

After string of St. Landry church fires, pastors pray, plan ways to protect churches | Crime/Police

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St. Landry Parish Baptist leaders are uniting in the face of destruction and fear after three historically black Baptist churches burned to the ground in the past 10 days.

Ten pastors from area churches gathered at First Benjamin Baptist Church in Opelousas on Thursday to support one another, discuss the similarities between the fires and strategize ways to get the community involved.



[Third church in 10 days burned down in St. Landry Parish; investigators on the scene](#)

The meeting occurred hours after firefighters from St. Landry Fire District 3 arrived at Mount Pleasant Baptist Church on Highway 182 to find the building engulfed in flames.

The pastors from the three destroyed churches — St. Mary Baptist Church in Port Barre, Greater Union Baptist Church in Opelousas and Mount Pleasant Baptist Church in Opelousas — spoke of the devastation they felt when they saw their burning churches.

The Rev. Gerald Toussaint of Mount Pleasant Baptist Church said he was crushed to see so much history go up in flames.

“It was heartbreaking,” Toussaint said.

The pastors, all part of the St. Landry Ministerial Alliance, said they’re remaining steadfast in their faith and their support of one another.

The causes of the three fires are still under investigation. The Louisiana State Fire Marshal’s Office and the federal Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives are leading the investigations.

Officials have not said whether the fires were caused by arson.

Even so, the pastors noted Thursday, the fires had striking similarities.

Each burned church was a historically black Baptist church, each well over 100 years old, and each church was along a rural highway. The fires were set overnight, and each affected pastor said he received a call about the blaze between 2 a.m. and 4 a.m.

It's an unusual situation, the Rev. Kyle Sylvester of St. Mary Baptist Church said. His church was the first building that burned down, on March 26.

Even with the similarities and recognition that race may be a motive if arson is determined to be the cause, the pastors said they don't want to stoke fear in the community.

"I don't know who's doing it or why they're doing it, but I don't want to be the one to inject race into it," the Rev. Harry Richard of Greater Union Baptist Church said. "Until we find out exactly what's going on, I pray the community doesn't panic. All the assumptions are flowing and creating an atmosphere of fear."

He encouraged his fellow pastors to continue praying: "Prayer changes things," he said.

[Photos: Mount Pleasant Baptist church burns to the ground; third St. Landry church destroyed in 10 days](#)





RECENT CHURCH FIRES

Third historically black Baptist church in just over a week destroyed by fire

MARCH 26:
St. Mary Baptist Church

APRIL 2:
Greater Union Baptist Church

APRIL 4:
Mount Pleasant Baptist Church



Advocate map



The pastors aren't only relying on prayer to carry them through. The group is planning a public meeting April 15 at Little Zion Baptist Church near the intersection of East North and North Academy streets in Opelousas.

They said they want to gather with the community, law enforcement officials and elected leaders to discuss the fires, pray together and determine how they can protect other churches in the community that could be at risk if investigators determine an arsonist is to blame.

The pastors said they're interested in increasing law enforcement patrols and organizing civilian watch groups to monitor the churches. They're encouraging community members to be vigilant, and to be watchful of all houses of worship, not just Baptist churches.

As the pastors plan their coordinated response, they're also considering how to assist the affected congregations so they can continue worshiping. Each pastor with an unharmed sanctuary offered buildings and services to the other pastors.

No matter what, the pastors said, their congregations will only grow stronger through this tragedy.

“The church is still alive,” Toussaint said. “The building is gone, but we’ll be back because we can’t let the enemy win.”