

Anti-racism confab reveals racial divisions in S.C.

By Todd Burroughs
Special to Sentinel-Voice

A reporter came up to Rev. Patricia Lowman, assistant pastor of St. John's the Baptist Church in Eastover, while she looked at what remained of her church one August 1995 morning.

After several years of vandalism, including drive-by shootings, the firebombings of its roof and racist graffiti, done presumably by local white racists, the church had finally been burned to the ground.

Conference

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burned. (Many of the pastors told stories of racial harassment by white racists before their churches were burned to the ground.) And here in Columbia, the state capital, the flag of the Confederacy flies from the state house.

Two South Carolina Klan members have been indicted on federal charges for two of the state's church burnings.

Civil rights lawyers have sued the local Klan for conspiracy in its link to the church burnings. Local Klan leaders, denying any connection, have ironically made public statements against the burnings.

The NCC, an interdenom-inational group headquartered in New York City, took the lead on the church burning issue earlier this year. Jones and other NCC officials traveled the South this past summer, meeting with the victimized pastors and hearing their stories. The organization has raised more than \$7 million to help rebuild the burned churches, and is distributing grants to them.

After testifying in Washington, D.C., this past spring about what they had seen, the NCC, the CDR and other groups proposed the idea for a South Carolina march led by local organizers in October. A conference was called instead.

Local organizers told reporters that a march for the spring was still being considered.

As a result of its high visibility and leadership on this issue, the NCC and its allies have been attacked by several right-wing organizations, including the Institute on Religion and Democracy, a right-wing Washington, D.C. think tank that has in the past attacked church leaders who came out against the Persian Gulf War and the anti-apartheid movement.

Todd Burroughs, a doctoral student in the College of Journalism at the University of Maryland at College Park, recently completed a two-month stint at the Burned Churches Project of the National Council of Churches as a researcher/organizer.

Fair

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that's important. As companies got to diversify their workforce, they have found out that having a diverse workforce is important. We try to reach that and we do it through the community level and through our PR campaign, and through the help of people like Nevada Partners as well as the advertising we did on the various radio stations."

"I thought this job fair was great," said Glenda Jackson, a single mother looking for work in the casino industry. "It's much easier to find work at an event like this, than to go to each individual hotel."

As Rev. Lowman recalls, the reporter asked her who she thought was responsible.

"Weren't you here last year?" she asked him. "You tell me," she said.

Denial by blacks and whites seems present here in this primarily agricultural state.

It is part of the "New South," proud of its many black elected officials and historically black colleges and universities. But the Ku Klux Klan feels free to have public rallies, the Confederate flag flies from the

state house, and "The Redneck Shop," a store that sells white racist paraphernalia, has opened up for business in recent years.

And now, 27 black churches have burned in this state, more than any others in the South since 1991.

But some parishioners are (publicly) blaming Satan more than whites, and local law enforcement officials, who have arrested two white culprits for at least two of the burnings, have thus far treated the issues as isolated.

The state's governor, David Beasley, is an impediment to racial harmony, said those

interviewed. The Rev. Joe Darby, president of a local black clergy group, recalled how Beasley's 1994 election campaign used commercials aired on white radio stations claiming that elected him would stop "them" from taking away "our" flag.

When President Clinton came to the state this past summer to meet with the pastor of a burned church, Beasley stayed away, characterizing the visit as "politics." But Beasley's supporters remind detractor that he was the first governor of the eight Southern states victimized by the church burnings to set up a reward.

Beasley hosted a breakfast meeting with several black pastors at the recent "Emergency Conference on Racism" held here. After he left, some pastors and conference organizers said the flag is still an issue with them.

Other than white racism, another problem in South Carolina is the inability of the old civil rights guard to yield to a new generation with new ideas, said Alvin McEwen, the 25-year-old associate editor of *South Carolina Black News*, flagship newspaper of the *South Carolina Black Media Group*.

Instead of fighting for the rights of blacks, they are "living

off the civil rights movement," he said.

The National Council of Churches and other organizations involved in the issue have said that South Carolina's tolerance of racism has exacerbated problems.

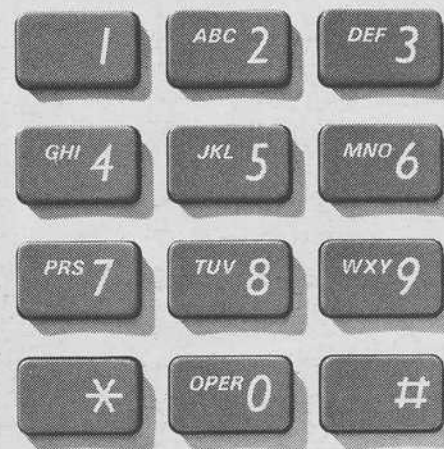
The church burnings go "to the core of the problem people don't like to discuss," said Darby.

All interviewed said the time for talk is over in South Carolina.

"We can only cry for so long," said Rev. Terrance G. Mackey Jr., pastor of Mt. Zion AME Church in Greelyville, one of the burned churches. "Enough is enough."

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