

Four die as lightning hits church hall [South Africa]

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THUNDERSTORM TARGET: The Methodist Church's Luzuko society hall in Ngceza village near Tsomo, where lightning struck on Sunday. Lightning struck a church in Tsomo, killing four worshippers and injuring four others, including the minister in charge, shortly after Sunday's sermon.

Among those killed were society steward Justice Dlabane and members Nozuko Ntozini, Noright Qhesa and Nophelo Mvikweni. The injured included the minister, his daughter and an evangelist. Lightning struck the United Methodist Church of Southern Africa's Luzuko Society church hall at KuNgceza village near Tsomo. Circuit secretary Nomgcobo Ncoko said: "It was a disaster – and a miracle. "I thought it was judgment day. "I saw a bolt of blue lightning and a ball of fire strike where the society steward was sitting."

Disaster struck soon after the Rev Zanoxolo Ngcephe's first sermon, on his first day as the church's Tsomo circuit superintendent. The sermon was also the first delivered in the new church hall. Shortly after he had delivered his sermon, Ngcephe said, a big storm was seen coming. The electricity went off and the candles went out. "I had already left the pulpit and was sitting at a table flanked by two men, a society steward on the right and an evangelist on the left. "As we were talking, we heard a big bang and I felt a burning sensation in my feet. "I screamed and jumped up and down, and my leg went numb. "I blacked out. When I came to, noticed that the society steward [and the evangelist were] not breathing.

"The church was filled with smoke and all the worshippers, about 50 of them, had been flung across the floor – some were screaming. "The smoke and the smell of gas made me think the building was on fire." Ngcephe said his daughter, Sinethemba, 13, and wife, Nomakula, were among those slightly injured. "I think it missed Sinethemba by inches as there were holes in the wall near where she was sitting," he said,

Three sheep which had sought shelter against the church walls were also killed. "In all my 17 years in the ministry I have never seen or heard of something like this," Ngcephe said. "Lightning striking a church

and killing worshippers inside the church – I really do not know why this happened. “I have lost four church members on my first day in this church.” Queenstown police spokesman Colonel Gcinikhaya Taleni said an inquest had been opened.