

Your honor, I appreciate the opportunity to address the court on behalf of the congregation at First Presbyterian Church of Douglas, AZ.

May 22, 2023 started out as an ordinary Monday in the life of a small community of faith located in a small town on the border of Douglas, Arizona and Agua Prieta, Mexico. The financial secretary of the church went into the church office that morning to prepare the deposit of the offering from the day before, when the church had exercised its right to gather in worship, trusting that in the United States of America, they were free to do so. Another member went into the fellowship hall to drop off some food for the emergency food pantry. Neither of them dreamed that less than an hour later, an arsonist would enter the building and attempt to burn it down.

While the size of the membership of First Presbyterian is small, the impact of this congregation and their commitment to their faith has been very big. Their faith tells them that the Love of God is deep and wide. Their faith tells them that all people are equal in the eyes of God and that all are welcome to the Lord's table. Their faith tells them to feed the hungry, to give strength to the suffering, to give a voice to those whose voices often go unheard. Because of their faith, they were approached by law enforcement when humanitarian help was needed for migrants in crisis. Because of their faith they have provided help and hope and light to the surrounding communities of Douglas and Agua Prieta for over 120 years.

Their sanctuary was built one stone at a time, with stained glass windows hand-made by dedicated religious artists. This was a sanctuary that radiated beauty in a place where there are very few beautiful buildings. It gave inspiration to an area that has endured much economic deprivation and many challenges over the years.

We never dreamed that someone's hatred would try to destroy it.

But even more than beauty, it was a safe place. A harbor. I could tell you so many stories of people for whom this sanctuary was a refuge, including myself. Those who came with me today and those who shared some thoughts with you in the victims' impact statement.

But I want to share a story about one of our children. A little girl who has come to church all her life with her grandmother. She is a child whose life is devastatingly hard. For her this congregation is a family where she is accepted and loved and taught about right and wrong. For her, this church was her safe place.

One recent Sunday when we were gathered in a little classroom adjoining our destroyed building, we were talking with some visitors from Phoenix. They asked us how we were doing in recovering from the fire a year and a half later. We told them about the difficult process of coming up with a plan for our future and the frustrations of trying to find construction companies who could handle this kind of huge rebuilding project – and who were willing to travel to Douglas to do so. We told them about our dilemma of realizing that

our insurance policy would not cover the total costs of rebuilding this historic sanctuary and the fellowship hall, and the hard decisions we had had to make.

In the midst of this conversation, the little girl of whom I spoke, asked if she could share. She is 11 years old. She then proceeded to tell us with tears running down her face, how each day at her school, which is only a block away from the church, she goes out to the playground and she looks over at what's left of the church... 3 charred stone walls and a bell tower. She stands there and looks over and just feels really, really sad.

There is really no way to undo the harm that has been done by Mr. Ridenour's actions. Even if he could magically reconstruct a place that took years to create, the hurt in this child's heart will take years to heal. The fact that her safe refuge was violated by someone who believes his actions to be justified can never be undone.

But Your Honor, we would like Mr. Ridenour to know that his actions – as devastating as they have been to us – have not stopped our ministry. His actions have not changed our faith in a Lord of inclusive Love. In fact, we have only been strengthened in our trust in a God of goodness who can bring hope and light out of even the darkest of circumstances. We **will** have a building again, where we will **continue** to welcome anyone with a loving heart to share in our ministry. We will continue to provide safe harbor to those who need it most. We will continue to live our commitment to a Lord who reached out to everyone, no matter their gender, status, sexual identity, state of mind, wealth or poverty, health or illness.

We pray for him. We hope that – in the midst of the personal hell he has created for himself - he might one day see and accept the true love of God, which can transform even the most damaged and broken of us, and we pray that one day he might be set free of the hatred that drives him.

In the meantime, our ministry of Love will continue. We are not defeated.