

## CIVIL RIGHTS JOURNAL

## Churches still burning

By Bernice Powell Jackson



Bernice Powell Jackson

I guess I shouldn't have been surprised when even the "liberal" press began to start questioning the burnings of black churches. I guess once again my desperate desire that this nation begin to talk about and deal with the racism which is a part of life in America had outweighed my own cumulative life experience. Far too many Americans still are willing to deny what they see on videotapes, what they live in their own communities and what they know in their own hearts to be the case—racism is still alive and well in America.

Black churches are still burning in this nation, although it is no longer on the front pages (or back pages, for that matter) of our newspapers or on the nightly television news. But in late July and early August seven more churches burned: two in Arkansas, two in Alabama and one each in Mississippi, South Carolina and Texas. According to *USA Today*, which has done the most in depth and on-going coverage of the burnings, "Black churches in the South continue to burn at the same rapid rate that pushed the arsons to the top of the national agenda one month ago. The pace of the arsons - more than one a week - guarantees that 1996 will be the worst year for Black church arsons in this decade."

Nevertheless, the *Wall Street Journal* and *Atlantic Monthly* have implied in recent articles that the burnings have been used by the National Council of Churches to raise dollars for itself and that there is no real conspiracy of white supremacist groups and that therefore we should not be overly concerned about what is going on. Both of these assumptions are dangerous and both of them are wrong.

As the scope of the church fires began to be known in early 1996, the National Council of Churches, an ecumenical organization composed of 32 Protestant and Orthodox denominations, focused its efforts in reaching out to those churches which had been burned. It was only natural that these denominations work together rather than individually on this issue and they were joined by Catholics, Jews and Muslims.

The NCC also worked together with the Center for Democratic Renewal and the Center for Constitutional Rights to investigate the fires. They have found that there have been 75 arson attacks on black churches from January 1, 1995 through July 31, 1996, more than double the number (28) counted during the previous five years combined. While there have been a similar number of white churches burned during that time period, since African-Americans are only 12 percent of the population, proportionately four times as many black churches are burning.

In addition, they have documented case after case where there was spray-painting of racist graffiti, use of molotov cocktails and other incendiary devices, vandalism and targeting of churches with a history of strong advocacy for African-American rights, including death threats and racist insults by phone at night and by mail. At least 13 of the fires since January 1990 have taken place around Martin Luther King, Jr.'s birthday. They have found evidence of racist motivation in the majority of cases, with several clearly connected to white supremacist groups.

While no national conspiracy of white supremacist groups has yet to be found, if these are the acts of individual or small groups of racists is that less dangerous for race relations? Does that mean that the rest of us can relax, take a breath and go on with business as usual?

Finally, the NCC has indicated that about 85 percent of the funds they are receiving are being used for the restoration of the burned churches. The balance of the contributions are being used for programs to address racism and for administration of the funds. But, if donors indicate they want their contribution only used for rebuilding, the NCC is honoring the request. Some \$2 million has already been approved by its Grants Committee, on which I sit. Churches are being rebuilt, hymnals and Bibles are being replaced, pews and altars are being built.

But the NCC has also taken the position that it would be futile to re-build the churches and do nothing about combating the underlying causes. "We must take such a holistic approach lest we rebuild churches only to have them burn down again," said Dr. Joan Brown Campbell, General Secretary of the NCC.

Black churches are still burning and we still have work to do. We must re-build the churches and we must build a racism-free nation.

## POINT OF VIEW

## Acquiring black political power

By Dr. Conrad W. Worrill

1996 is a big political year in the United States, that culminates in the presidential elections in November.

And as the season nears, the question still facing the African Community in America is what are the best methods for us to achieve Black political power? I often remind readers of this column that "politics is the science of who gets what, when, where, and most important of all, how."

Since 1966, when Kwame Ture (formerly known as Stokely Carmichael) made his pronouncement that what African people in America needed to strive for was Black Power, the dynamics of Black politics in America have shifted drastically.

Thirty years later, there are more than 8,000 Black elected officials in the United States, including more than 40 congressmen and congresswoman, a U. S. Senator, more than 400 Black mayors and host of state senators and state representatives, and numerous local elected officials in a variety of electoral and appointed political positions. Most of these elected and appointed officials are Democrats.

With this number of elected, and appointed officials, the question must be raised that with just four years before the 21st century, do African people in America have political power to the extent that we can determine significantly, throughout the United States, "who gets what, when where, and most important of how?" The answer to this question is an obvious—No!

