



NATIONAL CHURCH ARSON TASK FORCE

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NATIONAL CHURCH ARSON TASK FORCE ISSUES FOURTH REPORT Number of Arsons at America's Houses of Worship Continues to Decline

WASHINGTON, D.C. C The National Church Arson Task Force issued its fourth report to the President today, highlighting statistics that indicate that the number of arsons at houses of worship continues to decline. Task Force officials attribute their success, in part, to continued vigilance, well-publicized arrests and ongoing prevention efforts.

In the year 1996, when the Task Force was created, there were 297 arsons, bombings or attempted bombings at our nation's houses of worship. In 1997, that number dropped to 209 incidents; in 1998 there were 165 incidents; and in 1999 there were 140. These data represent a 53% decrease in the rate of such incidents between 1996 and 1999. This downward trend continues into the year 2000. As of August 15, 2000, there were 82 incidents.

The Task Force's arrest rate of 36.2% continues to be more than twice the national average for arson cases. To date, 305 defendants have been convicted in connection with 224 arsons or bombings.

"Four years ago, President Clinton declared church arsons a national priority and directed his Administration to investigate and prosecute the arsonists, rebuild burned churches and prevent additional fires," said James E. Johnson, Under Secretary of the Treasury for Enforcement, and co-chair of the Task Force. "Since 1996, the NCATF arrest rate is more than double the national solve rate for all arsons, and more than 945 church fires have been investigated. The investigators, prosecutors and state and local authorities should be highly commended for their vigor and compassion in solving these horrific crimes."

"Fires may have scorched the structures, but they did not sear the spirit of the communities in which these houses of worship are located," said Bill Lann Lee, Assistant Attorney General for Civil Rights at the Department of Justice and co-chair of the Task Force. "Nor did they deter law enforcement from investigating and prosecuting each and every one of these incidents to the fullest extent of the law. For the Federal government, combating attacks on America's houses of worship will remain a permanent priority."

The Task Force's accomplishments include:

- opening 945 investigations into arsons, bombings, or attempted bombings that have occurred at houses of worship between January 1, 1995 and August 15, 2000, resulting in the arrest of 431 suspects in connection with 342 of these investigations;
- a 36.2 % arrest rate in Task Force arson cases C more than double the 16 % rate of arsons in general;
- convictions by federal, state and local prosecutors of 305 defendants in connection with 224 arsons or bombings at houses of worship.

The Task Force also reported that on July 11, 2000, Jay Scott Ballinger pleaded guilty to setting 26 churches on fire in eight states between 1994 and 1999. Sentencing has not yet been scheduled, but Federal prosecutors are seeking a sentence of more than 42 years in prison. This sentence would be the longest sentence in U.S. history for a crime of church arson. The Ballinger plea represents the largest number of fires linked to a single defendant since the Task Force was created. Ballinger faces additional federal charges related to five church arsons in and around Atlanta, Georgia.

The Task Force continues to work with the Civil Rights Division, U.S. Attorney's offices, ATF, the FBI, the Community Relations Service of the Department of Justice and state and local authorities, and to investigate and prosecute arsons at houses of worship. The Department of Housing and Urban Development and the Federal Emergency Management Agency also continue to assist communities affected by these fires by providing rebuilding assistance and fire prevention information.

The Fourth Year Report is available on the internet at www.atf.treas.gov/pub.

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