

# Church arsonist sentenced to nine years

by [Jack Flynn](#)

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SPRINGFIELD, Mass. (RNS) The first of three men charged with torching a black church hours after President Obama's 2008 election was sentenced to nine years in prison on Monday (Nov. 1) for what the judge called a "particularly vicious act of stupidity."

Benjamin J. Haskell, 23, of Springfield also must pay a share of \$1.7 million in restitution to the Macedonia Church of God in Christ and serve three years supervised release after completing his prison term.

"The element of rank, blind stupidity in this act is literally almost unbelievable," U.S. District Judge Michael A. Ponsor said from the bench.

"It is especially galling, however, that a crime like this would take place, not in Mississippi or Alabama, with their troubled histories, but in our City of Springfield, once a stop on the Underground Railway and the place where John F. Kennedy announced his candidacy for president," he added.

Haskell, 23, pleaded guilty in June to a civil rights violation and destroying religious property. Another Springfield man, Thomas A. Gleason, Jr., 25, pleaded to the same charges, while Michael F. Jacques, 25, is awaiting trial.

Fueled by a gasoline and Styrofoam mix dubbed homemade napalm, the fire erupted at 3:10 a.m. on Nov. 5 and quickly engulfed the church, which was still under construction in a residential neighborhood. The blaze caused \$2 million in damages, sent two firefighters to the hospital and triggered a federal civil rights investigation that was

monitored by the White House.

Haskell dodged a potentially longer sentence by confessing after being confronted by state police in early 2009, and participating in a sting that led to videotaped confessions by his two co-defendants.

Gleason is scheduled for sentencing Dec. 10, while Jacques is scheduled for trial on March 7.

The church's pastor, Bishop Bryant Robinson Jr., expressed ambivalence about Haskell's sentencing.

"On one hand, what a waste of a young life; the fact that people were identified and prosecuted for perpetrating a very despicable crime, there's a bit of satisfaction in that," he said.

The rebuilt church is expected to open next spring or summer, according to Robinson.