

Department of Justice

Office of Public Affairs

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Friday, January 14, 2011

Two Men Plead Guilty to Federal Hate Crime Charge Related to Desecration of Synagogue and Churches in Modesto, California

WASHINGTON – Brian Lewis, 23, of Modesto, Calif., and Abel Mark Gonzalez, 23, of Morgan Hill, Calif., pleaded guilty today before U.S. District Judge Lawrence J. O'Neill to conspiring to violate the civil rights of congregants of Congregation Beth Shalom, a synagogue in Modesto, Calif.

According to court documents, on or about Feb. 2, 2006, Lewis, Gonzalez and a co-conspirator conspired to deface and damage the synagogue. Lewis and Gonzalez admitted that the men spray-painted anti-Semitic and neo-Nazi graffiti on the synagogue's exterior walls. Lewis and Gonzalez further admitted that the men spray-painted anti-Christian graffiti on the exterior walls of, and caused other damage to, Our Lady of Fatima Church and School and the Greek Orthodox Church of the Annunciation, both churches located in Modesto.

Lewis and Gonzalez each face a maximum sentence of 10 years in prison and a fine of \$250,000. A sentencing hearing has been set for April 8, 2011.

"Freedom of worship for all Americans is a constitutional right that the federal government will continue to protect through strong enforcement of our nation's civil rights laws," said Thomas E. Perez, Assistant Attorney General for the Civil Rights Division. "This prosecution sends a clear signal to all who may contemplate similar conduct that we will continue to seek justice for victims of hate crimes and will hold accountable those who threaten religious freedom."

U.S. Attorney for the Eastern District of California Benjamin B. Wagner said: "This country and this state are bastions of religious freedom, and our duty is to preserve and protect that liberty. No job is more important for this office than protecting the right to worship free from violence, fear, or intimidation. As this case indicates, together with the FBI and our state and local law enforcement allies, we will vigorously investigate and prosecute those who attack that right."

This case, which is ongoing, is being investigated by the Modesto Resident Agency of the FBI's Sacramento Field Office with assistance from the Modesto Police Department, and is being prosecuted by Assistant U.S. Attorney David Gappa of the U.S. Attorney's Office for the Eastern District of California and Civil Rights Division Trial Attorney Karen Ruckert Lopez.