

The Duluth police said they had found no evidence that hate or bias motivated the fire that destroyed the Adas Israel synagogue last week.



By **Mitch Smith**

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The police in northern Minnesota said on Sunday that they had a man in custody on suspicion of first-degree arson in connection with the fire that destroyed a Duluth synagogue last week. But the police said they had not found evidence to suggest that the crime was motivated by hatred or bias.

The fire, reported early in the morning on Sept. 9, tore through the 118-year-old Adas Israel Congregation synagogue near downtown Duluth. One firefighter was injured while combating the fire, which largely destroyed the building.

The police identified the suspect as Matthew J. Amiot, 36, a Duluth resident with an arrest record and no permanent address. He was being held without bail on Sunday, awaiting an initial court appearance.

The fire attracted wide attention in part because it came at a time when anti-Semitic crimes and rhetoric have been on the rise nationally.

“We are terrified: This isn’t the first attack against Jews recently,” said Sarah Rose, a journalist and author whose family helped found Adas Israel and who said she had visited the synagogue frequently as a child. “This is an act of intention, if not of bias, and we have every reason to believe there will be more.”

The fire brought outpourings of sympathy from across the country and beyond. Duluth firefighters, one of whom sustained a concussion, rushed to save Torahs and other religious objects from the lower sanctuary while smoke was still pouring out of the building.

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“It was just amazing what they did,” said Phillip Sher, a leader of the congregation. “The bravery of these men was just incredible.”

Adas Israel Congregation has been a hub for northeastern Minnesota’s small Jewish community for well over a century. Founded by Lithuanian immigrants in 1885, according to the Minnesota Historical Society, the congregation began building its synagogue near downtown Duluth in 1901. Mr. Sher said that the suspect, Mr. Amiot, had no known links to the congregation, which he estimated to have between 45 and 60 members.

“We’re not out for vengeance,” Mr. Sher said. “All I can find out of this event is sadness.” He said the congregation would hold services in various temporary locations over the next few weeks while it looked for a longer-term home.

At a news conference on Sunday announcing the arrest, city officials said investigators had gone door to door at nearby apartments to seek witnesses, and had reviewed hundreds of hours of surveillance video.

The fire started in a sukkah, a temporary structure erected outside the synagogue each year for the Sukkot celebration, and the flames quickly spread to the synagogue, officials said. Police officers and firefighters arrived within a few minutes of the first 911 call, they said, but by then the blaze was already spreading through the wood-frame building.

“Your loss is our loss, your pain is our pain,” Chief Mike Tusken of the Duluth police said at the news conference in remarks

addressed to the congregation. “We grieve with you, we pray with you and we have hope for healing in the days to come.”

The fire followed a wave of anti-Semitic crimes — including the killing of 11 people last year at a Pittsburgh synagogue — that the Anti-Defamation League said had reached alarmingly high levels. The federal Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives helped in the Duluth investigation, a standard practice for fires at religious sites. Shawn Krizaj, the city’s fire chief, said that no signs of accelerants were found at the scene.

Houses of worship of many faiths have been the scenes of crimes in recent years. A mosque in Bloomington, Minn., was bombed in 2017. A white supremacist murdered nine people at an African-American church in Charleston, S.C., in 2015. Six people were killed at a Sikh temple in Wisconsin in 2012.

“We understand that our Jewish community feels uneasy in this current political and social environment,” Steve Hunegs, the executive director of the Jewish Community Relations Council of Minnesota and the Dakotas, said in a statement on Sunday. “The image of a house of worship ablaze is a searing reminder of the challenges we face with rising anti-Semitism and bigotry in this country.”

Minnesota politicians from both parties, including Senator Amy Klobuchar, Representative Pete Stauber and Gov. Tim Walz, sent messages of support on social media after the fire.

“Grateful that a suspect has been arrested in the Adas Israel fire,” Senator Tina Smith of Minnesota said Sunday on Twitter. “Now justice must be done.”



Prosecutors had not filed formal charges against Mr. Amiot as of Sunday afternoon, and it was not clear whether he had a defense lawyer. Chief Tusken, who said officers arrested Mr. Amiot in downtown Duluth on Friday, declined to speak in detail about a possible motive for the fire.

“At this moment in time, there is no reason to believe this is a bias or hate crime,” said Chief Tusken, who added that “this may change as the investigation progresses.”

A formal complaint with more details about the crime would be released soon, perhaps as early as midweek, he said.

Mr. Sher, a lifelong member of Adas Israel, said plans for a permanent new synagogue would probably wait until after the long Minnesota winter. For now, he said, the congregation’s focus was on preparing for the Jewish High Holy Days, which begin later this month.

“True Judaism is in the heart,” Mr. Sher said. “It’s not in the building.”

Mitch Smith covers the Midwest and the Great Plains. Since joining The Times in 2014, he has written extensively about gun violence, oil pipelines, state-level politics and the national debate over police tactics. He is based in Chicago