



Hostility Against Churches

Supplemental Report – First Quarter 2023

by Arielle Del Turco, M.A.

On March 27, 2023, three children and three adults were killed in a shooting at The Covenant School, a private Christian school and a ministry of Covenant Presbyterian Church in Nashville, Tennessee. The assailant shot through glass side doors to access areas throughout the building, including the church office and the children’s ministry. Covenant released a statement that said, “Our community is heartbroken. We are grieving tremendous loss and are in shock coming out of the terror that shattered our school and church.”¹

Research conducted by Family Research Council (FRC) indicates that criminal acts against churches have been steadily on the rise for the past several years, and the first quarter of 2023 has continued the upward trend. The first three months of 2023 saw approximately three times the number of acts of hostility perpetrated against churches in the same timeframe last year.

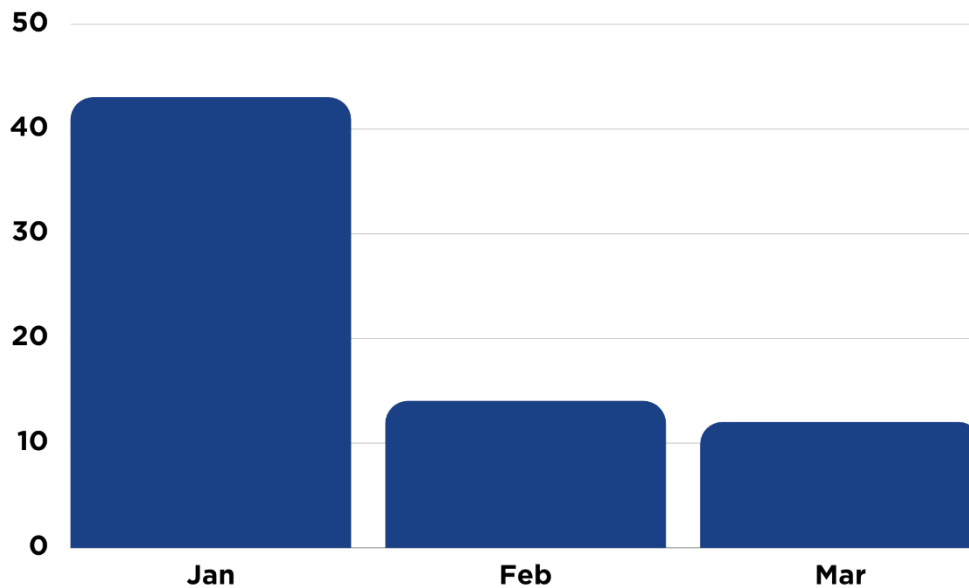
Acts of Hostility Continue to Be on the Rise

In December 2022, FRC released an extensive publication documenting a sharp rise in acts of hostility against churches in the United States. Analyzing publicly available data from the past five years, FRC found a total of 420 documented acts of hostility that occurred between January 2018 and September 2022. The types of acts identified include vandalism, arson, gun-related incidents, bomb threats, and

more. There also appeared to be an increase in frequency over the course of the reporting period. FRC’s report identified 137 acts of hostility against churches between January and September 2022. By comparison, there were 96 incidents in all 12 months of 2021. FRC also identified 54 incidents against churches in 2020, 83 in 2019, and 50 in 2018.

Since the launch of that report, FRC has continued to track acts of hostility against churches. The fourth quarter of 2022 saw an additional 54 incidents, for a total of 191 in 2022. That number is nearly double the previous year’s total of 96. In the first quarter of 2023, 69 incidents have already occurred. If this rate continues, 2023 will have the highest number of incidents of the six years FRC has tracked, continuing the upward trend. Most of the 2023 incidents occurred in January (43); 14 occurred in February, and 12 occurred in March.

Incidents per month, January-March 2023



Compared to the same timeframe in previous years, January through March of 2023 represents a significant increase in acts of hostility. In those same months, 2018 saw 15 acts of hostility against churches; 2019 saw 12; 2020 saw none; 2021 saw 14; and 2022 saw 24.

