**Beat: Politics**

# US Department of Justice releases information on church burning

**Freedom to practice the religion**

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**The Objective Review - Correspondent Joseph Kirk -** Jean-Claude Bridges pleaded guilty earlier this year to deliberately setting a church on fire and was sentenced this morning. “Mr. Bridges´ racial bias led him to commit the dangerous crime of arson,“ United States Attorney Timothy J. Heaphy said today.

Bridges, 18, of Henry County, Va., pleaded guilty to one count of destroying a religious property by fire. Prior to his guilty plea, the court granted a government motion to transfer Bridges to adult status for criminal prosecution. The defendant was 17-years-old when the criminal conduct occurred.

“The freedom to practice the religion that we choose in a safe environment without being subjected to hateful acts is among our nation´s most cherished rights,“ said Roy L. Austin, Jr., Deputy Assistant Attorney General of the Justice Department´s Civil Rights Division. “Anyone who violates this right will be prosecuted to the fullest extent of the law.“ ~U.S. Department of Justice

The Religious Freedom Restoration Act applies to all religions. The Free Exercise Clause of the First Amendment states that Congress shall not pass laws prohibiting the free exercise of religion.

the case record Reveals that at approximately 1:20 a.m., Bridges and another juvenile intentionally set fire to New Holy Deliverance Outreach Ministry. A predominantly African American congregation, located in Axton, Va. burned to the ground due to arson. Bridges admitted that he burned down the church because of the race, color and ethnic characteristics of its members.

The investigation of the case was conducted by the Henry County Department of Public Safety.
the Henry County Sheriff´s Office and the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives aided with the investigation. Assistant U.S. Attorney Thomas Cullen along with Trial Attorney Christopher Lomax of the Department of Justice´s Civil Rights Division, will prosecute the case for the United States.

Bridges was sentenced to serve two years in prison, two years of supervised release and ordered to pay $141,773.68 in restitution .

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