

# Authorities investigating fires at North Carolina churches

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**By Hannah Elliott**

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GREENVILLE, N.C. (ABP)—Suspicious fires damaged two Baptist churches and a break-in was discovered at a third in Greenville, N.C., the night of Jan. 13.

Memorial Baptist Church and Unity Free Will Baptist, located near each other in the city about 50 miles east of Raleigh, burned in fires that authorities have labeled “suspicious.” Losses are estimated at \$ 1 million, according to local reports.

Police are also investigating the break-in at Oakmont Baptist Church, which is located near the other two churches. As of the afternoon of Jan. 16, they had yet to say if they believe the three events are connected. No injuries were reported in connection with the events.

According to Associated Press reports, witnesses saw a person running away from Memorial Baptist right after the fire started. The North Carolina Bureau of Investigation and the federal Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives are also helping with the case.

The fire gutted Memorial's main educational building and its 90-foot steeple suffered heavy damage. The adjacent sanctuary suffered mainly water and smoke damage, according to reports and a photo on the website of the Daily Reflector newspaper.

The fire also destroyed a wing of the facility that housed Memorial's large child day-care program. Four other Greenville churches have offered their space for the program to use while the building is repaired.

Founded in 1827, Memorial was the first Baptist congregation in Greenville. According to a history on the church's website, the church relocated in the late 1970s from a historic downtown location to its current campus in the city's eastern section. Memorial is affiliated with the Southern Baptist Convention as well as the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship and the Baptist State Convention of North Carolina. Oakmont is also affiliated with CBF.

Unity Free Will Baptist belongs to the National Association of Free Will Baptists. The fire there was contained to only one room.

Staff members at the burned churches were unavailable for comment for this story.

In February 2006, arsonists destroyed several Baptist churches in central Alabama over a two-week period. Authorities later charged three young men—two of them college students in Birmingham—with the crimes.

*Robert Marus contributed to this story.*

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