

# Leaders of burned St. Landry churches reflect on pain, progress one year later | Coronavirus

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BY KATIE GAGLIANO | Staff writer, Katie Gagliano

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Each week Deacon Ronald Milburn of Greater Union Baptist Church cuts the grass and maintains the cemetery at his former religious home, walking beside scraps of burnt wood and the bald patches of grass where the over 100-year-old worship hall once stood.

It's been a year since confessed arsonist Holden Matthews, 22, burned St. Mary Baptist Church in Port Barre and Greater Union and Mt. Pleasant Baptist churches in Opelousas. The historically black churches each went up in flames in the early morning hours between March 26 and April 4, 2019.

Matthews was arrested after officers from local, state and federal agencies combed through [physical evidence](#) and [a slew of digital evidence](#), including photos and videos from the scenes of the fires. Matthews initially pleaded not guilty, but changed his plea in federal and state courts to guilty Feb. 10 and awaits sentencing in May.

While Milburn said the criminal questions have been answered, there's still a lingering disbelief over Matthews' actions and pain over the memories and emotional and historical significance his actions cost the congregations. For decades, the churches served as sources of solace for black St. Landry Parish residents who experienced racial discrimination and economic hardship, he said.

"What could possess someone to burn a building of that nature, and that history, down to the ground for self-gratification?" the deacon questioned.

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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...

The three congregations have fought to move forward in the months since.

It's been [an especially difficult year for the Greater Union congregation](#), who lost [the Rev. Harry Richard suddenly in January to heart problems](#). His deacon said Richard helped lead the group through the tragedy with kindness and a focus on forgiveness, and they're still holding onto that message.

"We had a strong leader that preached to the world that hatred doesn't stop God's work and we've tried to lean on one another to promote that. Things could've gone south and taken a turn for the worse, but we've kept strong, kept together," Milburn said.

The Rev. Kyle Sylvester of St. Mary Baptist said he's cautioned his members not to allow the situation to harden their hearts. They've all felt anger, fear, frustration, disappointment and an array of other emotions throughout the year, but at some point, you have to set your emotions aside to prevent them from hindering progress and healing, he said.

Sylvester said his saving grace was that no one was injured in the fires. That consolation helped him keep going.

"We have to live the message that we preach. We preach forgiveness and love and that love covers a multitude of sins...every crime deserves a punishment, but we can't get bitter from it happening. We need to listen to God calling us to love and operate in love as we do His will," Sylvester said.

The fire anniversaries were marked with little fanfare. Each congregation is limited from gathering by the stay-at-home order issued by Gov. John Bel Edwards to prevent the spread of the novel coronavirus, or COVID-19, and the church leaders said they're taking the protection of their flocks seriously. Many of the members at the three churches are older.

“We’re stronger together but safer apart. That’s my favorite motto right now,” Milburn said.

Greater Union has had a more difficult time maintaining its usual spiritual business. Without a full-time pastor, there’s no one to lead sermons, Bible studies or worship virtually. Milburn said most congregants are also 50 or older and don’t have access to the needed technology to access video services, so they’ve resorted to a church GroupMe message and phone calls to stay connected.

Pre-coronavirus, the congregation had pastors from churches in the Seventh District Missionary Baptist Association step in to lead services on Sundays. They’re observing a six-month grieving period before beginning the search to hire Richard’s successor, Milburn said.

Once the coronavirus separation is over, the congregation leaders said they’re hopeful they can continue their rebuilding efforts.

Rebuilding has been a delicate spot for each church congregation. Each church leader mentioned anxiety among their congregants to return to a permanent spiritual home, doubt over the length of the process and frustrating setbacks that have made visible progress difficult. While seeing is not believing in faith circles, they said their congregants are anxious to see construction activity.

“The thing that makes me the most stressed is how long it takes to get it done. I wish it could happen today, but it can’t. You just can’t do it that way...it’s different than it used to be back in the day,” Toussaint said.

The pastor said stress has been high in the past year. Between trucking lumber for his day job, meeting with firms about the church construction and pastoring two churches, Toussaint said rest has been evasive. Around Thanksgiving, the pastor went to the hospital because his blood pressure was so high, he nearly had a stroke, he said.

“Sometimes I sit up there in bed and just go through all the stuff at night. I’m trying to go to sleep but I can’t get the church out of my mind. I can’t rest,” he said.

Toussaint said he’s tried to slow down since then and hand more authority to his deacon board. Construction at Mt. Pleasant is currently underway — the land has been cleared, the initial dirt work is complete and the church is awaiting inspection so they can begin preparing foundation work.

Sylvester said his church is taking a slightly different approach. At the time of the fires, the church had just poured the slab for a fellowship hall adjacent to the church. The slab was undamaged, and the St. Mary congregation has focused on completing the fellowship hall and a parking lot; the fellowship hall will then be used as the group's temporary worship space while the new church is built.

It's been a slow process, and worshiping from an empty former storefront on North Main Street in Opelousas has been emotionally strenuous, he said. Each time the congregants set up the chairs and equipment for their Sunday service, it's a reminder the space isn't theirs, Sylvester said.

While they didn't ask to be in this position, the pastor said he's reminded his flock they need to keep their eyes forward and instead of bemoaning the loss of normalcy, be thankful they can still experience faith among one another, he said.

"I can remember telling the congregation, 'A lot of us are trying to get back to normal and what we're used to. Normal is gone,'" he said. "We're out of our comfort zone but let's embrace it and not fight against it. God has brought us to a new chapter."

Milburn, a retired U.S. Army First Sergeant, said he's accustomed to seeing a problem and enacting a solution. Being unable to take quick action to solve the problems facing his church has been difficult. The past year has been an uphill battle, between the fire, rebuilding setbacks, Harry's death and now the coronavirus, he said.

The Greater Union congregation hopes to have the construction project rebid by the end of April after Department of Transportation and Development approval, civil engineering inspections and the finalization of the architect's designs.

Milburn said the process has been a lesson in God's timing.

"It's taught me to be patient with God and that he'll do things on his own time," he said. "In time, your wounds will heal if you keep licking them. I'm licking my wounds," the deacon said.

Though time heals, it doesn't erase what happened, Milburn said. The deacon said he's [thankful for the public's support during their recovery](#) and asked that people keep the churches in their minds and prayers. For the three congregations, there's still a long road ahead, he said.

“Our fire is still burning. I just hope the world and the community don’t forget about us in this process. It’s not easy to go through what we’ve been through. Our faith has been tested over and over, and I hope the people don’t forget that,” Milburn said.