

Suspect charged with hate crimes in Louisiana black church burnings

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ST. LANDRY PARISH, La. (BP)—Hate crime charges have been filed against a white man accused of arson that destroyed three Louisiana black Baptist churches.

Holden Matthews, the son of a St. Landry Parish sheriff's deputy, was arrested April 10.

Matthews, 21, is charged with three counts of hate crimes, two counts of simple arson of a religious building and one count of aggravated arson of a religious building, and was denied bond. Matthews pleaded not guilty April 15 to the charges in St. Landry Parish Criminal Court, according to the St. Landry Parish Clerk of Court's office.

Investigators are considering Matthews' membership in a band that plays "black metal" music—a genre that has promoted church burnings in other countries.

'An attack on the house of God'

"This was an attack on the house of God," Louisiana State Fire Marshal H. "Butch" Browning said in an April 11 news conference. "Though the spirit is still strong, the landmark has been destroyed. We took that very seriously in this investigation."



Investigators are working to determine the motives of Holden Matthews, the alleged arsonist in the destruction of three black Baptist churches in Louisiana. (State Fire Marshal Office photo via BP)

Matthews is accused of burning Mount Pleasant and Greater Union Baptist churches in Opelousas, and St. Mary Baptist Church in Port Barre—congregations that each have served the small towns over 100 years.

“At this time, the investigative team is still vetting several potential motives,” Browning said. “However, information investigators have uncovered, and that Matthews has offered, suggests a possible connection with a genre of music called ‘black metal’ and its associated history with church burnings in other parts of the world, which have been documented in movies and books.”

The racial characteristics of the crime could damage progress made in race relations in the state, Louisiana Baptist Convention Church Planting Director James Jenkins said in an interview.

“I don’t know the motive of the guy who was arrested. I would hope that it was not racial, and at the same time I can’t think of a motive that I can accept,” Jenkins said. “It was an attack on God, more than it was an attack on anything.

“I just hope that with the arrest that it starts the process of healing in the community. I always hate to hear about things of that type, because I think we’re making such progress here in the state of Louisiana as far as race relationships, and things of that type have the effect of taking the scab off of a sore.”

Louisiana Baptists want to help the churches recover, Jenkins said. The Louisiana Baptist Convention is working with associational missional strategists and hope to meet with an area ministerial alliance that serves the congregations to determine needs and desires, he noted.

“It’s important, too, that whatever we do, that we offer it in the spirit of Christian love and in solidarity with other Christians,” he said. “It’s just a matter of our being able to make that contact and then figure out what we can do and the best way we can, according to how they want to be helped, if they need it.”

‘Love one another’

Gerald Toussaint, pastor of Mount Pleasant Baptist Church in Opelousas and a member of the Seventh District Baptist Association, thanked investigators for their work.

“We’ve suffered, but I think it has a cause, a higher cause,” said Toussaint,

a bivocational pastor who leads two churches while working as a truck driver. “Our country has to find out that the God we serve does not look on the outside; he searches the heart. And I believe the heart of these people is why we’re standing here today.

“We don’t represent hate. We represent love, togetherness, peace, long-suffering, hope. And that’s what we’re here today to say to, not just to our community, but to our country.

“Be strong. Love one another. Be patient with one another. Help one another. Guide one another. Train up your children in the way they should go.”

Pastors of the three destroyed church buildings were part of the investigative team comprised of more than 100 law enforcement officials, Browning said. The team included the State Fire Marshal’s Office, the ATF, FBI and Louisiana State Police.

“We had some very unique criminal investigators,” Browning said. Pastors provided prayer, a calming voice and served as investigative agents throughout the two-week investigation.

“We can now confirm that all three of these fires were intentionally set,” Browning said. “And all three of these fires are related. Several pieces of evidence, both physical from the scene and technological evidence, have confirmed that Matthews is the suspect.”

EDITOR’S NOTE: This article was updated April 17 and the first three paragraphs edited after Matthews was charged with hate crimes in addition to arson.