The call for Black Power in 1966 led to the organizing of the first Black Power Conference that was convened on Saturday, September 3, 1966 at the Rayburn House Office Building in Washington, D.C. The session was called by the late, great, Congressman Adam Clayton and was generally referred to as a National Planning Committee.

As a result of this first conference, several more were held in Newark, New Jersey in 1967; in Philadelphia in 1968 and the Fourth International Black Power Conference, held in Bermuda in 1969.

As an outgrowth of conferences, the Congress of African People Conference was called in the summer of 1970 in Atlanta, Ga. More than 3,000 people of African ancestry attended this meeting. It was here that a resolution was adopted that a political structure be established to create a National Black Political

Convention.

This historic First National Black Political Convention took place in Gary, Ind. in March of 1972. More than 8,000 Black people from every state participated in this historic gathering.

The follow-up created a structure called the National Black Political Assembly which was to continue permanently after the convention. Additionally, it was the aim of the Assembly "to develop a new Black Politics and organize the National Black Political Agenda" that was established at the convention.

The introduction of the 1972 Gary National Black Political Convention agenda stated some profound truths, of which we should be reminded as we prepare for the upcoming political season.

## TO BE EQUAL

## An ounce of prevention

By Hugh B. Price  
President

National Urban League

Here's a hypothesis: Those seeking to enter the job market of today who are well-prepared academically and socially have far brighter futures than those who lack the proper educational and social skills. Therefore, many, if not most of the children who grow up in poor inner-city neighborhoods will endure lives of grinding poverty and social isolation.

The concerted efforts to increase achievement standards in education and in the workplace provide conclusive evidence that the first part of this theorem will be proved true.

But the second part of it doesn't have to be. We can prevent that bleak forecast—for those individuals and for our nation—from happening if we follow that old adage: an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure. What we need to cure is not only the lack of "hard" skills and an unshakeable self-confidence of many poor youth in our inner cities.

We also need to cure the mistaken notion that because many youth in inner cities are having difficulty, none of the young people in these neighborhoods are striving to do well, and succeeding.

This belief—widely accepted, and decidedly wrong—is a significant problem because it obscures the truth that young people in these neighborhoods are indeed succeeding. And that, in turn, hampers the development of a broader

Firstly, it stated that "Here at Gary, let us never forget that while the times and the names and the parties have continually changed, one truth has faced us insistently, never changing: Both parties have betrayed us whenever their interest conflicted with ours (which was most of the time), and whenever our forces were unorganized and dependent, quiescent and compliant."

Continuing, it explained, "Nor should this be surprising, for by now we must know that the American political system, like all other white institutions in America, was designed to operate for the benefit of the white race: It was never meant to do anything else."

"So when we turn to a Black agenda for the seventies, we move in the truth of history, in the reality of the moment. We

move recognizing that no one else is going to represent our interest but ourselves. The society we seek cannot come unless Black people organize to advance its coming. We lift up a Black agenda recognizing that white America moves towards the abyss created by its own racist arrogance, misplaced priorities, rampant materialism, and ethical bankruptcy," the agenda continued.

As we prepare for November, we should keep these fundamental truths in our spirit as we continue to seek the acquisition of Black political power. We must also be reminded that in the Mission Statement of the Million Man March, we committed ourselves to "the follow-up development of an expanded Black political agenda and the holding of a

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understanding of what has worked and can work to give young people in these communities, and all of us, a brighter future. That is, it undermines efforts to prevent the problem from becoming more serious, thus making the cost of the cure all the more expensive in financial and human terms.

We in the Urban League movement intend to do as much as we can to change that. We take seriously our motto—"Our Children=Our Destiny." That is why on September 21 we at national headquarters in New York joined nearly 90 of our affiliates across the country to honor our youth who are excelling in school and striving

to better their communities.

Each of our affiliates, from Jacksonville, Florida to Gary, Indiana, to Los Angeles, California sponsored such activities as parades, picnics and award ceremonies, and panel discussions in which young people discuss their concerns with the media, elected officials and other community leaders. Our flagship event in New York, hosted by the New York Urban League, was held at the Martin Luther King, Jr. High School in Manhattan. This particular site couldn't be more appropriate, of course, because King exemplified the wondrous advances that can come when an individual's drive for achievement is wed to a commitment to serve the larger community, too.

We are not alone in this effort by any means. Schools and school systems, churches, fraternities and sororities, and myriad community organizations and businesses have joined with

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