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Quaker
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Today



Report from Boligee

Rebuilding Churches in Rural Alabama



by Kim Roberts

photos by Martha Tabor

Most of the time when I hear of an injustice I feel helpless. That was my initial reaction when I heard about the racially-motivated pattern of church arson that has been occurring in the U.S., mostly in the South. I was really angry, but I didn't think there was much I could do about it. But this time I was lucky. I heard about Washington Quaker Workcamps from a close friend, and I was able to use my anger for (literally) constructive purposes. I was given the opportunity to spend four days in Boligee, Alabama, where volunteers are rebuilding Baptist churches.

Washington Quaker Workcamps is working on two church sites: Mt. Zion and Little Zion. (Ironically, Mt. Zion is on flat land, and Little Zion, which is on a hilltop, is the larger church. Go figure.)

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Martha Tabor is a member of Friends Meeting of Washington (D.C.). Photos © 1996 Martha Tabor.

One Volunteer's Experience

Volunteers work alongside members of the congregations and local contractors. The efforts are led at Mt. Zion by Bobby Woolrich, who runs a contracting business, and at Little Zion by Willie Carter, who ministers to that congregation in addition to being in the building trade. Harold Confer, the Executive Director of Washington Quaker Workcamps, takes pride in pointing out that the volunteers come from varied religious backgrounds, what he called "God's people responding to God's people."

Washington Quaker Workcamps volunteers were housed in nearby Epes, Alabama, at the Federation of Southern Cooperatives, which Harold describes as "the old Black farmer's union." The Federation has been very supportive of Quaker efforts, and so have many local residents, but the Workcamps are insistent on the

rule that no one leave the center without permission or alone. When I arrived, Harold was quick to reemphasize his worry about hostility from local whites, the racists (and presumably xenophobes) he ominously referred to as "the enemy without."

Volunteers' lives are dominated by a bell, which rings at 6:30 a.m. to awaken everyone and again at 7 to summon everyone for breakfast. Volunteers then disperse for chores—we were divided into four groups whose assignments rotated between emergency (essentially a day off), dishes, food preparation, and housekeeping—until the bell rings again to gather the group for daily meeting for worship. Participants moved to do so were encouraged to speak out of the silence, but while I was there, only Harold and two other older Quaker men spoke. After meeting,

Harold would make announcements, and then the group would gather their tool belts and hard hats and head for the bus to take them to the work site. In the evening, a bell rings again for dinner and, when we had one, for an evening gathering.

Our group was very much dominated by ten high schoolers who arrived in one gregarious batch and stayed for two full weeks. Their energy and idealism were pitched very high. They are at the age where they are both children and adults. They gave our group the air of a summer camp, but they were serious too: they were, by and large, very hard workers, determined, possessing a stamina that far surpassed what I could muster.

The area where the churches are located is more rural than anyplace I've ever been. The few scattered buildings are mostly trailer homes and modest, single-floor frame houses. I was told by another volunteer that it is one of the poorest counties in the country. The landscape is low-lying flood plains, trisected by a railroad line and the Tenn-Tom Waterway (of which the Tombigbee River is a part). Downtown Epes looks all but abandoned, except for the BP gas station. The most notable building is a one-room wooden structure painted bright pink and covered by a faded red tin roof: the Nu-Image Style Shop, Clarence Bell, Proprietor. There's a clean, modern, one-room post office building, which appears to be the going-est proposition in town, and an auto repair shop that was closed. While I was investigating downtown, a train loaded with timber went past. The tracks run through the middle of town, with no gates or flashing lights separating the tracks from the road.

In between the scattered shacks and houses, flowering mimosas grow, mixed in with conifers. Long stretches of flat, open landscape extend in all directions, and buildings are few. Most residents of Epes and Boligee are African Americans. I was told upon arriving that of the ten churches in the county,

seven are white congregations and three are Black—and all three Black churches have burned, one last December and the other two in January. Locals tend to blame the arsonists on outsiders.

The few days I was there, the Little Zion Church crew was kept busy hanging roof shingles, pulling electrical wire, and putting up wall insulation (those fiberglass splinters get everywhere, and they are *itchy!*) It was extremely hot, in the high 90s, and humid as well.

The volunteers worked alongside a local crew, and I had some opportunity to talk with a number of area residents. Many of the people I spoke with had lived in the area all their lives. At midday, women from the Little Zion congregation showed up (some with children in tow) to bring lunch. We stood to bless the meal, starting with a gospel song ("Give Praise to Jesus"), followed by a long prayer of thanks from the pastor, Willie Carter.

The pastor's twin brother is a deacon of the church, and he was present at the building site too, as well as Deacon Smith and Deacon Bell, their wives, and other

women from the congregation. The food was simple and generous: fried chicken, hot dogs, potato chips, salad, and watermelon and angel food cake for dessert. There were two big coolers with soda pop.

