


# Holden Matthews pleads guilty to burning St. Landry churches, says he was trying to impress on Facebook | Courts

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BY KATIE GAGLIANO | Staff writer, Katie Gagliano

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Accused church arsonist Holden Matthews pleaded guilty in federal and state court Monday to burning three historically black St. Landry Parish Baptist churches in March and April.

Matthews, who originally pleaded not guilty to all counts in both cases, admitted to his crimes Monday, pleading guilty to all six state charges and four of his six federal charges. In exchange for his guilty plea, federal prosecutors agreed to drop the two remaining charges against Matthews.

In federal court, Matthews pleaded guilty to three counts of intentional damage to religious property, a hate crime under the 1996 Church Arson Prevention Act, and one count of using fire to commit a felony. In state court, Matthews pleaded guilty to three state hate crime charges, two counts of simple arson of a religious building and a count of aggravated arson of a religious building.

His federal sentencing hearing is scheduled for 10 a.m. May 22. His state sentencing hearing will follow at 9 a.m. May 26. Prosecutors intend for his federal sentence to run concurrent to any state sentence Matthews receives, Assistant U.S. Attorney John Luke Walker said.

Matthews' 10-day arson spree destroyed St. Mary Baptist Church in Port Barre, Greater Union Baptist Church in Opelousas and Mount Pleasant Baptist Church in Opelousas. Matthews, the 22-year-old son of a St. Landry Parish sheriff's deputy, was arrested after physical evidence and video surveillance linked him to the crimes.

Matthews was present at both hearings, shackled and wearing an orange Lafayette Parish Correctional Center jumpsuit. He spoke little, except to issue a "no, sir" or "yes, sir" in answer to the judges' questions and to officially state his guilty pleas. Matthews' parents, Roy and Angela Matthews, were also present but did not comment.

Now, it's time for the focus to shift fully to restoring the congregations, he said.

“This is the result of a lot of hurting, a community that’s been trying to heal and it’s been an extraordinary show of faith. I think this ended with justice. It doesn’t take away the pain, it doesn’t take away the hurt,” Browning said. “These congregations between these three churches are hurting, you could see it in the courtroom, but they’re ready to move forward and we’re still waiting for the day for their churches to re-open.”

“It’s time to move on and it’s time to show our love and our care for these church members and get them where they need to be,” he said.

Greater Union Baptist Church congregant Sheryl Richard, 57, said she had mixed emotions after leaving Matthews’ hearing. She said she won’t feel confident in the process or begin to have a sense of closure until his sentence is announced in May but was glad to see Matthews begin to take ownership of the pain he caused.

“At least now you’re acknowledging this was your handiwork. As believers in Christ, we have to find forgiveness in somebody acknowledging that they are guilty,” she said.

Richard said she’s found some forgiveness in her heart for Matthews but she’s still grappling with the destruction of her church. She’s attended Greater Union since childhood and said it’s difficult reckoning with the fact a spiritual home her family and many others poured hours of love and work into could be destroyed “in a matter of moments.”

She said the Rev. Harry Richard of Greater Union, who passed away in January, also grappled with the church’s loss and Matthews’ crime, despite imploring his congregants to forgive. Richard said if the pastor were present Monday, he would be proud of Matthews’ choice to seek responsibility and would pray for his conversion to faith.

“He would hope and pray that throughout this time and whatever time [Matthews] is given that he’d seek a relationship with God,” she said.

As the court process continues, Richard said she has lingering questions about Matthews’ association with black metal and how no warning signs of the genre’s deep influence on his actions were detected.

In his federal plea agreement, Matthews admitted he committed the crimes “to raise his profile as a black metal musician” and emulate bass player Varg Vikernes, of the band Mayhem, and other Norwegian black metal artists accused of a string of church fires in the 1990s.

At his June federal detention hearing, Matthews' parents testified that their son had watched "Lords of Chaos," a film depiction of Vikernes' rise in the black metal scene, about two months before the St. Landry fires. Matthews' federal defense attorney Dustin Talbot said Matthews was "a copycat."

Federal prosecutor Risa Berkower presented in June messages Matthews sent to friends bragging about the fires and soliciting feedback on album art he created using photos taken from the scenes of the fires. In one message, Matthews wrote that he wanted to exact revenge on the Christian religion for what he described as centuries of oppression. He said he wanted his victims to know the fires were intentional.

"I want them to be scared," Matthews wrote.

Summerhays said Matthews acknowledged in his plea agreement that he received a positive reaction from the Facebook posts and messages he shared with other black metal enthusiasts and was "further emboldened" to continue his arson spree.

In a statement, Talbot said he looked forward to the next hearing before Judge Summerhays, "where the court and the public will learn that Holden had the social and mental development of an adolescent and that he committed these acts in a naive attempt to use images of the fires to gain acceptance into an online music community. Holden now fully understands the seriousness and gravity of his actions and is deeply remorseful for what he has done and the pain he has caused the congregations of these churches."