

Two suspects arrested in East Texas church fires: Suspected of setting at least nine fires

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Two young men suspected of setting at least nine churches on fire in East Texas were active in the youth group of a Southern Baptist congregation before drifting away from church after the mother of one of them died three years ago.

David McAllister, father of 21-year-old Daniel George McAllister, one of two men arrested February 21 on an arson charge, told the *Tyler Morning Telegraph* he had struggled with keeping his son on the right track since his wife died of a heart attack. His wife, he said, homeschooled the boy and kept him active in First Baptist Church in Ben Wheeler, Texas, east of Dallas.

Carlton Young, pastor of the Baptist General Convention of Texas-affiliated church for 15 years, remembered Wanda McAllister as the “spiritual anchor” of the family. “I knew her death affected him tremendously, but I hadn’t seen him enough since his mother died to know how much,” Young told the Tyler newspaper. “It was a really traumatic experience for their family.”

The pastor said neither McAllister nor the other suspect, Jason Robert Bourque, 19, had attended the church for a year and a half. He said their attendance fell off after McAllister’s mother died and Bourque’s family moved to Lindale, Texas, about 20 miles away.

Police arrested Bourque in Van Zandt County, Texas, and McAllister in San Antonio. Both arrests were without incident and both suspects were taken to Smith County to face charges of arson in the February 8 blaze that destroyed Dover Baptist Church in Tyler, Texas.

Authorities believe the duo is responsible for nine church fires set between January 1 and February 8 in four East Texas communities. They also are suspected in three attempted church break-ins during the rash of arsons. Additional charges were expected to be filed.

Police say they believe that a January 19 arson that destroyed First Baptist Church of Temple in Central Texas is unrelated to the East Texas church fires. An official with the federal Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms said February 21 that a person of interest has been identified in the Temple fire, which caused an estimated \$15 million in damage.

Police did not discuss a motive for setting the East Texas church fires, but they said they had known about the two suspects for several weeks. Officials said a telephone hotline tip triggered the arrests and that DNA evidence linked one of the two men to the scene of one of the fires.

News of the arrests brought relief to area churches, which had been advised to take security measures such as installing alarm systems and surveillance cameras and having members take turns guarding church buildings in what law-enforcement officials called “church patrols.”

Church arson in Texas is a first-degree felony punishable by five to 99 years in prison. Bourque and McAllister are being held on \$10 million bond.

“No investigation is finished until guilt is proven in court, but today marks a significant milestone,” said Robert Champion, special agent in charge of the ATF in Dallas. “The arsons in these communities have been devastating, but the citizens have been resilient and aided each other and the investigation.”

Hundreds of local law enforcement officers, more than 200 personnel from the Texas Department of Public Safety, and numerous FBI and ATF agents and specialists worked the case in a three-county area covering 2,648 square miles and an estimated 713 churches.

“By working closely with our local and federal partners, we brought tremendous resources to this investigation, working around the clock, and culminating in these arrests,” said Steven McCraw, director of the Department of Public Safety. “The arsons of these houses of worship were despicable and cowardly acts, and Texas won’t stand for this kind of criminal activity.” —*Associated Baptist Press*