

Pentecostal Church Burned Down After Suing for Right to Hold Services

A church in Mississippi was destroyed by a suspected arson fire, about a month after its pastor filed a lawsuit challenging the city of Holly Springs on gathering restrictions amid the coronavirus outbreak.

First Pentecostal Church in Holly Springs, Mississippi, burned down Wednesday morning, news outlets reported. When investigators from the Marshall County Sheriff's Office got to the scene, they found graffiti in the church parking lot that read: "Bet you stay home now you hypokrits [sic]."

"We've kind of racked our brains and we have no idea," Jerry Waldrop, the pastor of the church, said. "No enemies that we know of. We don't know anyone that we even think could be capable of doing something like this."

Waldrop had filed a lawsuit against the city of Holly Springs last month, alleging police officers had disrupted a church Bible study and Easter service. Holly Springs City Attorney Shirley Byers said nearly 40 parishioners inside the church building were not practicing social distancing on April 10 when a violation citation was issued for the church.

Churchgoers practiced social distancing while indoors and only held indoor services when bad weather would not allow them to gather outside, the lawsuit said. Waldrop's complaint also asked for a temporary restraining order to keep city officials from preventing church services.

While Mississippi Gov. Tate Reeves's safer-at-home order allowed churches to operate as essential businesses, Byers said the city did not give churches the same latitude until

they amended their local order in late April to allow for drive-thru services. She said Waldrop's lawsuit has yet to be served.

Authorities are offering a reward for tips on the arson investigation. {eoa}

The Associated Press