

Coming together in the heart of Dixie

Boligee rebuilds with help from its friends

Southwest of Tuscaloosa, in the heart of Alabama's old Greene County plantation country, Boligee and Eutaw are typical of the small Southern towns where blacks and whites go to separate schools and separate churches but where everyone says "Hi" in the Piggly Wiggly grocery store and waves hello as they speed past each other on the two-lane roads. But on December 22, 1995, and twice more in the dark of night last January 11, somebody burned three black Baptist churches to the ground.

If setting the fires was an attempt to wreck the hard-won peaceful coexistence between blacks and whites in and around Boligee, it has failed. Blacks and whites alike were horrified, and whites were quick to come to the aid of their black neighbors. Some immediately began raising money, and others have used or donated farm and business equipment to help haul away debris and



CHURCH FIRES

clear the land for rebuilding.

But as the investigation into the fires has dragged on with no leads, no suspects and no arrests, the frustration has begun "raising tensions around here, and I don't think it's doing the community any good," says catfish farmer and cattle rancher Thed Spree, 48, whose family

donated the land on which one of the burned churches, Mount Zion Baptist, stood for nearly 100 years. "Nobody black or white wants to believe anybody from around here could have done such a thing," says Charlie Means, 33, a long-distance trucker and senior deacon at Mount Zion, the first church to be burned. "Everybody wants whoever it was caught soon so this can be over with."

Residents variously blame "heathen crazies," drunken out-of-town hunters, intoxicated teens and whites retaliating for a black judge's conviction of two white youths who vandalized several other churches. A few whites even

claim church people burned the buildings themselves for the insurance money. (A fourth church, Jerusalem Baptist, also burned, but while investigators say that fire was suspicious, they blame it on an electrical problem.)

Cooperative effort. Despite the unease, the rebuilding is underway in an interracial and ecumenical spirit. Along with new sanctuaries, each new church will have a pastor's study, a fellowship hall, and a kitchen—areas none had before. Most cherished will be indoor baptismal pools, essential for a basic Baptist sacrament. "I never dreamed when I saw the ashes that we'd have a church again," says the Rev. Arthur Coleman, pastor of Mount Zoar Baptist Church.

But because Mount Zoar had almost no insurance or other resources, leaders of the Mennonite Disaster Service, based in Akron, Pa., decided to rebuild the church. Near the end of May, MDS, which usually assists at natural disasters, arrived with a fleet of mobile homes, including dormitories and a kitchen and dining area to feed 40 workers three meals a day. A semitrailer is brimming with tools. By late August, when the new church should be completed, several hundred Mennonite young people and adults will have donated time and labor.

Cornelius Driedger and his wife, Elsie, from Manitoba, will stay in Boligee until the work ends; he's overseeing the project and she's cooking for volunteers. Says Elsie Driedger: "It doesn't matter what race or what church, but that people are in need and you are able to help."

At the other burned churches, Mount Zion and Little Zion Baptist, volunteers recruited by Washington (D.C.) Quaker Workcamps are helping. The Quakers have raised money from Jews, Baptists, Episcopalians, Catholics and Presbyterians. The recruits are just as diverse, coming from the United States, Germany, Nicaragua, Chile, France, Switzerland and Lithuania. Already at work: a Tanzanian who came for three months and a professor and his wife from New Mexico. The diverse volunteers are a reminder that, sometimes, all that is necessary for evil to fail is for good people to do something. ■

BY JEANNYE THORNTON IN BOLIGEE

People interested in volunteering should contact Harold Confer at Alabama Workcamps, PO Box 95, Epes, AL 35460, (205) 652-4754. Fax: (205) 652-4764.



Partners. Elsie and Cornelius Driedger with the Rev. Arthur Coleman of Mount Zoar

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