I asked Willie Carter about the history of the congregation. Pastor Carter has skin the color of fudge and a big round belly. He has a warm smile and he looks you right in the eye as he talks. "It's about 250 years old, I'd guess." He told me the original congregation was given the land by a white landowner and they initially met under a brush arbor. After a number of years, that was replaced by a more permanent structure, a log cabin. Then, on that same spot, they built a wooden frame building. "I remember when they built that first frame church," he told me. "That was in my lifetime." The church building that burned was built in 1971, so they would have marked their 25th anniversary in that building this year, had it not been for the tragedy. True to tradition, the new church was being built in the same location as the first brush arbor.

The church sits atop a small hill, the road leading right up to the front doors. To one side of the church, a graveyard stretches along the hillside. Most graves are flush to the ground, topped by concrete slabs. Small headstones mark the family names: Johnson, Carter, Chiles, Hamilton, Croxton, Henry, Cook. A couple of headstones note military service (such as John Coley, 1892–1956, who served as a private in WW I). Many are marked with the phrase incised under their dates, "Gone But Not Forgotten."

Shade trees surround the building (blessed shade), and tables and water jugs were laid out under the trees for the workers. I drank a lot of water. After coming down off the roof after about an hour of shingling, I headed straight to the cooler where I downed several glasses in quick succession. One of my fellow workers, a former policeman from New Jersey named Kevin, noted the relish with which I was drinking water. He said, "Ah—the champagne of roofers."





Photos, pages 7-9: Volunteers, church members, and contractors work and relax together at the Little Zion Church site near Boligee, Alabama.

Kevin and Steve (a property manager from Ft. Lauderdale, Fla.) and Mark (a computer programmer from McLean, Va.) were really gung ho, working with hardly a break. I could not possibly keep up with their pace—but I contributed what I could.

On one break, I asked Willie Carter about the size of his congregation. “We’d have about 100 if everyone came,” he told me. “We have 65 active members.” Of the three churches that burned, this is the largest.

The old baptismal pool is by the shade trees on the side of the church opposite the graves. It is the only thing remaining from the original building, since it was separate from the church itself. “We used to do our baptisms at night,” Willie Carter told me.

“That must have been beautiful,” I responded.

He grinned. “Yes indeed. Beautiful.”

The new baptismal pool will be inside the church, behind the sanctuary. The tank, a prefab fiberglass structure, will be large enough to accommodate two staircases, one for entry and a second for exit, with room between for the traditional full-body immersion in waist-high water.

On either side of the baptistry, side rooms open out (the floor plan is shaped like a cross) with a men’s side and a women’s side for separate bathrooms, water fountains, and changing rooms for the choir. The men’s side also squeezes in

a small pastor’s study. Behind the baptistry will be the community room, and behind that, the kitchen.

Everyone was very open and friendly, especially considering the volunteers were changing on a weekly basis. One woman

told me the church burned “the Thursday behind the first Sunday in January.” But I got the strong sense that she wanted to talk about the future of their church rather than the tragedy of the past. Another woman, wanting to emphasize the positive, pointed out that no one would know about their churches at all if it hadn’t been for these fires. No concrete evidence of arson has been found, nor, at this point, is likely to be found.

The second church, Mt. Zion, was originally located on a site with no running water, and they have had to rebuild on a new site, approximately three miles from their original location, almost in the center of the town of Boligee, in order to get insurance coverage for the new building. It was evidently a big decision for the congregation, since grave sites would be left behind. The older site was in a swampy area not far from railroad tracks. The church has decided to maintain two sites, continuing to bury their dead in the old graveyard. When I visited the burn site of Mt. Zion, two men were mowing the grass around the graves.

This graveyard, like the one I visited at Little Zion, has concrete slabs topping each grave and masses of plastic flowers. In the woods just beyond the clearing, I could see the discards: a haphazard pile of faded and damaged plastic baskets and plastic flowers. Newer versions of the same were placed on the grave slabs them-



selves, with a couple spelling out "MOM" or "DAD" in flowers. Inscriptions named the dead as they were called in life: "Mamma Bessie" or "Joe" rather than the more formal versions of their names. I noted the inscription on the tomb of Rev. Isaac Judge Sr.: "I Have Fought a Good Fight."

The old church stood in the middle of these graves, and the outline of the foundation can still be clearly seen, showing it was a very small, one-room building. Two piles of bricks lean against a tree, most blackened on one side. An old, rusted oil tank is the most prominent remainder.

