

Satanists Set Bibles Ablaze on Church Doorsteps in Apparent Hate Crime

Arizona authorities are probing a series of arson fires at suburban Phoenix churches as possible hate crimes after an apparent arsonist set Bibles alight on church doorsteps, police said on Thursday.

Authorities said up to six small fires were touched off at four churches in Mesa, Arizona, since mid-May by burning the books, said police spokeswoman Sergeant Diana Williams. The fires caused only minimal damage.

In one instance, a pastor said the words "HAIL SATAN" were carved into a metal gate near one of the burned Bibles. Police have declined to confirm the details of that incident.

Mesa police said the first arson fire was reported on May 11 at the Mesa Baptist Church, followed by another at the church on May 17. Those blazes were ignited near a back door to the gymnasium on the sprawling four-acre grounds of the Mesa Baptist Church, Senior Pastor Mark Rice said.

The remnants of the burned books were found by church employees. Police said they also had reports of a third fire at the church on May 18, but Rice said he was unaware of a third fire.

Rice called the fires a brazen act because the apparent arsonist set them in a place where a person could have easily been seen by residents of the surrounding neighborhoods.

"No one was trying to set the church on fire or they would have burned it closer the building," he said. "They had something else in mind."

He said the message etched into the gate with its 3-inch (8 cm) high letters appeared to be fashioned with a knife or a nail.

Police said the next church fires were sparked on June 14 at East Mesa Christian Church and then on June 20 at Pilgrim Lutheran Church. The most recent fire was set on July 7 at Calvary Baptist Church.

Williams said the Bibles in the fires are not believed to have come from the churches involved in the incidents in Mesa, a large mostly bedroom community about 20 miles southeast of Phoenix.

Editing by Cynthia Johnston and Lisa Shumaker

© 2014 Thomson Reuters. All rights reserved.