

South Dakota church offers forgiveness to youths who started fire in building

The temperature was below zero the night three stranded youths broke into the church hall and burned hymnals and furniture.

by [David Paulsen](#) in the [March 28, 2018](#) issue

On an early February night when the temperature was below zero, stranded youths seeking warmth and shelter built a fire in the middle of the floor of an Episcopal mission church building in On the Tree, South Dakota.

Margaret Watson, a priest who serves 11 congregations on and near the Cheyenne River Reservation of the Lakota Sioux people, has not learned the identities or ages of the three youths, who were discovered by a rancher who was driving by St. Thomas Episcopal Church and stopped at the sight of the fire.

The youths ran out of the church hall to ask the rancher for help, saying they had been abandoned at the side of the road by a friend.

“The road is quite remote,” Watson said. It “goes from nowhere to nowhere.”

The rancher drove them into town after putting out what remained of the fire. He notified Watson, who emphasized the sense of relief she and the congregation feel.

“We sincerely thank God that they are alive and that they made it out,” she said. The damage to the church hall from the fire was “nothing that cannot be repaired.”

Watson said the intruders broke into the church hall and started a fire with hymnals as kindling, burning chairs and a table that had been used as a backup altar.

One of the church members, Ina Blue Coat, was among the first to survey the damage. She offered prayers for the safety of those who sought refuge in the building, Watson recounted. “With this cold weather,” Blue Coat told Watson, if “someone is stranded in the rural areas, survival is crucial.”

A year ago, the church—in a sparsely populated area in the north-central part of the state—was used as a staging ground for search parties looking for two young people who were missing. They were later found dead from the cold.

That tragedy might have been repeated this year if the three young people stranded outside hadn't found the church hall.

Many years ago, the church was usually left unlocked, Blue Coat said, but the congregation began locking the doors to stop thefts from the church.

The last service held at St. Thomas was on Christmas Eve. Watson and a curate try to offer Eucharist at each mission church at least once a month, but in the winter months, the St. Thomas congregation sometimes gathers instead in Eagle Butte at St. John's Episcopal Church, which has central heating. When services are held at St. Thomas in the winter, the congregation of a few dozen typically gathers in the smaller, better-insulated church hall, warmed by a kerosene heater. Watson didn't expect to be able to worship there again until Easter at the earliest.

The congregation will need to raise money for the repairs and to buy new hymnals.

"This is a congregation that loves to sing, and all of our hymnals, which are in Lakota, were burned," Watson said. "That one hits close to the heart." —Episcopal News Service