

AG Pastor Learns Lesson in Forgiveness After Church Desecrated

Pastor Dennis Noble of Lake City Assembly sat in the airport on Tuesday afternoon, his temperature rising—he was not happy. Two straight times the computer at the Seattle-Tacoma Airport had inexplicably dropped his name from the passenger standby list.

So now, while other standby passengers who had arrived long after he did were already in flight or even home, he was still waiting to board a plane.

Most days, Noble could have shrugged the incident off—perhaps this was one of those God opportunities? But today wasn't most days. Inside, he was wrestling with all kinds of powerful emotions—from pain and heartbreak to anger and maybe even revenge.

Over the weekend, late Saturday or early Sunday morning, their church, his church—God's house—had been violated and desecrated. And frankly, it hurt. Tens of thousands of dollars in damage had been done to the doors, windows, classrooms, the kitchen and sanctuary by some contemptible person or people, with hate-filled messages painted on classroom walls.

It was 6 a.m. Sunday when Noble received the call from the janitor at the church's location in Medical Lake, Washington, telling him to come right away—someone had broken in. Directing the janitor to call 911 and report the crime, Noble quickly got ready and headed to the church. TV crews almost beat the police to the scene as an email alerted them about the break-in.

When Noble arrived at the church, the amount of damage was

mind-numbing. It was clearly evident the break-in was designed to inflict as much damage as possible on the church. Doors were kicked in, windows were smashed, computers were destroyed—but as the tour of the facilities continued, it was discovered very little had actually been taken.

“The insurance claim has not been finalized yet,” Noble says, “but the damage is estimated to be somewhere between \$50,000 and \$100,000.”

With the kitchen a mess due to the contents of a fire extinguisher being emptied into it, classroom walls filled with hateful messages and broken glass scattered throughout the sanctuary and church, Noble made the call to cancel services for the day.

That afternoon, after the inspectors left, Noble and some church members began taking inventory and trying to clean up what they could. Later that evening, more church members started showing up—hoping they could hold a small service, but the damage was too severe.

“People just began to sob,” Noble says. “This was their church, their home ...”

Noble, who is an Executive Presbyter (EP) for the AG Northwest District, had to fly out Monday night for a Tuesday morning meeting at the district offices located near Seattle. As he sat in his hotel room that evening, all kinds of very human thoughts filled his mind: “this was a hate crime, we could get the FBI involved, whoever did this would not get away with it ...”

The district EP meeting concluded early on Tuesday and now Noble was in the airport, wanting to get back home and to his church as soon as he could—and with his name being dropped twice and his emotions already on edge, he was steaming inside.

Reflecting on the experience, Noble chuckles and sighs. "I was sitting there, angry and upset, thinking all these negative thoughts when all of a sudden God starts talking to me. He tells me, 'Until you change your attitude, until you repent and forgive, you're not going home—you'll sit here all night.'"

Convicted to the core, Noble did as he was directed, repenting and forgiving. He was on the 6 p.m. flight home.

Whether or not that was the keystone for something great, only God knows for sure, but when Noble landed, his wife called—they had arrested a man who confessed to the crime and had him in lock-up. The police wanted him to come by.

When Noble arrived, the church's senior associate pastor, Nick Hawkins, was already in the room with the young man, and was praying with him. Hawkins promised the 23-year-old, that when he got out, he would help him get into a Teen Challenge program.

"We learned that the young man had broken into the church, high on meth," Noble says. "He didn't know what he was doing. He admitted that when he realized what he had done, he contemplated committing suicide—that would have been the real tragedy."

Since then, Noble says the entire church has forgiven the young man—and God has used a senseless and destructive crime to teach about the power of forgiveness and to build His Church.

"We've received all kinds of media coverage—news reporters standing in line to talk to us," Noble says. "People in the community, who we have never met, are coming by and making donations. I've been contacted by countless people with expressions of support and love. We've heard stories of how our act of **forgiveness** has inspired others to forgive. We even had a reporter attend one of our services for a news story.

She told me she loved the church and loved the worship and was excited to call her mother to let her know she had gone to church."

As for the young man behind bars for what police have called a "hate" crime against the church, there is hope. He has not only received forgiveness from the church, but has taken the step to say he is truly sorry for what he has done. He has even expressed his desire to attend Lake City Assembly when he gets out of prison.

"Pastor Nick and I are going to visit the young man in jail and again offer him the opportunity to attend a Teen Challenge program [an Assemblies of God program for those with life-controlling problems] when he is finished serving his time," Noble says. "Our church, we believe, is not only willing to forgive him, but also to sponsor him to attend a Teen Challenge program."