

## Inside a church without walls

By Nicole Elsasser

**Editor's note:** *Church on the Street, a new worshiping community in the South Dakota Synod, began its regular monthly worship services in October 2016. Designed to truly be a "church without walls," Church on the Street is a faith community that seeks to break down barriers and welcome the homeless population in to hear the word and promises of God, often for the first time in their life.*

*In the article below, you'll hear from Nicole Elsasser, compassion coordinator for Church on the Street, with her perspective on what it was like to see God at work firsthand through this new ministry.*



Church on the Street in Sioux Falls had its first worship service with the homeless population on Oct. 1, 2016, at the Bishop Dudley Hospitality House. The shelter is where many who live in low-income housing, the homeless and all those in-between take refuge.

There had been a lot of activity building up to this first worship. Rebel Hurd, our mission developer, worked endlessly to coordinate with hundreds of people and dozens of churches to create a sturdy group of followers who helped create a dream of worship without church walls. Carolyn Dodson and Rebel, along with the Strategy Table, started the idea behind this church just two years ago and now here we are—a full worshiping community with the homeless that today meets on a regular basis.

Keep in mind, this was our first service so we were completely going on a

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whim as to how this would go. Right away we had a very eager volunteer, Wes (last name withheld). He was so excited to help. He was a resident of Bishop Dudley and had recently moved to Sioux Falls from Texas with his pregnant wife. He was eager to be involved and turned into our most reliable volunteer of the day. Along with Wes, we were so fortunate to have a group from Beaver Valley Lutheran Church, Valley Springs, to grill hot dogs and create a meal for our attending members.

Before the business of setup and chaos ensued, Rebel gathered all of our volunteers together for

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words of advice. As she began, a young man, obviously inebriated, interrupted our volunteer circle. I felt that wave of panic as I hoped all would go well and all of our volunteers would not be scared away.

But Rebel was quick and had the most beautiful reaction. She smiled at him and said he could join the circle. He went up to Rebel and she hugged him. As he stood in the circle with us, I watched as a tear went down his face. I wondered when was

the last time he had been hugged and welcomed into a community.

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Unfortunately, some of the workers from Bishop Dudley knew this man well and that he was known for a violent past. They were wary of his presence with us. They asked Rebel if there were any issues, but she told them there were none.

I didn't see what happened, but soon after the meal was passed out workers tried to escort this man out. He went into a rage, fell over, cussed at anyone by him and kicked over one of our tables. Others flocked to the scene to assist in handling him.

I watched sadly. I wanted him to be at our worship, but his state had caused him to be arrested. I wondered what would have happened if he had been left alone—alone with the people who had held hands with him in a circle. Would he have been just fine? Unfortunately, his intoxicated state made this situation too tricky to truly know.

I know Jesus accepts all, but I want to know Jesus' thoughts of such situations where safety is in question. Would Jesus have healed this man of his addiction and taught us a lesson of love and accepting others? I would like to think so.

As soon it was 11 a.m., people began to show up and lined up for food. Carolyn and I walked around downtown trying to recruit more people with our goody bags in hand. It was exciting!

Worship began at 11:30, with the Rev. Paul Stjernholm, who serves Peace Lutheran Church, Sioux Falls; Rebel; and Greg (last name withheld) as the main-stage players.

Rebel introduced herself and this wonderful new ministry called Church on the Street. I joined our new members in our lawn chairs and listened to this woman welcome all to Jesus' table.

As the service began, we followed the bulletin of prayers and I felt so at peace with God's creation as I heard my voice echo with the people around me. People I would never have met in my comfortable life. People who have stories I cannot imagine. People who have been scorned and torn down in ways that I can never imagine. People who may have never been invited to church or who were under the impression that church is a special box for special people. For the first time in a long time, I felt

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### For more news:

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truly connected to God by being with his people wherever they were at in their life regardless of their situations, including my own.

As we sang a hymn I could not contain my joy. I listened to the young man's voice next to mine and could not stop smiling. We were doing it! We were actually a *church* on the street.

As Rebel closed the worship, her passion and love for the people took her to tears. We did it. She helped create a ministry with God's helping hand. God wanted this ministry to happen and he knew Rebel could be that building block. Through her cracking voice, God was there with us all witnessing the brokenness of our human lives and trying to grasp hold of a people who are

often forgotten, hated and lost behind broken walls.

Now here we are with Church on the Street and there are no walls. Nowhere to hide. Nowhere to deny the nakedness of our true selves. Here because we are God's children. Lost and broken in a world that is hard to live in, God wants us to never forget that we do not need walls to see him. We just need kindness and love from others to guide us to him. **L**

For more information on Church on the Street, visit [churchonthestreet.weebly.com](http://churchonthestreet.weebly.com) or contact Rebel Hurd, mission developer, at [rebel@peacelutheran.com](mailto:rebel@peacelutheran.com).