

SALEM POLICE DEPARTMENT MEDIA RELEASE

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CONTACT: Salem Police Communications Office | spdmedia@cityofsalem.net

Large fire overnight determined to be arson, suspect in custody

Salem, Ore. — At approximately 2:30 a.m. today, emergency personnel responded to St. Joseph Catholic Church located at 721 Chemeketa ST NE on the report of a dumpster on fire on the property.

Arriving Salem Fire Department personnel found the tall flames from the dumpster fire spread to the roof of the church building. Within an hour, Salem Fire crews requested assistance from regional fire agencies as the fire was upgraded to a four-alarm status.

Firefighters safely evacuated a priest living in an adjacent building on the church property. No injuries were reported. Several road closures were in place for nearly ten hours as part of the fire suppression efforts and the investigation.

The Salem Fire Department received assistance from the fire departments of the cities of Dallas and Keizer, as well as the Marion County, Mount Angel, and Polk County Fire Districts. Salem Fire Chief Mike Niblock shared, “Salem Fire firefighters and dispatchers, in conjunction with mutual aid resources, were integral in containing and suppressing this significant structure fire. I appreciate the effort by all the emergency responders on this incident.”

Due to the suspicious circumstances of the fire, arson detectives from the Salem Police Felony Crimes Unit responded to the scene for the investigation, resulting in the arrest of Billy James Sweeten, age 48.

Sweeten, who is lodged at the [Marion County Jail](#), faces first-degree arson charges.

“My thanks to the officers and arson investigators who worked throughout the night on this case,” said Salem Police Chief Trevor Womack. “The church building holds a historical significance in our city, and their diligence in quickly apprehending the suspect helped to bring justice to the community.”

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