

Lipan church opens its facility to burned-out school

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By George Henson

Staff Writer

LIPAN—At least for a little while, First Baptist Church in Lipan has more occupants Monday through Friday than it does on Sunday.

A fire destroyed the North Central Texas community's junior high and high school seven days before classes were to begin. It was only hours, however, before the decision was made that students and teachers would walk across the street to hold classes at the church.

Deacon
Richard
Ator (left),
a member
of the
Lipan
school
board, and
Pastor
David
White of
First
Baptist
Church
work
together
to meet
the needs
of the
local
burned-out
school.
(Photo by
George
Henson)

Pastor David White saw it as an obvious fit.

“We have had a very good relationship with the school, as it usually is in a small town. Also, two of our deacons are school board members,” White said.

The space the church provided was not the only aid the school received.

“Teachers from a-round the area brought in car loads of supplies for our teachers,” said deacon and school board member Richard Ator. “We didn't have to tell them anything. They knew what we needed. It was real nice.”

About 140 students are in the junior and senior high grades of Lipan School, while the church runs about 100 in Sunday morning worship services.

The school eventually will move the students to portable buildings, maybe as early as the end of this month.

Meeting for classes at the church has helped the students maintain some degree of normalcy since they only had to walk across the street, Principal Charles Rowett said.

“There are always other options, but in this case, this was the best option,” he said.

The fire that started in the ceiling above the school's utility room did not damage the elementary wings of the school. The blaze accelerated when it spread to the storage room for the chemistry class.

The lunchroom, library and agricultural classroom were undamaged, so students walk back across the street to use those facilities.

The day after the fire, teachers walked through First Baptist trying to decide the best places for the various classrooms. While the church has its limitations as a school-no space for a chemistry lab, for example-the church offered all it could, White said.

“We've had a cooperating relationship with the schools for years,” he said. “When we've had large groups going to summer camp, we've been able to use the school bus. When they've needed to transport small groups of

students to various things, the church van has always been available," he offered as an example.

"It's a matter of our being faithful Christians and being helpful in a time of need. We've served this community for 128 years, and we're here to meet needs. This fits right into what we see as the mission of our church."

Girl Scouts, Boy Scouts, sewing clubs and piano lessons also meet at the church, he added. Students and teachers alike have adjusted to the situation very well, Rowett said.

"We knew we were going to be a little cramped, and since we anticipated that, it hasn't been bad at all," he said.

Church members also have accepted the changes to their classrooms, White said. "They're going to absorb any inconvenience because they know it's a pressing situation. I've haven't heard one complaint-not one."

Part of that may be because the end is in sight, Ator suggested.

"As long as you can see the end, it's easy to put up with it, rather than it being an open-ended kind of thing," he said. As a deacon and school board member, Ator said, the acceptance and readiness to help has been present from the beginning.

"I went around and queried several church members right after the fire, and everybody said, 'Bring 'em on.' Not one reservation or 'what about this?'" he said.

For some students, the fire has placed them in a church for the first time, Rowett said. And even though no religious instruction of any kind is taking place, that may be a positive thing, Ator said.

"I think that maybe this may help them realize that this is not a bad place," he suggested. No parents have complained about the school meeting in the

church, Rowett said. And no complaints are warranted, White believes.

“We manage cooperation, and yet separation, quite well here.”

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