

Alabama church fires stoke renewed concerns: Motive for latest arsons unknown

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A series of church fires last month in Alabama has renewed a perennial, nationwide concern for protecting congregations and prosecuting arsonists.

Racial hatred did not appear to be a motive in the damage or destruction of ten churches—half of them with black members, half with white congregants.

Within the first two weeks after the first fires February 3, federal authorities had not charged any suspects. One lead suggested that two young men traveled about setting most of the fires.

The National Coalition for Burned Churches, based in Charleston, Southern Carolina, has documented more than 1,700 arsons, attempted arsons, bombings and suspicious church fires in the U.S. from 1990 to 2000. More than 600 cases of church arsons have been found in subsequent years, according to the United Methodist News Service.

These figures “are most likely low,” said Rose Johnson-Mackey, program director for the coalition, which is working with the women’s division of the United Methodist Board of Global Ministries. The data are based what the coalition has gathered on its own. In addition, volunteer fire departments usually do not have the resources to investigate small fires, she said.

In Alabama, United Methodists and other church groups have made donations and offered help in other ways. In many cases, the Baptists whose churches were destroyed or damaged vowed to rebuild.