

Fire at Mississippi Black Church a Hate Crime



Jacksonville, November 3 (RHC)-- In the U.S. state of Mississippi, police are treating the burning of a Black church -- during which vandals spray-painted "Vote Trump" on an exterior wall -- as a hate crime, saying it amounts to an act of voter intimidation.

A 911 call reporting the fire at Hopewell Baptist Church in Greenville came in Tuesday evening and firefighters were able to quickly extinguish the blaze. Most of the damage to the 111-year-old church was to the sanctuary, pastor Carilyn Hudson said at a news conference.

Investigators continue to collect evidence, and while there are no suspects yet, police are "possibly talking to a person of interest," Greenville Police Chief Delando Wilson said at the news conference. Authorities are treating the act as a hate crime, he said, because it's viewed as an attempt to intimidate voters.

The west Mississippi city of about 33,000 located near the Arkansas border is 78% Black, according to the most recent census. Surrounding Washington County is 71% Black. Mayor Errick Simmons said he spoke to some of the church's 200 members who were fearful and felt intimidated. They felt the vandalism was not just an attack on the church, but on the Black community as a whole.

The vandals also wrote "Vote Trump" in crude, white spray paint across the church. "It happened in the '50s, it happened in the '60s, but we're in 2016 and that should not happen," he said.

Greenville faced another race-based attack in September when someone painted the n-word on the city's boat ramp, Simmons said. He ordered city workers to paint over the pejorative, he said.

Because it's an African-American church, the FBI is working "with our local, state and federal law enforcement partners to determine if any civil rights crimes were committed," said a statement from the FBI's office in Jackson, the state capital.

The Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives is assisting the Mississippi State Fire Marshal's office, ATF special agent Joseph Frank said. ATF agents weren't able to enter the structure until mid-morning Wednesday because it was still too hot.

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