

V. Rebuilding Efforts

As part of the 1996 Church Arson Prevention Act, the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) is responsible for administering a \$10 million Federal Loan Guarantee Fund to assist with the rebuilding of houses of worship and other non-profit organizations that have been damaged or destroyed by arson.

HUD has forged a strong coalition with the National Council of Churches, the Congress of National Black Churches and other organizations to assess the overall arson damage and to target resources to these houses of worship as quickly as possible. As a result of this cooperation, ten churches have been rebuilt and thirty more are under construction.

The National Rebuilding Initiative will be awarding "rebuilding resource packages" to 79 churches in 18 states in the form of grants from the National Council of Churches, federally guaranteed loans, and volunteer labor and in-kind materials. Of these 79 churches, 13 are eligible for a HUD loan, 20 have received or are eligible for a National Council of Churches grant, and 46 are eligible for a blended resource package of a grant and loan.

VI. Preliminary Conclusions

After a series of fires around the time of the Martin Luther King Jr. holiday in 1996, federal authorities began to focus on the sharp increase in attacks on churches, particularly African American churches in the South. An evaluation of the pattern of church fires in the South prompted the conclusion that closer coordination between federal and local law enforcement was necessary.

The significance of the problem also prompted the Federal government to increase substantially the resources devoted to addressing it. This increased effort devoted to investigating and solving these crimes has borne fruit, in terms of arrests and convictions, coordination between federal and local law enforcement, and the investigation of racial motivations involved in these crimes.

The number and proportion of fires at African American churches have raised the possibility of racial hostility as a motive. Indeed, nine defendants have been convicted of federal civil rights charges in connections with six fires in Nevada, Tennessee and South Carolina. To date, the investigations have revealed a range of motives, from blatant racism and religious hatred to financial profit, to personal revenge or vandalism.

There is still much work to be done, however, before charges are filed in other cases. NCATF can then speak to the motivation behind other fires at churches and other houses of worship in the last two years. While it was the number of fires at African American churches that brought these crimes to national attention, the NCATF will continue to investigate and prosecute attacks on all houses of worship, regardless of their denomination or racial composition.