At the new Mt. Zion, they're building the church sanctuary about the same size as the old, but the entire building will be bigger—about double in size—because it will have bathrooms and a choir room, too. (I assume they used outhouses at the old site, although I didn't see any. The real mystery is how they performed baptisms with no running water. Did they bring the congregation to the Tombigbee River? The new site doesn't have an indoor pool like Little Zion Church will—so I couldn't figure out what their future plans are for this basic tenet of their faith.) Because the sanctuary is so tiny, the double-tiered altar is right in the middle of the new building, resting atop a smooth poured concrete floor.

The volunteers were hard at work when I arrived, hammering and pounding. Two volunteers with prior construction experience, Earl and Dwayne, were helping to instruct the less experienced volunteers. (Most people, like myself, had not done this kind of work before they came to Alabama.) I asked Molly, one of the high school students from Silver Spring, Md., what was the most memorable part of her experience. She said it wasn't the process of building but the people, particularly the other volunteers. "I've learned a lot about myself," she told me. "I've learned what I want to be like."

Three churches have been burned in the area around Boligee. Friends are working on two of these; the third, Mt. Zoar, is being rebuilt by the Mennonite Disaster Service. All three are expected to be completed in mid-to-late August.

Harold Confer told me that they had been swamped with media crews since the construction started on June 2, sometimes having as many as 30 or 40 people from the media show up in a single day. Because of all the media attention, they've had so many volunteers come forward that they are filled for the rest of the summer. They have actually had to turn

people away. Carol and Bob, two Quaker volunteers from New Mexico, talked to me at length about the intrusiveness of the media, particularly during Sunday church services. But I can't help but think that such attention is good—it helps educate us all. Many of the media are foreign: Japanese and British crews were filming while I was there.

Sunday was the highlight of my trip. I attended church services with two different congregations. I started with Bible study with Mt. Zion, which has set up temporary quarters in the small recreation center room of the Arrowood Public Housing complex in Boligee. Mt. Zion offers a full church service only on alternate Sundays, in between which Bible study meets.

The room was dressed up slightly to give it more of a church feel, with handwritten signs on the walls such as the Lord's Prayer and Psalm 28:7, "The Lord is my strength and my shield: my heart trusted in him and I am helped: therefore my heart greatly rejoiceth; and with my song will I praise him." A temporary pulpit constructed from plywood and covered in white paper leaned in one corner.

The Sunday lesson centered on "Faith and Wisdom." We read three biblical passages in unison, then Deacon Means or Deaconess Black led us through each a second time, explicating the meaning further. Interpretations were direct and simple, for the maximum comforting effect. (I didn't get the sense this was a group where one could express doubts—most of the explanations centered on giving yourself over wholly to the mystery and glory of God.)

One part of the lesson bothered me; at one point Deacon Means spoke about the loss of their church building. "Churches are still being burned, and we are still in danger," he said. He went on to extol the need for prayer, for being true to the teachings of Jesus, for giving up jealousy and gossip and bad habits. All this sounded fine to me, but he took it a step too far for my comfort when he suggested that the arson might have resulted from the personal failings of members of the congregation.

Two collections were taken, one for the congregation as a whole and one for the missions. We sang a few gospel songs as a group, the powerful voice of Deaconess Black sweeping up, booming out her soul. Hearing her lead us in "Work for Jesus" was truly a spiritual experience.

At a small church just down the road, I caught up with the congregation of Mt.

Zoar for my second church experience of the day, entering the service late. (Their service lasts approximately three hours, so I didn't feel as though I'd missed out by coming a little late.) This congregation is quite small also, and most congregants are either deacons or in the choir, leaving very few regular church members to face them from the pews. Those that were there sat mostly on the left side of the aisle; the right side consisted largely of the five visiting television crews: one each from Japan; New York; Charlotte, N.C.; CNN; and Washington, D.C. I'd heard a lot about the intrusiveness of the cameras on the previous Sunday from Quaker volunteers. Many were quite upset about the media interrupting what they thought was a solemn moment, but I'm not so sure. For one thing, I can't help but hope all this attention can provide a measure of protection to these small congregations—after all, the arsonists are still at large. I also think we "outsiders" perceive media attention very differently than the locals. What seems obtrusive to a white Quaker may be welcomed by an African American Baptist. I get this idea from two interactions I had with church members. When I asked Mrs. Henley what she thought of all the video cameras, she told me she really liked being photographed in church, because she knew she looked her best there. What had upset her was being photographed bringing lunch to the volunteers at the worksite. The first two times she came, she told me with embarrassment, she wasn't even wearing a dress. My other interaction that backs Mrs. Henley up came from Deaconess Black herself, who told me the media attention was a "blessing" because without it, "you and I wouldn't even know one another exists."

Much of the Mt. Zoar service consisted of a call-and-response plainsong in which deacons took turns leading a spontaneous chant about the joys of coming to Jesus while the congregation kept a constant, wordless singing underneath, a deep-throated wave of solid sound. There was no written text or music; it just seemed to bubble up from the core of each participant. The speakers extemporized in a natural, unprompted way, and the congregation improvised the music to go along. It was different than anything I'd ever seen or heard before, and I let it sweep over me like a wave.

