

## Pioneering pastor dies in Grand Island fire

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In July 2004, the Rev. Reba J. Edwards approached her close friend and fellow pastor with an idea: She wanted to start a Church of God in North Buffalo, and she wouldn't take no for an answer.

"I feel the Lord has one more church for us to plant, and we're going to do it together," Edwards told the Rev. Althea P. Baines.

Edwards was 71 at the time, and her idea became North Buffalo Church of God, a Pentecostal church on Delaware Avenue. It later became New Beginning Church of God on Parkridge Avenue in Buffalo, where Baines is senior pastor.

Monday morning, almost seven years later, Edwards, 78, was killed when she became trapped in her burning home on East River Road, Grand Island fire officials reported.

Edwards had been pastoring for more than 50 years, often telling people that the Lord called her to the ministry at age 13, Baines said.

At various times, Edwards served as senior or interim pastor at Churches of God in Arcade, on Indian Church Road in West Seneca and in Niagara Falls. She also evangelized extensively, going from church to church to spread the word.

"Her strength was being able to talk even the hardest person into realizing that their soul needed to be saved, that the Lord indeed was the light of their salvation," Baines said.

Monday, a neighbor called the Grand Island Fire Company at 7:50 a. m. after

spotting the fire in Edwards' two-story frame home at 3998 East River Road, near Edgewater Avenue.

"The neighbor said she believed there was someone in the residence," said Ray Pauley, the fire company's public information officer. "They immediately went in on a search and rescue, and found her in the upper bedroom."

Firefighters from the fire company's four-person search and rescue team carried Edwards out of the home. But authorities say she was dead at the scene.

The blaze, which caused damage estimated at \$ 70,000, broke out in the first-floor laundry room before spreading upstairs, fire officials said.

Grand Island firefighters, under the direction of Fire Chief Kevin Koch, were assisted by volunteers from Sheridan Park and Brighton.

One Grand Island firefighter, part of the search and rescue team, suffered a back injury while carrying the victim out of the home. The firefighter reported off duty but was not taken to a hospital.

Later in the day, Baines told reporters about her special friendship with Edwards, whose husband, Robert, died in early January.

Baines remembered how Edwards, through heart-to-heart talks, would encourage her whenever Baines began to question some of the difficulties of their calling as pastors.

"Are you kidding me?" Edwards would say. "It's the greatest job ever."

Late Monday, Baines gave her friend the ultimate tribute:

"My goal in life was to be just like her."