

NAMB establishes fund to assist burned black churches

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ALPHARETTA, Ga. (BP)—Southern Baptists' [North American Mission Board](#) has established a fund to help African-American churches damaged or destroyed by fire in recent weeks.

Fires at seven black churches have fueled discussions of racial hatred, as the first occurred within a week of the June 17 massacre of nine black Christians by a 21-year-old white supremacist at a Charleston church.



Kevin EzellAs investigations into the fires continue, two of the blazes have been confirmed as arson and a third has been ruled suspicious. While none have been deemed hate crimes at this point, NAMB is offering assistance.

“Southern Baptists should be the first to condemn acts of hatred toward African- Americans,” NAMB President Kevin Ezell said. “Regardless of the causes of these fires, as brothers and sisters in Christ, we need to come alongside and offer whatever assistance we can.”

NAMB is starting the fund with \$50,000 to be available immediately to churches needing assistance.

“It has been heartbreaking to hear of these fires,” Ezell said. “We wanted to provide an easy, centralized way to help.”

Fred Luter, senior pastor of Franklin Avenue Baptist Church in New Orleans and new national mobilizer for NAMB, said, “What is happening today could happen to any of our churches in any of our states.”

Call to prayer

“We are living in a crazy day and time when there is no respect for God, no respect for the Bible or for houses of God. So these kinds of things could happen anywhere,” he said. “I would encourage all Southern Baptists around the nation to pray for those churches in South Carolina and elsewhere that have been impacted.”

Luter appealed to Southern Baptist pastors to lead their churches in a response.

“I would encourage pastors to put themselves in the place of these pastors whose buildings are destroyed,” he said. “Pray for them, yes, but do all you can to contribute to this fund so we can help our brothers and sisters in Christ.”

To contribute to the NAMB fund for the churches, visit namb.net/givenow or call toll-free (866) 407-6262. Checks should be made out to NAMB with “Church Fire Fund” on the memo line and mailed to NAMB, P.O. Box 116543, Atlanta, Ga. 30368-6543. One hundred percent of donations will go to help churches—regardless of denominational affiliation—affected by the fires.

One Southern Baptist church damaged

Arson was confirmed in a June 24 fire that caused \$250,000 in damage at Briar Creek Road Baptist Church in Charlotte, N.C., a predominantly black

Southern Baptist church that also hosts services for two Nepali congregations. It is the only African-American Southern Baptist church damaged to date.

Arsonists torched College Hills Seventh-day Adventist Church in Knoxville, Tenn., June 22. A fire the following day at God's Power Church of Christ in Macon, Ga., was suspected to be arson but had not been confirmed. Other fires occurred in Greeleyville, S.C.; Jackson, Miss.; Tallahassee, Fla.; and Warrentonville, S.C.

Frank Page, president of the SBC Executive Committee, said he is brokenhearted "at the burning of a house of prayer or God's house, and it disturbs me greatly because of the cowardice of such acts and the hatred of such acts of violence."

"I am deeply disturbed that people would act so cowardly and hatefully, especially toward a building where people gather for worship of our Lord, and it is a heinous act of violence that I pray will be mediated somewhat by the apprehension and the prosecution of these persons who are responsible," Page said.

Previous arson in 1995-96

Southern Baptists have helped churches recover from fires in previous years, including numerous African-American and multicultural churches set fire by arsonists in 1995 and 1996.

At the 1996 SBC Annual Meeting in New Orleans, messengers approved a resolution deploring the crimes, and pledged to "pray for, support, encourage, stand with, and assist our sister churches and fellow believers in the African-American community who have been victims of these criminal acts."

Southern Baptists contributed at least \$724,000 to an arson fund initiated

in 1996 by then-SBC President Jim Henry. The funds helped 98 African-American congregations in 17 states rebuild after arson attacks.