

Michigan Worshipers Targeted in Deadly Church Shooting and Arson; Four Dead, Eight Hurt

The assault during a memorial for late LDS leader Russell M. Nelson saw a gunman plow his pickup through church doors, fire into the congregation, and set the chapel ablaze. Police called it domestic terrorism amid rising threats to faith sites.

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Aerial view shows the LDS chapel in Grand Blanc Township engulfed in flames after a gunman rammed his pickup through the front doors, opened fire on worshippers, and set the building ablaze during Sunday services.

A quiet Sunday morning service at a suburban Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints chapel erupted into chaos on September 28 when a gunman rammed his pickup truck through the front

doors and unleashed a barrage of gunfire, killing four worshippers and wounding eight others before setting the building ablaze. The attack, which unfolded around 10:30 a.m. ET during a memorial gathering for the church's late president, Russell M. Nelson, who had died the previous day at age 101, drew a swift response from local police, who exchanged fire with the suspect and killed him on the scene.

Flames fueled by gasoline quickly engulfed the single-story structure on McCandlish Road, about 50 miles north of Detroit, causing a partial collapse and trapping potential victims inside as firefighters battled a five-alarm blaze. Grand Blanc Township Police Chief William Renye, addressing reporters in the afternoon, described the response time as under a minute, crediting two armed officers—one from the township force and another from the Michigan Department of Natural Resources—for neutralizing the threat by 10:33 a.m. “This was a targeted act of violence against a place of worship,” Renye said. The FBI and Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives quickly joined the investigation, classifying it as domestic terrorism amid a string of recent assaults on religious sites.

The suspect, identified by authorities as Thomas Jacob Sanford, 40, of nearby Burton, Michigan, was a Marine Corps veteran who had served in Iraq and received a Purple Heart, according to military records released later that evening. Witnesses reported Sanford's silver GMC pickup, adorned with two American flags in the rear, barreling through the chapel's entrance during sacrament meeting, scattering congregants who had gathered to honor Nelson's legacy.

“He drove right through the wall like it was paper,” said Tony Deck, 56, a neighbor who arrived shortly after with cases of water for first responders, only to find yellow tarps draped over bodies in the parking lot and thick smoke billowing from the roof. Inside, Sanford allegedly fired an assault rifle at fleeing parishioners in the foyer, striking at least 10 people, including two young children, per initial accounts from survivors.

The second counselor in the local bishopric reportedly returned fire, sustaining critical injuries but possibly slowing the gunman's advance. As emergency crews arrived, Sanford doused the interior with gasoline and ignited it, officials said, turning the chapel into an inferno that forced evacuations amid screams and the crackle of collapsing beams. By evening, two additional bodies had been recovered from the rubble, bringing the toll to four dead—three from gunshot wounds and one from fire-related injuries—while seven survivors remained in stable condition and one fought for life at a Flint-area hospital.

Federal investigators, led by acting FBI Special Agent in Charge Reuben C. Coleman, arrived within hours, combing the charred debris for evidence of motive. “The F.B.I. is investigating the shooting and fire as ‘an act of targeted violence,’” Coleman stated during a joint briefing with ATF Special Agent in Charge James Deir, who noted the use of gasoline as an accelerant.

Preliminary reports suggested Sanford harbored anti-Mormon sentiments, with online posts from his accounts referencing conspiracy theories labeling Latter-day Saints as “antichrist” figures, though authorities cautioned against speculation pending a full review of his devices and vehicle. The timing added a layer of poignancy: the service marked Nelson's passing, drawing an estimated 200 congregants to the modest brick building near a law firm and a Jehovah's Witnesses hall.

No manifesto was immediately found, but the attack echoed a June incident at another Michigan church and an August shooting at a Minneapolis Catholic Mass that claimed two children's lives, prompting renewed scrutiny of threats to houses of worship. The Gun Violence Archive tallied

this as the 324th mass shooting of 2025, noting a grim pattern where sacred spaces have become flashpoints.

Shocked families, community leaders and national figures condemned the violence in measured tones. Vice President JD Vance called it “awful” on social media, noting the Trump administration’s close monitoring, while Attorney General Pam Bondi announced FBI and ATF agents were en route, describing the act as “heartbreaking and chilling.” President Donald Trump, briefed on the “horrendous” events, offered federal resources in a statement from the White House.

Locally, Grand Blanc Community Schools announced closures for all 13 campuses on Monday, September 29, to allow for trauma support and investigation. Witnesses like Katelyn Kruse, 26, of nearby Fenton, recounted huddling with friends outside as flames roared: “I was afraid they were going to start shooting cars as we were leaving,” she told reporters, still clad in her church attire. Joanne Green, 75, and McKenna Harrington, 25, flanked her in a show of solidarity, their faces etched with disbelief at the violation of a space meant for solace.

The assault’s immediate aftermath revealed the fragility of routine worship in an era of heightened tensions. Fire crews from multiple departments contained the blaze by early afternoon, but the chapel—home to a tight-knit ward of about 150 families—suffered extensive damage, with its roof caved in and walls blackened. ATF agents sifted through the wreckage for shell casings and remnants of the accelerant, while counselors from the Red Cross set up in a nearby school gym to aid survivors grappling with what Renye called “extreme fear.”

Drone footage captured the eerie sight of the truck embedded in the facade, its flags tattered amid the soot. For the Latter-day Saint community, already mourning Nelson’s death, the loss compounded grief; church officials in Salt Lake City issued a statement expressing “deep sorrow” and committing resources for rebuilding. “Violence in a place of worship is a cowardly and criminal act,” tweeted FBI Director Kash Patel, echoing sentiments from across the political spectrum as lawmakers called for enhanced security grants for religious institutions.

In the hours following, as investigators pieced together timelines and motives, Grand Blanc—a bedroom community of 8,000 with tree-lined streets and a median income above the state average—reeled from the intrusion of horror into its daily rhythm. Preliminary ballistics confirmed the officers’ actions saved lives, with Renye praising their training: “They stopped what could have been far worse.” Yet questions lingered about warning signs, with neighbors describing Sanford as reclusive but unremarkable, his truck a familiar sight in Burton. The incident, unfolding just one day after Nelson’s passing, served as a stark reminder of vulnerabilities in faith communities nationwide, where incidents of hostility have risen from 50 in 2018 to over 400 in 2024, per advocacy groups.