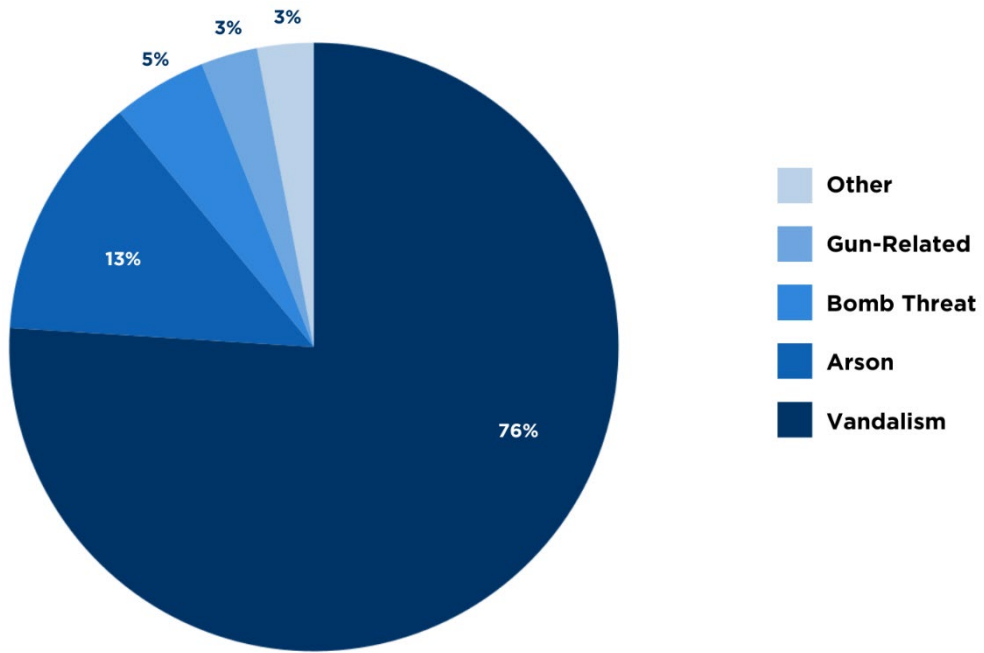
Criminal acts of vandalism and destruction of church property are symptomatic of a collapse in societal reverence and respect for houses of worship and religion—in this case, churches and Christianity. Some people appear increasingly comfortable lashing out against church buildings, pointing to a larger societal problem of marginalizing core Christian beliefs, including those that touch on hot-button political issues related to human dignity and sexuality.

The anger and division that increasingly characterize American society are endangering churches and eroding religious freedom. When congregants feel targeted by members of their communities or church buildings bear the brunt of outrage over political events, the very ability to live out one's faith safely is under attack. Violent or destructive incidents that interfere with an individual's lawful free exercise of religion at their house of worship present a significant nationwide challenge.

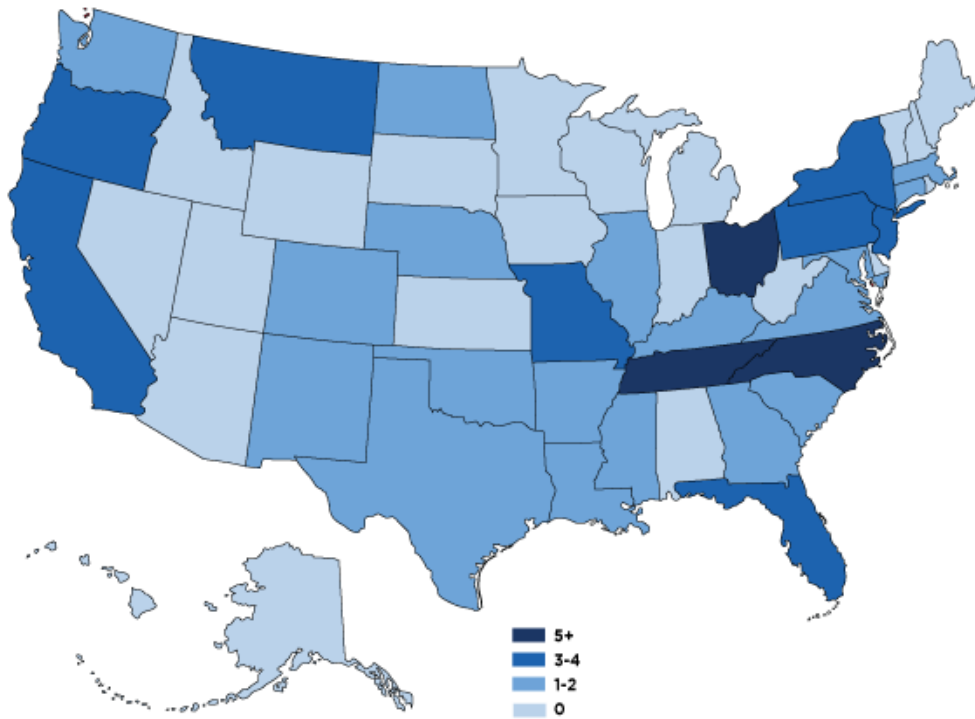
Analyzing Incidents from January to March of 2023

