

Questions Smolder After Pentecostal Church Was Torched in Kentucky

Since arson destroyed the Louisville structure in June, the congregation is \$1.7 million in debt, and police have no case

An independent Apostolic church in Louisville, Ky., hopes to settle into a new home during January after its building was torched by arsonists last June, a blaze that strapped the church with a \$1.7 million mortgage debt.

Although Heart of Fire Church was in the southeastern suburbs, it has been negotiating to purchase an old shopping center in the southwestern part of the city in a lower socioeconomic area. Pastor Dan Johnson said the congregation decided a new location would better align with its ministry focus on the poor, needy and homeless.

"We're ready to get into an area that's more receptive to whosoever will come and worship the Lord," he said.

By early fall, no charges had been filed in the case. An agent with the federal Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms (ATF) said the investigation may continue for several months. Special agent Don York said an accelerant was used to set the fire, but he declined to provide more specific details.

The crime had an impact on church attendance. The church met last summer in a large tent on its property after a search was

conducted for an alternate facility. While turnout dropped initially, by late September it had reached 150 of about 300 members.

The church's Christian school and day-care center also were part of the blaze.

"We're believing God for a miracle," Johnson noted. "We've got to move forward. Our heart is to reach youth and this city."

The arson occurred less than a month after members participated in an anti-Ku Klux Klan rally. The church received several threatening calls—name-calling or racial slurs—after the downtown event.

Johnson called the arson a hate crime. Noting that two Baptist churches in the state burned the same week, he added, "It just doesn't seem to be coincidental."

The other two fires were not in the vicinity, however. One was an hour southwest of Louisville and the other in eastern Kentucky. York said the ATF investigated all three but didn't find a link.

The church operated a multiracial day-care center, and Johnson's wife, Rebecca, said it was emphasized that the center was for all people.

"It looked like a rainbow in there," she said of the African American, Hispanic, Asian and Indian children who mixed with whites. "These kids are so beautiful."

She said the old center was popular because it stayed open late at night. The extended hours allowed staffers an opportunity to minister to parents who worked late or unconventional shifts. The facility also generated considerable revenue, a key point in the pastor's indignation over reports about the church's debt.

Local media have discussed Heart of Fire's \$1.7 million mortgage and legal dispute with a contractor. Johnson believes those discussions implied someone within the church set the fire to collect insurance money.

Considering the revenue Heart of Fire lost, that would have been foolish, he said. He pointed out the insurance only covered half the debt and that a sale of the property was pending.

Despite the setback, some good has come from the property loss. The pastor said although some people were fearful and mourned the loss, others treated it as a call to arms. Some members are feeling more useful by helping the congregation recover.

"It has strengthened me," said deaconess Linda Dickson. "It has brought home that we as Christians are the church. What God has committed to us to do needs to be accelerated."

Her husband, Don, noted that during the week of the fire a local fire-department chaplain encouraged the church from Isaiah 61:3, saying that the Lord would bring beauty from ashes.

"After the initial shock and disbelief, for awhile I felt

anger," Dickson said. "But when the Lord gave us that they ever determine who did this, we'll just have to love them and forgive them."

Still, the pastor would like to see the crime solved. Last summer's attack came about four years after someone shot out half a dozen windows. No one has been charged in that incident, either.

"For our sake, it would be one of the best things that could happen, to clear the air," Johnson said.