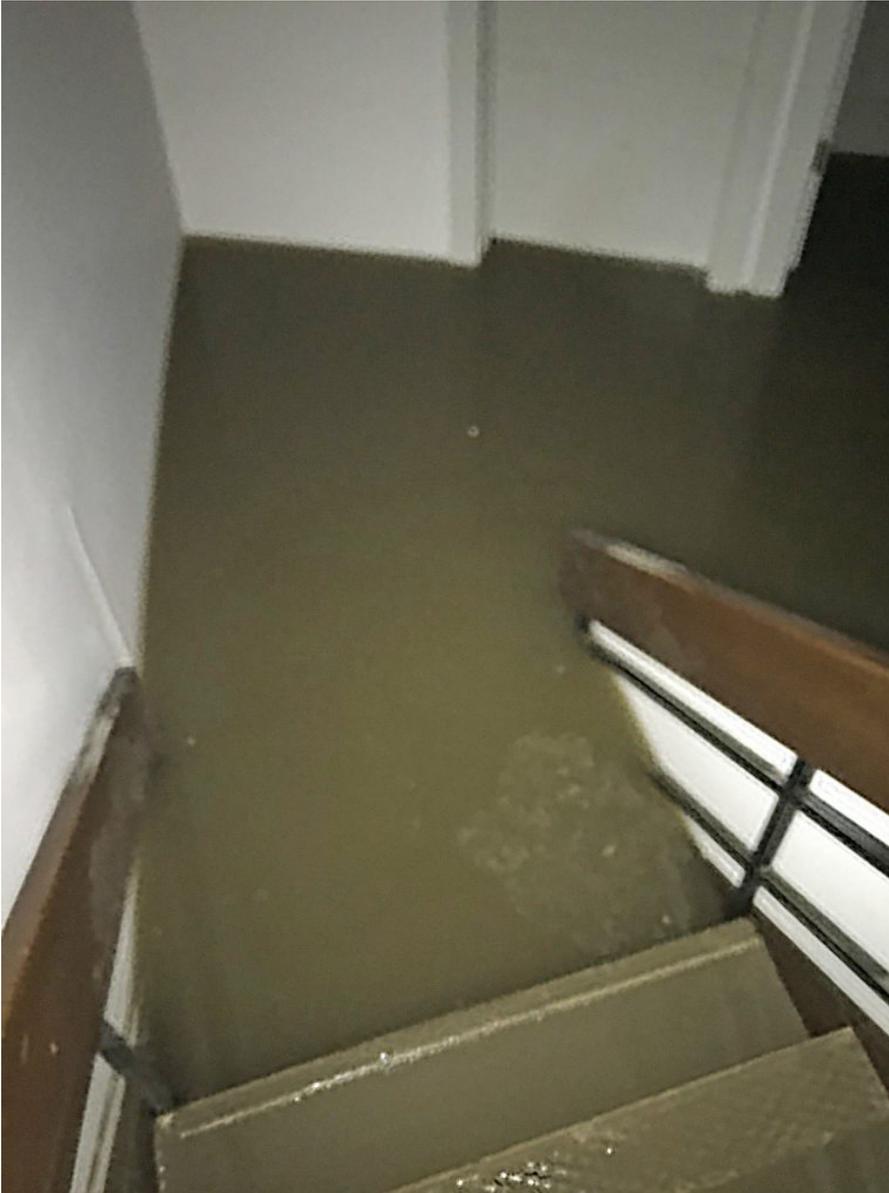
tough. They have gone through so many tough times, and survived.

"I'm hopeful that, with the help of many people and working hard, we'll come back to normal."

That will take a while. At least 1,230 properties were damaged and 13,000 residents displaced, according to the Regional Municipality of Wood Buffalo. The disaster was the result of a 25-kilometre ice jam on the Athabasca River that caused water levels to rise in low-lying areas along the Athabasca and Clearwater rivers.

The city's other Catholic church, St. Paul's, is located high enough above the city that it's undamaged.

Father Joseph vividly recalls the 3 a.m. call April 27 about water creeping toward St. John the Baptist, even though it's about 600 metres from the Clearwater River and high above the city.



Flooding is seen in the basement of St. John The Baptist Church.Courtesy of Rev. Augustine Joseph

Just hours later, water was seeping through the basement and then the windows.

Father Joseph and a group of parishioners were frantically trying to save church records, archives and as many items as they could from the basement. Pumping and sandbagging didn't hold back the floodwater.

Father Joseph went into the church's main floor, which was relatively unscathed, and removed the Blessed Sacrament as a precaution.

"We carried many things upstairs to the main level of the office building, and in between one of the trips we checked the church and saw that there was sewer backing up in the church basement. That was really heartbreaking," Father Joseph said. "We tried to save whatever we could. We loaded up whatever we

could grab and we had to run for our lives.”

Joseph said many of the parishioners don't know the extent of the damage, other than a few photos he posted on the church website. When the flooding began, the RCMP blocked off access to the church and office building, and since then only a cleanup crew has been inside.



Bishop Paul Terrio

“The air was so, so putrid – and the stench just terrible – that you could not get into the building,” said Bishop Paul Terrio of the [Diocese of St. Paul](#) after surveying the damage to the church on May 2.

“The extent of this tragedy, and this disaster, for the people in the downtown area was felt across the whole community. There are a number of people who are hurting.”

Bishop Terrio noted that many of St. John The Baptist's parishioners are immigrants and work multiple jobs to survive. Some of them have had their own homes flooded and they have no flood insurance – or not enough – to pay for the damage.

The flooding came in the midst of the COVID-19 coronavirus pandemic and just four years after the devastating 2016 wildfires that destroyed 2,400 homes and buildings. Though it was called the costliest disaster for insurers in Canadian history, many homeowners lacked the proper insurance, slowing rebuild efforts.

The cost of the cleanup and restoration of St. John The Baptist church is yet to be determined.

Bishop Terrio did note there is a surplus in the 2016 disaster relief fund,

raised by Catholics from across Canada during the wildfires, that may be able to be accessed. The fund is administered by the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops.

Flood damage to residences alone in Fort McMurray could top \$100 million, according to Don Scott, the mayor of the Regional Municipality of Wood Buffalo.

Two schools, Father Turcotte Catholic School and Fort McMurray Composite High School, and at least one in nearby Fort Vermillion, St. Mary's Elementary School, reportedly have flood damage.



St. John The Baptist Church was completed and dedicated in 1970. Courtesy of Rev. Augustine Joseph

The Alberta government is providing residents who were evacuated due to spring floods with emergency funding of \$1,250 per adult and \$500 per dependent child. Scott is calling on the federal and provincial governments to extend disaster relief funding to the nearly 13,000 people forced from their homes. Many have returned, but as of May 3, more than 3,600 people remained away.

Also, a boil-water advisory will be in place until September in Fort McMurray and area.

Bishop Terrio said even in the aftermath of this latest disaster, Fort McMurray will rise again.

"The hope is the hope of all Christians everywhere who face disasters, repeated

disasters. We know that we're journeying on this side of eternity, and we often have challenges and experiences of various levels of the cross," Bishop Terrio said.

"We're not surprised when we have to experience the cross even when it's repetitive. We know that all of this is not all there is. The people in Fort McMurray are very resilient."