

Black churches in St. Louis area damaged by fires, arson suspected

by [Celeste Kennel-Shank](#) in the [November 11, 2015](#) issue

Fires damaged several churches—of different denominations, but most with predominantly black congregations—within a few miles of one another in northwest St. Louis and nearby suburbs within weeks in October.

Captain Garon Mosby of the St. Louis Fire Department said the fires, set near each church's front doors, were caused by arson, according to news reports.

One of the churches damaged by fire was New Life Missionary Baptist Church in St. Louis's Walnut Park East neighborhood, the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* reported.

David Triggs, pastor of New Life, told the *Post-Dispatch* that he was troubled that the five churches affected at that point were all predominantly black.

"This was done by the mind of someone who is spiritually sick," Triggs said of the fire at his church.

The church held its Sunday service on the lawn October 18, the day after the fire, the *Post-Dispatch* reported. The New Testament reading that day was from 1 Peter 4, which in the King James translation speaks of "the fiery trial which is to try you" and exhorts believers to rejoice in partaking in Christ's sufferings.

After a series of fires damaged several black churches in the South this summer, [Christ Church Cathedral](#) in St. Louis, an Episcopal congregation, organized the Rebuild the Churches Fund.

The fund raised more than \$700,000 through special collections from nearly 300 Christian, Jewish, Muslim, and other congregations. Organizers were in the process of preparing disbursement checks when the blazes occurred in the St. Louis area, said Michael D. Kinman, dean of Christ Church Cathedral.

Kinman and other cathedral staff contacted the pastors of the churches damaged by fire—also including Catholic, Lutheran, and Pentecostal congregations—asking, "How can we as a community rally around you?"

They inquired about the extent of the damage and whether there were costs not covered by insurance, as well as other needs.

“We want to make sure that the communities that have been hurt are the ones that get to determine their need,” Kinman said.

Roderick K. Burton, from another Baptist congregation, asked for prayer support. Christ Church Cathedral offered to have people attend that church’s regular Wednesday prayer meeting “as a sign of solidarity,” Kinman said. Burton then opened the invitation to the whole city.

While investigators have worked in each case to learn the cause of the fires in the South and the St. Louis area, this interfaith effort sought to send a message that the acts of arson are unacceptable, Kinman said. And the Rebuild the Churches Fund plans to stay in touch with congregations through the rebuilding process.

“When you attack the church in the black community you attack the heart of the black community, and this is just something we can’t stand for,” Kinman said. “We want to make it clear that the power of hate to burn down is nothing compared to the power of love to rebuild.”

*This article was edited on October 27, 2015.*