Most of the incidents covered in this supplemental report are acts of vandalism; FRC identified 53 occurrences of vandalism in the first quarter of 2023; 10 arson attacks, arson attempts, or fires with unknown causes; three gun-related incidents; three bomb threats; and two other incidences (assault, etc.). Three incidents fell into more than one category. Twenty-nine states experienced acts of hostility against churches. North Carolina had the most incidents, with seven. Ohio and Tennessee each had five. Florida, Missouri, and Pennsylvania each had four. No incidents were found in 21 states or the District of Columbia.

Types of incidents, January-March 2023



Incidents per state, January-March 2023



Vandalism

Acts of vandalism comprised the majority of reported acts of hostility against churches in the first three months of 2023. Some incidents appeared to have been committed by youth or persons struggling with mental illness. Some acts of vandalism against churches appeared to have been motivated by anger toward the church that was targeted. Several instances of vandalism also involved theft. Many acts of vandalism against churches were under criminal investigation; some were under investigation as hate crimes.²

Many of the acts of vandalism represented unexplained acts of destruction, such as an outdoor nativity scene being destroyed³ or rocks being thrown through a window.⁴ In Memphis, Tennessee, vandals broke into Holy Nation Church, smashed the stained-glass windows in the sanctuary, and stole equipment the church uses to broadcast its services online. The pastor explained the situation by pointing to larger problems facing youth struggling to grapple with their own emotional distress. “I hold no ill will,” Pastor Andrew Perpener Jr. stated. “These things are just a manifestation of a greater hurt.”⁵

Some of the incidents conveyed profound anger and aggression being directed toward churches. In Winston-Salem, North Carolina, vandals broke into the Dellabrook Presbyterian Church on Valentine’s Day and sprayed a fire extinguisher all over the church. The ventilation and air-conditioning system picked up the powder residue from the fire extinguisher and spread it throughout the building, causing around \$40,000 in damage. Luellen Curry, who works at the church, told a local news station, “I just don’t understand. I keep wondering why. It shows a great deal of anger. And were they angry at us? Were they angry at churches? Were they angry at God? I just don’t understand why someone would do this.”⁶

In February, vandals entered Jesus Is Alive World Center in Reading, Pennsylvania, and destroyed sound equipment, a podium, and 100-year-old stained-glass windows. They also damaged a piano and television, threw chairs around the building, and discharged a fire extinguisher, ruining the carpet. Still, Pastor Isaiah Adio told reporters, “We are not going to be frustrated, we will continue doing what we are doing for the body of Christ and our community.”⁷

In some acts of vandalism, hateful messages were left behind. At least one church was vandalized with Satanic symbols.⁸ A pro-life sign outside of a church was vandalized with the message “Womens body womens choice.”⁹ On March 3, vandals wrote “TRANS PWR” in black spray paint on the front of St. Joseph Catholic Church in Louisville, Kentucky. This incident occurred the day after the Kentucky House of Representatives passed a bill that would protect children from harmful gender-transition procedures.¹⁰

Arson, Arson Attempts, or Fires with Unknown Causes

From January to March of 2023, there were 10 instances of arson, attempted arson, or fires with unknown causes. Many of these acts were deeply disturbing. On January 3, Portland Korean Church, a vacant 117-year-old building in Portland, Oregon, was set on fire. The 27-year-old suspect, whose legal name is Cameron Storer but who identifies as female, claimed voices in Storer’s head threatened to “mutilate” Storer if Storer refused to burn the church down.¹¹ Goodwill Baptist Church, a historically black church in Austin, Texas, was set on fire on March 6 in what police believed to be arson, causing \$200,000 in damages.¹² In other instances, individuals attempted to set fire to crosses or statues that were outside church buildings.

