

Basement 'Stranger' Triggers Nightmare

Alerted by what he thought was a door slamming, the sexton of Asbury United Methodist Church discovered a sinister "stranger" in the basement of the Allentown church yesterday.

The "stranger" was a fire that exploded in his face and later destroyed the interior of the edifice.

Sexton George Schneeberger said he was on the second floor of the church with L. Roy Muncy, a church trustee, about 2:20 p.m.

"I was showing him a storm window I just rebuilt when I thought I heard a door slam downstairs," Schneeberger later told a reporter.

"I didn't think much about it. I just thought someone came into the church. I heard the same sound — like a door slamming — a couple of minutes later, and I decided we better check to see who it was," said Schneeberger.

He and Muncy descended into the basement, where they discovered smoke pouring from atop the blower mechanism for the church's pipe organ.

"It looked like it was going pretty good," said Schneeberger. As Schneeberger trained a fire extinguisher on the blower, Muncy telephoned an alarm to firemen. The time was 2:23 p.m.

"I put four fire extinguishers

on it. I was shooting them, and he was handing them to me. We just about had it out when it kind of exploded and hit me here (he indicated his chest) and pushed me back a couple of feet."

The fire then was burning very intensely. The two men decided to leave the building.

There was a moment of panic, Schneeberger recalled, when he got outside and discovered Muncy was not behind him. "I was scared, I thought he was lying back in there."

But Muncy, who could not be located for interviews at the fire scene, had taken a different exit route and was safe outside.