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## Branches United Methodist in Florida City rises above the flames

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MARSHA HALPER / MIAMI HERALD STAFF

Branches United Methodist Church's Pastor Audrey Warren, center with hand on chest, walks Monday afternoon with youngsters in the church's after-school program. The Florida City church, at 145 SW Fifth Ave., went up in flames before 1 a.m. Sunday.

Charred pages from hymn books nestle in the grass around the burned shell of what once was the century-old Branches United Methodist Mission in Florida City.

Fire investigators now suspect arson in the devastating early morning blaze on May 24 -- Pentecost Sunday -- that destroyed the church sanctuary and adjacent playground.

But the emotional toll on visitors' faces -- even as everyone vowed to rebuild -- tells the real story.

Eddie Velez, 25, doesn't look like a man who cries, but on this day, as the smell of burned wood and brush still permeates the air, he has to catch himself.

``It's sad to walk by and see this," he says, clutching a scrap of burned paper. ``I'm so

used to see this as a happy place -- the kids here playing. It's tough. Give me a second."

Velez grew up in this working class Florida City community of 10,000 with his brothers Gabriel and Eric, all of whom used to play briefly in a small band at the church.

Branches, ``an incredibly important part of the community," according to Florida City Mayor Otis T. Wallace, is well known for its outreach programs for children and adults, ``One of the most aggressive in the area," Wallace said. Among its programs: tutoring English as a second language for adults, bible studies, nutrition and finance classes. Branches also tutors and mentors children of nearby farm workers.

The church, 145 SW Fifth Ave., also works with 25 families by giving them a bag of food every week.

``All of that food burned for this month," Rev. Audrey Warren said.

After hearing of the fire, First United Methodist Church of Homestead offered Branches a replacement shipment of 25 bags weekly.

Warren, 26, a month short of celebrating her first year as pastor here, estimates that 500 people pass through the church every month for "one reason or other."

## **FAMILIAR WITH STRUGGLE**

The Naples-bred pastor is no stranger to struggle. Before she took over the leadership of the Florida City church, the Duke Divinity School graduate led a malaria task force initiative in South Africa on behalf of the United Methodist Church.

"My youth director always took us on mission trips and told us this is how we love God."

Warren reflects on why she chose to come to Branches. A religious leader once told her "go to the poorest places because that's where you'll meet Jesus every day." She chuckles at the memory. "I said I wanted to be involved in a church that is involved with its community and this church is definitely involved with its community."

At least 140 are neighborhood kids who are part of a youth group. The church is still planning its Summer Shade day camp program after school lets out -- but until the church can rise again, all programs will be conducted under a tent.

"As we know, it gets hot in here," Warren said as a breeze whipped a tablecloth held in place by a cross.

"A homeless man we knew came to us and said he was coming to sleep here and heard firecrackers and it went up in flames," Warren recounts. "He said, 'I lost my home' because he sleeps under the walkway."

Just a year ago, a new \$94,000 playground, sandwiched between the church building and community center, opened up on the sun-parched grounds.

Now, the playground is filled with pieces of equipment, melted, twisted and scarred -- another casualty of the fire.

To compound the sense of loss, sometime after the early morning fire, someone broke into the single-story community center that was unscathed and stole five laptop computers, Warren said. The computers were used for neighborhood children to do their homework.

Another church in Fort Lauderdale heard about the loss of the laptops and agreed to donate five computers so that Branches can continue its computer lab, Warren said.

"I feel sad," said Steve Jean, 10, from across the street. "Why would they do this to the church -- that's a church. Why would they disrespect it?"

## **'NEVER FENCED OFF'**

Hours earlier, Warren hugged neighborhood kids who stopped by to see if they could help. "Churches here are gated off and this place was never fenced off," she said.

But later, fire officials erected a fence to close off the grounds of the burned sanctuary to keep everyone away from the debris.

“This affects everyone in this community directly,” Warren said. “When you think about the lives of youth that have been changed here, youth that decided to come to church rather than to be on the streets, to be part of a youth group rather than a gang, this impacts us all.”

Kim King Torres, director of the Branches' outreach center, and husband Raymundo Torres, plan to continue hosting youth groups and young adult bible studies in their home down the block. “The kids here have to know people trust them,” he said. The fire could have been a blessing in disguise, the couple said. “We don't know the way God works, but I see it as an opportunity to serve this community. People came out of their houses and were asking, ‘What can I do?’ This brings people together,” Torres said.

For Velez, who claims allegiance to no religion, the church still represented stability.

The church, perhaps the heart of a city that serves as the pathway to the Keys and Everglades, a survivor of Hurricane Andrew 18 summers ago, is not all about religion, Velez says.

Rather, Branches was the one jewel of “positivity” in a neighborhood where the average household income is \$18,285 and crime is an ongoing concern.

“I went from wearing diapers here to becoming a man. Not many people can call one place home, but I can. Florida City. This is my *home*.”

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