Gun-Related Incidents

Three gun-related incidents occurred on church property in the first three months of 2023, including the shooting at The Covenant School. In one incident, two adults and two juveniles shot 50 rounds from 9mm pistols at a Mennonite church building in Versailles, Missouri; the property damage was charged as a hate crime.¹³ In another incident, a late-night shooting took place in the parking lot of the Praise Temple Baptist Church in Shreveport, Louisiana, sending four individuals to the hospital.¹⁴

Bomb Threat

FRC found three incidents of bomb threats against churches in the first three months of 2023. On February 19, a passerby noticed a pipe bomb outside St. Dominic Catholic Church in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. The Philadelphia Police Department's bomb squad removed the 18-inch device but did not tell reporters whether they believed the church had been targeted.¹⁵ On January 30, a suspect was charged with a felony after she threatened to blow up Gracelife Chapel near Pevely, Ohio. The suspect had reportedly issued multiple threats to a church employee, one time texting, "I will make your church go bye bye."¹⁶ Another incident involved a teenager calling in a false bomb threat to a church in Nashville.¹⁷

Other

Two incidents in the first three months of 2023 fell into the "other" category; one was a violent attack. On March 12, a man was arrested for stabbing someone at Crossfire Church in Springfield, Oregon. Church staff said the assailant had been attending the ministry and had never shown signs of violence before the assault. Staff chalked up the assailant's actions to drug use and expressed frustrations with

Oregon’s increasingly liberal drug laws, which they saw as contributing to substance abuse. The victim sustained non-life-threatening injuries to his head and neck. Pastor Aaron Taylor stated, “We are affected on a regular basis by the fentanyl crisis that is in our community and is hurting so many.” Yet, he insisted that he would not let the attack negatively impact the church’s ministry. “We’ll never screen people who come to church. Instead what we’ll do is have a very robust security and staff.”¹⁸

Conclusion

January of 2023 was a particularly intense month for acts of hostility against churches. Although the number of actions dropped in February and March. The first quarter of 2023 overall saw an unusually high number of acts of hostility, with 69 such incidents being documented. Our research indicates that number is more than the entirety of 2018, in which we identified only 50 incidents, or 2020, in which we identified 54. This steep increase is a cause for concern.

To learn more about FRC’s findings on acts of hostility against churches, check out our full publication released in December 2022 at [FRC.org/HostilityAgainstChurches](https://www.frc.org/HostilityAgainstChurches)

Arielle Del Turco, M.A., is Assistant Director of the Center for Religious Liberty at Family Research Council. A special thank you to Abigail Ferrara, Laura Grossberndt, and Chris Gacek for contributing to this report.

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³ Hannah Kliger, “Parish leaders, worshippers lament vandalism of nativity scene at Saint Nicholas of Tolentine in Queens,” CBS News New York, January 9, 2023, <https://www.cbsnews.com/newyork/news/parish-leaders-worshippers-lament-vandalism-of-nativity-scene-at-st-nicholas-of-tolentine-in-queens/>.

⁴ “Police Investigating Vandalism of Takoma Park Church,” Source of the Spring, January 9, 2023, <https://www.sourceofthespring.com/takoma-park-news/2802064/police-investigating-vandalism-of-takoma-park-church/>.

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⁶ Louie Tran, “It’s horrifying’: Winston-Salem church vandalized on Valentine’s Day and left with \$40K worth of damage,” WXII NBC 12, February 17, 2023, <https://www.wxii12.com/article/its-horrifying-winston-salem-church-vandalized-on-valentines-day-and-left-with-dollar40k-worth-of-damage/42942019>.

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⁹ Micaiah Bilger, “Abortion Activists Vandalize Catholic Church’s Pro-Life Banners,” Life News, January 30, 2023, <https://www.lifenews.com/2023/01/30/abortion-activists-vandalize-catholic-churchs-pro-life-banners/>.

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¹¹ Aaron Mesh, “Person Set Fire to Century-Old Portland Church on Orders From Voices in Her Head, Court Records Say,” Willamette Week, January 5, 2023, <https://www.wweek.com/news/2023/01/05/person-set-fire-to-century-old-portland-church-on-orders-from-voices-in-their-head-court-records-say/>.

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¹⁴ Greg Atoms, “Four Shots During Drive-By Shooting at Shreveport Church,” News Radio 710 KEEL, March 4, 2023, <https://710keel.com/four-shot-during-drive-by-shooting-at-shreveport-church/>.

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