

# CHURCH

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The congregation has existed for 130 years, he said, serving generations of families in many cases. "For many of them, it's the only church they have ever belonged," he said.

Kropuenske and his family are examples of a long association with the church.

"My wife said her folks have always been part of the church," he said. "My wife has been a member her whole life. I joined in 1967, and all three of our daughters were baptized, confirmed and married at that church."

The sense of loss from the fire is still fresh for the parishioners, and many members will never fully recover from that feeling, Kropuenske said.

"There are still a lot of emotions," he said. "We have a lot of good memories (about the church) out there."

The shock has likewise remained for Mike McIlvenna, church council president at Our Savior's. He learned about the fire while working at his Viborg business.

"My wife got a hold of me at the shop," he said. "At first, I thought, 'It's just a little fire. Things will be OK.' But it was like nothing I had seen in my life."

McIlvenna said it's "like seeing a sibling lose a child."

## WHERE TO TURN

Even before the blaze was extinguished, Spring Valley

parishioners were faced with the question of where to hold Palm Sunday services — only two days away — as well as the rest of Holy Week observances and beyond.

"We had a (Spring Valley) council meeting right after the fire," Unzicker said. "I also talked with the president and vice president of Our Savior's. We talked about sharing Our Savior's for both churches."

Unzicker also found a tremendous outpouring of support from the surrounding region. He heard from various clergy and denominations.

"People of all churches were so willing to help. And it wasn't all Lutheran," he said. "We had calls from Roman Catholic and Seventh-Day Adventist churches. We were offered places to meet, like Swan Lake Bible Camp and Salem Mennonite Church."

Financial assistance came from unexpected sources, Unzicker said.

"We were even getting dollars sent to us from people who had never been in the building," he said. "But they had heard about it in the news and wanted to make a donation."

What brought that kind of response?

"I think they all recognized a sense of loss and tragedy," he said. "We all identify with what that experience would be like."

With their church gone, Spring Valley parishioners felt a need to gather, Unzicker said. They instinctively sought a church service that evening, held at Our Savior's.

"It was spontaneous. It was

a service for prayer, but there was also a sense of grief," he said. "It's almost like the church has a personality. There are so many lives connected to it. There springs forth a lot of emotions, and then there is a sudden death."

Many parishioners felt the fire took an important connection to other events in their lives, Unzicker said.

"One woman who watched the fire said she could see her father's funeral all over again," he said.

However, the parishioners also believe that they — and not the building — are what make the church, he added.

At that evening's service, Unzicker used the example of his father's death in 2005.

"My father taught me lessons and gave me memories that will continue to impact my life. We all have persons who continue to shape our lives," he said. "In the same way, we may have lost our church building, but Christ lives on within us and works the same way."

Kropuenske commended the minister for finding the right words.

"Rev. Unzicker provided a service that was tremendous. He put together a good message," he said. "It helped to comfort us. And we had help from our sister church (hosting the service)."

## WE ARE FAMILY

The Spring Valley and Our Savior's congregations held a joint Palm Sunday service. However, the congregations will hold separate services in

the future.

"Spring Valley doesn't want to come in and take over Our Savior's church," Unzicker said. "And we almost need to have two separate services. When we had the joint service, it was full."

Spring Valley finds itself in a different situation than St. John's Lutheran in Yankton, which sustained \$2 million in fire damages last April and has spent the past year holding services at Mount Marty College. The Yankton congregation will return to its church this weekend, holding its first services on Easter Sunday.

"At St. John's, they had one church building and it was gone. That made it very difficult," Unzicker said. "The key for us is that we are getting a great deal of support from (Our Savior's)."

Besides securing a temporary home, Spring Valley members also learned the cause of their fire. The South Dakota fire marshal and the federal Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms (ATF) officials conducted an investigation earlier this week, Unzicker said. Under federal law, the ATF investigates any fire involving a house of worship.

"They determined it was electrical and not arson. It started in the kitchen area," he said. "(The fire) was like a blast furnace because there was such an intense wind."

Church members observed and took pictures during Monday's investigation, Kropuenske said. After receiving clearance, the claims adjuster visited the site Tuesday. The final step came Wednesday,

when 10 church members cleared the site of all debris.

Unzicker's Maundy Thursday sermon did not address the previous week's fire. However, his sermon did offer words of hope.

The pastor noted that Lent represents a transition. Christians come together and respond to the world in a different way, gaining strength from God and Jesus Christ during difficult times, he said.

God, through faith in Jesus, will continue to shape us in daily life, he added.

