

6 St. Louis Churches Torched in Last 2 Weeks

Federal and local authorities are investigating six arson fires at mostly black churches in the St. Louis area, and a \$2,000 award has been offered for information leading to the person or persons responsible, the city's mayor said on Tuesday.

"Churches are a place for worship. They're a place of sanctuary," St. Louis Mayor Francis Slay said. "Someone who would commit such a crime is atrocious."

No one was injured in the fires that damaged one Catholic and five Protestant churches.

The churches are in close proximity to one another—two in Jennings, a suburb, and four in north St. Louis. The area of the suspected attacks is close to Ferguson, Missouri, a St. Louis suburb that received international attention and was the scene of sometimes violent protests after a white police officer shot and killed an unarmed black teen in August 2014.

All six fires were set in the doorways of the churches, starting with the Bethel Non-Denominational Church on Oct. 8. The most recent fire was discovered on Sunday morning at the Ebenezer Lutheran Church on Theobald Street, the St. Louis Post-Dispatch newspaper reported, citing a fire official.

Slay said the city's fire and police departments are working with county officials and investigators from the U.S. Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives. The reward is being offered by St. Louis Regional Crimestoppers and the ATF.

The Missouri State Highway Patrol also has been in contact with local and federal authorities and is ready to assist,

said Missouri Gov. Jay Nixon.

"These cowardly acts of violence against places of worship are deeply troubling," said Nixon in a statement.

The Anti-Defamation League of St. Louis said in a statement that while no racial motive has been established, "the fear and intimidation in the African-American community is substantial and must be validated."

The group raised similar concerns in July after a series of arson fires at black churches in southern states that followed the fatal shootings of nine people at Emanuel AME Church in Charleston, South Carolina, a historic black church.

On Sunday parishioners at the New Life Missionary Baptist Church in north St. Louis held an open-air services outside their damaged building, which was damaged on Saturday. They prayed for the arsonist or arsonists, and proclaimed their forgiveness, CBS News reported. {eo}

© 2015 Thomson Reuters. All rights reserved.