

FIRE!

~~~~Neal Pirola

I heard the sirens. I saw the flashing red lights. The streets trembled under the weight of the mighty fire trucks racing to the scene of yet another conflagration. Because the fire had started in the basement, away from the remembering eyes of the occupants, the blaze was not detected until major damage had been done. It was just a bunch of old rags. One was quite greasy; others had wiped up chemical spills. Some were just damp with salty water. But day after day, even weeks and months after months, they had not been taken care of—just dropped in a heap in the corner of the basement, hopefully out of sight of all visitors.

But heat was generated as the pile grew. Nobody knows who threw that final rag, nor what it had been used for, but as it was thrown on the heap, the right combination of heat and chemicals caused a spontaneous combustion and the fire began. At first it was just a spiral of smoke, but without smoke detectors, it was allowed to smolder for some time. One or another upstairs thought they sensed a strange smell, but busyness and business directed their attention elsewhere.

But one day! One day that pile of rags burst into flames and severe damage was done—to the building as well as the people who worked in that building. You see, there were few fire trucks and trained firefighters. Communication with the main station was infrequent and often not on the best of terms—more of a complaining of the number of rags being used. And, of course, no one at this building wanted to admit that there was any danger of fire. It was the last thing any of these workers wanted. It was basically an ignored subject. So, even when the call was sent: FIRE! there was hope in the fire chief that the blaze could be doused by local volunteers.

So while they waited for the professionals, they tried. Many suffered from smoke inhalation. The chemical rags were giving off a poisonous gas that was burning the eyes of the unprotected workers. Not realizing the danger, several went too close to the flames and were burned. One died. Several ran away. By the time the fire trucks arrived with the professionally trained crew, all were exhausted, drained, on the verge of quitting—throwing in the towel, so to speak.

But the experts took charge. They had learned about rag fires and how to care for those injured by such fires. Water and foam quickly put out the flames. As they all sat among the smoldering ruins, the questioning began. How did this start? Why was that pile of rags just left there? Who threw the final rag on the pile? The questions were searching out on whom blame could be laid. For, of course, the charred remains of the building will take time and money to rebuild. Or, possibly so much damage has been done in this area that all will have to vacate. Maybe build another building in another location.

While they were discussing this, the trained eyes of these professionals were looking for the injured. And the first aide they were able to administer did lay a covering over the pain. Something like a band-aide, of sorts. Some of the crew were arson investigators. They were picking up the charred remains of this rag and that

one, trying to ascertain who used this one and discarded it so carelessly in the pile. Of course, at a time like this (for the first aide administered only covered over the surface injuries) there was an embarrassed reluctance to share the deeper concerns about rag use and disposal.

One did secretly think that maybe there should be a rag washing machine, where the Water would wash away the grease and chemicals and the salty water. But she was too shy to suggest it. After all, she was in the presence of professionals. If there were such a machine, she convinced herself, surely they would have installed it for them. And their clinical manner assured her that they had no time to deal with some of the underlying issues—the trauma of a fire...the trauma that led up to and caused the fire. *She* knew. But *they* had other fires to put out.

In fact, as questions were still being asked to ascertain cause and blame, the chief got another call. They must be gone. The alarm says this is a really big one. We must go! Anyway, they had gathered enough data for their purposes. The underlying issues of rags and combustion and case studies of the varying degrees of seriousness of injuries caused by rag fires will have to be studied in conferences and reported on in symposiums so that future firefighters can be trained in the art of putting out rag fires. After all, you would not want firefighters to enter those scenes and themselves be injured by the fire.

## A FIRE PREVENTION PROGRAM

Through spiritual eyes, they looked and saw a world on fire. In some regions the flames leapt to unimaginable heights. In others, there were only smoldering embers of a fire that had destroyed the whole building. And the occupants had just abandoned the region. With even keener eyes, it seemed that there were fires about to ignite from what looked like piles of dirty rags.

At this point in time, though, just a white spiral of smoke. But the potential for a fire seemed real. They searched the horizon. In the yellow light of the fires they could see a few workers here and there throwing buckets of water on the flames. As they watched, there was an almost irresistible urge to join them. But wisdom from within said to wait. Neither were they trained in rag fire control.

From their vantage point, they thought: “There must be a way to keep rag fires from starting. Yes! That’s it! It is only too obvious. What is needed is a *Fire Prevention Program*. Can we develop a system of rag fire prevention? Oh yes, even with a good Fire Prevention Program some fires will erupt, but statistics show that there are far fewer fires and with much less damage caused with a good fire prevention program in place. Is there such a program? Can such a program be devised? There must be. There has to be, thought these new workers.

And so it happened: As new buildings were built, sprinkler systems were being installed. Fire extinguishers were positioned at potential hot spots. Just seeing the sprinklers and extinguishers kept the people more alert to the potential of fire, and they became more cautious. Fewer rags were being used and clear directions for disposing of rags were posted throughout the building.

And another whole segment of the community was called upon to manage this Fire Prevention Program. People skilled in the various aspects of fire prevention joined the team of workers. It was discovered that there were hundreds of new workers who wanted to help and were ready. They just had never been considered or invited.

As workers developed their own fire prevention team, more work was accomplished. And there were fewer fires. Yes, there were still some fires that required the skill of trained firefighters. But working together with the volunteer crew, buildings were saved. And lives were saved. And the work progressed. Let's call this Fire Prevention Program: *Partners in the Gospel!*

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