Unzicker said he didn't mention the Spring Valley fire for a particular reason. "We wanted to keep the focus as normal as we could during Holy Week," he said.

For Easter Sunday, Spring Valley will hold its sunrise service at 7 a.m. while Our Savior's will celebrate its Easter service at 10:30 a.m. In the future, Sunday services will be held at 9 a.m. and 10:30 a.m.

## CHARTING THE FUTURE

Spring Valley will hold two major meetings within the next 10 days. The church council will meet April 7. A congregation meeting will be held April 11, at which time members will decide the parish's future.

"There seems to be a real strong interest in rebuilding the church," Unzicker said. "That's the direction I see it going."

The church's constitution mandates a two-week wait in order to give notice of a special congregation meeting, the pastor added.

Kropuenske welcomes the wait. "This is a time of grieving. We need that time," he said.

# LETTER

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Governors whose offices reported getting the letters included Jennifer Granholm of Michigan, Bobby Jindal of Louisiana, Chet Culver of Iowa, Jim Gibbons of Nevada, Brad Henry of Oklahoma, Bob McDonnell of Virginia, and Gary Herbert of Utah, where officials stepped up security in response to the letter.

In Nevada, screening machines for visitors and packages were added to the main entrance to the state Capitol as a precaution.

"We're not really overly concerned, but at the same time we don't want to sit back and do nothing and regret it," Deputy Chief of Staff Lynn Hettrick said.

Granholm spokeswoman Liz Boyd said federal authorities had alerted the governor that

such a letter might be coming, and it arrived Monday. Boyd, who described the letter as "non-threatening," said it was opened by a staffer and immediately turned over to the Michigan State Police.

Jindal's office confirmed that the governor had received one of the letters and directed questions to the Louisiana State Police.

"They called us as they do for

any letter that's out of the norm," said Lt. Doug Cain, a state police spokesman. He declined to provide specifics about the letter, but said, "not knowing the group and the information contained in the letter warranted state police to review it."

The FBI warning comes at a time of heightened attention to far-right extremist groups after

the arrest of nine Christian militia members last weekend accused of plotting violence.

In explaining the letters sent to the governors, the intelligence note says officials have no specific knowledge of plans to use violence, but they caution police to be aware in case other individuals interpret the letters "as a justification for violence or other criminal actions."

The FBI associated the letter with "sovereign citizens," most of whom believe they are free from all duties of a U.S. citizen, like paying taxes or needing a government license to drive. A small number of these people are armed and resort to violence, according to the intelligence report.

Last weekend, the FBI conducted raids on suspected mem-

bers of a Christian militia in the Midwest that was allegedly planning to kill police officers. In the past year, federal agents have seen an increase in "chatter" from an array of domestic extremist groups, which can include radical self-styled militias, white separatists and extreme civil libertarians and sovereign citizens.

Unzicker agreed, noting the congregation has time to weigh its next move. "We are looking at different options, including building a new church," he said.

Regardless of the congregation's choice for the future, Unzicker said he will remain focused on his pastoral duties.

"You do your job as well as you possibly can do it," he said. "You teach, preach and do the sacraments."

Both Kropuenske and McIlvenna see Unzicker as a steadying influence, calming the rough waters that lie ahead.

"We are really lucky to have Pastor Steve," McIlvenna said. "He is very well liked by both congregations. He brings a cohesiveness that cements us together."

It's important that Spring Valley Lutheran has a home during Holy Week and for the coming months, Unzicker said.

"The people have a strong connection to the church. There are a lot of deep roots," he said. "The most important thing is that we have a place to worship and keep it as normal as possible."

And when the time comes, Unzicker welcomes the resurrection of a new Spring Valley Lutheran church. "It will be nice to have our church back," he said.

Our Savior's Lutheran stands ready to help its sister church in any way possible, McIlvenna said. The offer of assistance carries no time limits.

"Without question, we are open for them as long as it's needed," he said. "We are one congregation."

# STATE

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governors across the nation said that if they didn't leave office within three days they would be removed. Federal officials indicated they did not see threats of violence in the letters, but worried the message could encourage others to act violently.

"Adjustments have been made" to the governor's security because of the letter, Heineman spokeswoman Jen Rae Hein said Friday. She declined to detail the changes.

As of Wednesday, more than 30 governors had received letters. The FBI expects all 50 governors eventually will receive them.

Hein said the FBI notified the State Patrol on March 26 that a letter may be coming, and the State Patrol notified Heineman's office.

The State Patrol then forwarded the letter to Heineman to the FBI.

Hein said letters threatening the governor are not unheard of. "These types of letters show up from time to time," she said.

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