

# NEW MEXICO PUBLIC REGULATION COMMISSION

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**NEWS RELEASE**

# Arson Arrest Made After Fire Burns Church in Rio Rancho

**SANTA FE** – A joint effort among investigators representing government agencies at the federal, state, county and municipal levels resulted in the successful arrest and filing of criminal charges of a suspected serial arsonist this week.

Agents with the federal Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms & Explosives (ATF) on Thursday, August 4, filed federal criminal charges against 23-year-old Gordon Schuler of Rio Rancho, N.M. According to a press release distributed by the Office of the United States Attorney, Schuler has been charged in connection with the fire that severely damaged the Peace Lutheran Church in Rio Rancho, causing extensive damage to the church.

According to the statement of probable cause filed in the U.S. District Court of New Mexico, just before 5 a.m., Monday, July 31, 2017, a Rio Rancho Fire Department crew observed and responded to a fire at the church. After extinguishing the fire, firefighters determined that the fire had caused extensive damage to the church's sanctuary and heavy smoke damage to the rest of the church.

ATF Special Agents, New Mexico State Fire Marshal's Office Investigators, and investigators with the Rio Rancho Fire and Police departments began sifting through the charred building, canvassing the area, speaking to neighbors, and looking for homes with surveillance cameras.

The Life Roots Center, a business located near the church, reported that an alarm was tripped just before 2:30 a.m. Surveillance footage from that time was reviewed, and the agents noted a man resembling Gordon Schuler walking around the adult care facility. The video reportedly recorded Schuler, who was

wearing a backpack and carrying a hammer at the time, walking through the courtyard of that facility earlier that same morning.

During their investigation, fire investigators located a backpack and hammer inside of the church that resembles the items shown to be in Schuler's possession in the surveillance video footage.

Thursday's criminal complaint states that investigators determined the fire at the church was purposely caused and the result of arson, and states that the church engages in interstate commerce by donating a percentage of its income to an ecclesiastic council based in Wisconsin.

Rio Rancho Police officials arrested Mr. Schuler on August 1, 2017, on an outstanding warrant for absconding from probation on a state conviction. Schuler was placed into state custody and will be transferred into federal custody to face the charge in the criminal complaint, according to the U.S. Attorney's Office.

If convicted on this latest criminal charge, Schuler faces a statutory penalty of not less than five years nor more than 20 years of imprisonment and a \$250,000 fine.

At the time of his arrest last week, Schuler was just starting his five years of probation. Schuler absconded after being released from jail just one week before, for violating probation.

Last year, a New Mexico State Fire Marshal Fire investigator assisted Rio Rancho Police and Fire personnel investigating a series of intentionally set structure fires over the course of a few weeks and in the same general area. The State Fire investigator with the help from Rio Rancho Police detectives compiled a criminal profile, which led to Schuler's arrest, and his interview of the young man led to an admission from the suspect.

Schuler signed a plea agreement less than five months ago – on March 7, 2017 – in Thirteenth Judicial District Court with a previous Assistant District Attorney. The ADA reduced the second degree felony charge of arson to third degree in that previous case, and the judge presiding over the case suspended all but one year of the nine years Schuler was facing. Schuler was granted presentence confinement credit of 195 days and was eligible for good time. He served 226 days total.

This case was investigated by the ATF office in Albuquerque, Rio Rancho Police Department, Rio Rancho Fire Department, Bernalillo County Fire Department, and the State Fire Marshal's Office of the New Mexico Public Regulation Commission. Assistant U.S. Attorney Paul H. Spiers is prosecuting the case.

New felony charges could be filed against Schuler as early as this week.

### **About the NMPRC**

*The NMPRC regulates public utilities, telecommunications companies and motor carriers operating in the State of New Mexico. It also administers the State Fire Marshal's Office, the New Mexico Firefighters Training Academy in Socorro, N.M., and the Pipeline Safety Bureau.*

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