

# Black Burns Black Church

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## Black implicated in desecration case

By Hugh Aynesworth | THE WASHINGTON TIMES

DALLAS — A vandalism attack on a black church here seemed to have been the deciding factor in the Texas state legislature's passing a controversial hate-crimes law earlier this month.

The desecration of Dallas' St. Luke Community United Methodist Church, home church of several prominent black political leaders, was thought to have been perpetrated by white supremacists upset by the hate-crimes rhetoric. But now Dallas police and federal investigators are looking at whether the painting of Nazi swastikas and other graffiti was actually done by a black.

No arrests have been made, and police have been tight-lipped about the probe. It is known that a white couple, driving home from work the night of May 2, have told police they saw a young black man painting the church with white paint.



The Texas hate-crimes legislation passed the Democratic-controlled state House easily last month but seemed inexorably stalled in the Republican-controlled state Senate. Backers could not muster enough votes even to get it to a vote. Then the vandalism occurred, and the following day several speakers took to the floor of the legislature in Austin and passionately pointed to the church vandalism as a flagrant hate-crimes act. The bill passed the Senate eight days later and was signed into law by Gov. Rick Perry on May 11.

"It wouldn't have had a chance," said one lawmaker a few days ago. "The attack on that church gave some of us pause to reflect on just how degrading and hurtful such crimes can be — not just the highly publicized ones, but the everyday ones."

The legislation was named in honor of one of the most recent and heavily publicized victims of hate, James Byrd Jr. — the black man dragged to his death on a chain behind a pickup truck in east Texas in 1998.

One police source said the investigation has centered on members of the church choir. The group practiced that night until about 10:20 p.m. The couple who reported seeing the black youth daubing paint on the building said they witnessed the vandalism between 10 p.m. and 10:30. White latex paint was used — possibly from that remaining from an office renovation project at the church, investigators said.

The Dallas Police Department has refused to release the content of the 911 telephone message in which the couple reported seeing the perpetrator. They did this several hours afterward, after seeing publicity about the vandalism in the media.

Meanwhile, the Rev. Zan Holmes, pastor of St. Luke, angrily rejected suggestions that somebody in his congregation had done the painting. "I consider that to be a worse attack than the attack of the painting, the defacing of the building, for people to deface our personalities, the integrity of this church," said Mr. Holmes. "We don't operate that way, never have, never will."

The minister, who for years has been the city's foremost arbiter and negotiator in racially sensitive matters, said he could not understand how the witnesses could have seen all they claimed to have seen. He said he found it questionable as to how "an unsuspecting person, and at night, could notice somebody painting this church — with their back turned to the freeway — and to be able to discern their color, age, what they were wearing, including their socks."

He said he welcomed the ongoing investigation. "If it turned out to be an individual in this church, that's an individual. It was no organized effort on our part," he said. High-profile black members of Mr. Holmes' church include Dallas Mayor Ron Kirk, Dallas County Commissioner John Wiley Price and state Rep. Helen Giddings.

Police said that no member of the church is suspected, but they also have no evidence to prove the vandalism was racially motivated. Sgt. Terry Martin, of the Dallas police intelligence unit, said the couple did not call police that night because they thought the youth had been painting as part of some sort of youth event at the church. Only after they saw heavy news coverage the next day did they think it important to report what they saw, the officer said.