There were other parts of the service as well: the pastor of Mt. Zion, Levi Pickens, an elderly man with only one leg, read some Scripture. A collection

plate was passed, and the treasurer promptly counted the offering and reported how much was taken in. The choir stood to sing in tight harmony, swaying and clapping to such songs as "The Old Time Way" and "Oh Lord, Stop By Here." Each song was led by a member of the choir who sang the main melody, answered by choruses by the entire choir. One song, "Jesus Is Alive and Well," was led by the head pastor's eleven-year-old son.

The head pastor is a disabled man who walks with a pronounced limp and has a speech impediment that made it difficult for me to understand him. He led the main part of the service, not reading from the Bible or from a prepared text but improvising on the theme "Get Hooked on Jesus." As his emotion for the subject built, he went from speaking to a sing-song chant, in which he added an extra syllable to the end of each phrase, an extra flourish. ("Because Jesus can help you-ah. He-ah knows the way-ah.") He spoke of the various things men and woman can get involved with as a substitute for religion. He also referred to a conversion experience of his own, telling us that he saw God for the first time in 1967. The longer he went on, the less I could understand his words, and the more the congregation responded, yelling out to him: "Yes! yes!" "That's right!" "Amen!" The sound built and built, mesmerizing, ecstatic, ancient. The words themselves didn't matter—the strength of the underlying emotion could not have been more clear.

We took communion as a group (grape juice and saltine crackers), and when it was over, we all came forward and passed down a receiving line, shaking hands with each deacon and pastor in turn. The chief pastor's wife gave me a big embrace.

Later that afternoon, members of the Mt. Zion congregation and the Mennonite volunteers came over for Sunday supper at the Federation Center. The food crew cooked up a huge turkey and stuffing, and our guests contributed side dishes and desserts—a veritable feast. After dinner, our high schoolers and the Mennonite high schoolers played volleyball (despite the fact that it was still quite hot) while another group of us stayed inside and sang spirituals together. (The Baptist style of singing—at the top of your lungs—differs a bit from the traditional Quaker way. It was a funny contrast between the groups. Quakers are seriously into silence. Baptists are into NOISE: a great wall of joyful sound.)



Members of Little Zion Church and workcamp volunteers share fellowship and music during Sunday Bible study.

Most volunteers left Sunday night, and a new crew started arriving Sunday and Monday. I spent my final morning in the office with Kate Dixon, the administrative coordinator, inputting new computer records and helping her return phone calls to potential donors, people who want to volunteer, and the media. They were getting approximately 100 phone calls a day, and Kate told me the phone calls were the most overwhelming part of her job.

Back at home in Washington, D.C., I started thinking again about the lack of evidence of arson in Boligee. Was evidence overlooked—either intentionally or inadvertently? I spoke to Inspector John Curry, a delightful man who's worked for the D.C. Fire Department for 22 years. I wanted to know what he could tell me about how arson is investigated. In Boligee, I had been told that there was no conclusive evidence and no suspects. He asked me how much of the buildings were left standing. From what I know, the churches had pretty much burned to the ground, what Inspector Curry called a "Black Hole." The fire at Little Zion was not even reported until the building was almost demolished. He told me that made any investigation extremely difficult. "The more we have to look at, the more we can tell," he said. He also said that unlike a city, where an inspector is always on duty, most small counties have a single fire marshall who works alone. A county investigator may not see a burned site for a day or two after the damage is done, which also makes the work more difficult.

In general, I found most people I met

in Boligee reluctant to speculate about what happened. Perhaps this is partly political expediency, but I think it's human nature too: congregants from Mt. Zion and Little Zion were much more interested, now that some time has passed, in talking about the future.

The burning of the churches is a great tragedy of our time. It seems that as soon as the U.S. makes some progress towards equal access, we allow ourselves to get complacent, and then we backslide. Churches are an obvious target because they are a base of community activity, and African American churches have a tradition, dating back to "Jim Crow" segregation, of social gospel ministry—that is, of using Christian tenets to justify political and civil action. During segregation, churches were the only institutions in the African American community that were not controlled by whites; because of this history, the church remains a mainstay of Black consciousness and Black idealism. I wish 30 or so churches didn't have to burn before we, as a country, started to pay attention. I hope the attention will unify those of us who are angry to speak out against complacency. Civil rights do not come easily. Justice does not come easily. It comes only as the result of constant, vigilant words and actions. We cannot allow ourselves to become complacent, to think our work is done. □

Donations to support rebuilding efforts can be mailed to the National Council of Churches, Room 880, 475 Riverside Drive, New York, NY 10115.