

# Last of 3 men sentenced in church arson case

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SPRINGFIELD, Mass. (RNS) The last of three white men convicted of torching a black church on the night of President Obama's election was sentenced to 4 1/2 years in prison on Wednesday (Jan. 18), bringing the highly publicized case to a close.

Thomas Gleason, 24, of Springfield, was also ordered to pay \$1.7 million in restitution and serve three years of supervised release after finishing his sentence. The restitution amount is to be shared by the three defendants.

"This is something that never should have happened anywhere, and certainly not in Springfield, Massachusetts," said Judge Michael A. Ponsor, moments after imposing the sentence in U.S. District Court.

The 54-month term represents just a fraction of the prison time being served by defendants Benjamin F. Haskell, 25, and Michael F. Jacques Jr., 27, who received 9- and 14-year prison terms, respectively, for their roles in the church arson.

With credit for 18 months already served, Gleason -- who was a star prosecution witness last year in Jacques' trial -- will be released in three years.

Ponsor noted that Gleason not only confessed to the crime and cooperated with prosecutors, but also showed greater potential for rehabilitation after prison.

"He is a highly salvageable young man who has grown up during this experience. It's unfortunate that that's what it took," the judge said.

Gleason apologized for the "frustration and pain" he inflicted on both his family and the predominately black congregation that lost their church in the Nov. 5, 2008 blaze. "Don't let one night of stupidity define who I am," Gleason said.