

# Church Arsons: The Real Story?

by Mark Tooley

**I**t was one of the biggest stories of 1996: Black churches were burning all across the South, the seeming victims of a nationwide upsurge in racial hatred. Tens of thousands of horrified Americans rushed to contribute money toward the reconstruction of black churches.

We now know there never was any firm evidence of a church-arson epidemic and *no evidence* of a racist conspiracy aimed at black churches. We also know that a significant chunk of the millions of dollars raised for church reconstruction never actually went for bricks and mortar.

It appears that the church-arson story, whose primary promoter was the National Council of Churches (NCC), was used—at least in part—as a fundraising tool to forestall the NCC's impending financial collapse.

At the time of the story's debut, the insurance industry estimated that 490 churches typically burn in an average year. Since an estimated 20 percent of all churches are predominantly black, it would be expected that close to 100 black churches would burn annually. Nobody then (or since) ever claimed that anywhere near 100 black churches burned in a single year.

This discrepancy did not deter the NCC, which successfully touted the church-arson story to the media in 1996. The NCC quickly established the Burned Churches Fund, which became the most successful fundraising effort for burned churches. The fund included not only the NCC's 30-plus Protestant denominations but also the U.S. Catholic Conference and Jewish groups.

The Burned Churches Fund was fantastically successful, raising over \$10.8 million in cash, along with at least \$3.4 million more in in-kind donations. But of the \$10.8 million, only \$6.6 million can be accounted for in grants for church construction. The NCC has not fully explained what happened to the remaining \$4.2 million.

In late 1999, when the Burned Churches Fund was shut down, the NCC's own auditor questioned the transfer of the remaining \$330,000 to the NCC's general administration. The NCC has been wracked by deficit spending for years. In

1997, it suffered a \$1.6 million deficit; in 1998, it endured a \$1.5 million loss. Last year, when the Burned Churches Fund's fundraising had virtually come to a halt, the NCC fell short nearly \$4 million, precipitating a major reorganization for America's oldest and largest ecumenical organization. In just a few years, the NCC's reserves (once \$15 million) have been spent down to three million dollars.

The NCC had originally claimed that 15 percent of the Burned Churches Fund would go toward administration and programs to combat the "root causes" of racism. This provision set off fears among conservative critics that church-reconstruction money would fund left-wing political activities. They were right: Some did. But in the end, most of the rerouted money seems to have gone toward a far more banal activity: propping up the NCC's failing administrative infrastructure.

Including in-kind assistance—mostly construction materials—the fund raised about \$14.2 million; 15 percent would be \$2.4 million. This contrasts with the \$4.2 million that appears to have been spent on non-construction activities, or about 38 percent of the cash raised.

Last year, NCC General Secretary Joan Brown Campbell, who had been the Burned Churches Fund's chief cheerleader, retired under a cloud amid growing deficits and financial upheaval. The NCC's largest member, the United Methodist Church, even briefly cut off its funding in an effort to compel the NCC to repair its tattered finances and clean up its books. Over the last year, several of the largest member denominations have been asked to help with the NCC's multimillion-dollar bailout.

Still trying to repair the damage, NCC General Secretary Bob Edgar is cutting 17 positions from its staff of 64, and he has proposed dissolving the NCC in favor of a larger ecumenical umbrella that would include evangelicals and Roman Catholics. Some NCC insiders have privately raised the possibility that the NCC will collapse in the next year or two. That collapse might have happened several years ago if it weren't for the money raised for the Burned Churches Fund.

Although some money from the Burned Churches Fund was to have been spent on anti-racism programs, administration appears to have eaten up the bulk of the money. The NCC had promised a series of anti-racism conferences around the country. Only a few

were held, drawing small crowds. ' date, the NCC has refused to conduct audit of the Burned Churches Fund. final budget report was given to the NCC's General Assembly last year, but accounted for only \$6.4 million in grants for church reconstruction. It made no mention of the \$3.4 million in in-kind gifts, nor of the \$2.6 million apparently spent on overhead and political action.

Meanwhile, the NCC's incendiary claims about black church arsons continue to be undermined by more responsible documentation. In its 2000 annual report, the National Church Arson Task Force found that most churches suffering arson have been white, not black. And no more than ten percent of those arrested for arson have shown enough evidence of racial motivation to merit prosecution for hate crimes.

In a more comprehensive report on overall numbers, the National Fire Protection Association (NFPA) estimates that church arsons increased from 450 in 1995 to 570 in 1996. (The NFPA does not analyze the racial composition of burned churches.) The increase took place within an overall *decrease* in church arsons over the last 20 years. The number for 1996 is in fact identical to the number of church arsons estimated to have occurred in 1993. And arsons for each of the 12 preceding years were even higher, decreasing from a high of 1,320 in 1981. In 1997, the last year for which an estimate has been made, the NFPA believes there were 390 arsons, a continuation of the downward trend.

The advocates of the church-arson story claim the upswing in attacks on black churches began in the early 1990's—a claim that the NFPA's report would seem to refute. The only annual increase over the last 20 years in overall church arsons occurred in 1996, when the media hype began. It is not a stretch to speculate that copycat crimes could be the explanation.

The federal task force, along with some media outlets, has reported that the most prolific church arsonist over the last five years has not been a racist but a practicing Satanist. Jay Scott Ballinger pleaded guilty in July 2000 to torching 26 churches in at least eight states between 1994 and 1999. He and his girlfriend have claimed responsibility for attacks on 50 churches. So far, there is no word from the NCC or other church groups about initiating any programs against the followers of Satan, who apparently are not a concern to them.

## EDUCATION

### A Confederacy of Dunces

by Philip Jenkins

The task force claims to have participated in the conviction of 305 defendants connected to 224 arsons or bombings. As the task force points out in a news release, his arrest rate of 36.2 percent is more than twice the national average for arson cases. About one-third of the 948 arsons tracked by the task force since 1995 involved black churches. But the task force does not claim to have a complete list of church arsons. It is probable that churches suspecting a racist motivation were more likely to report their losses to the task force than ones that suspect mundane vandalism.

Even in the South, there is no evidence from the task force that black churches were more vulnerable than white churches. According to the task force, 44 percent of church arsons in the South were at black churches, and 56 percent were at white churches. But approximately 40 percent of Southern churches are predominantly black.

Of the 136 people arrested for arsons at black churches, 85 were white, 50 were black, and one was Hispanic. Thirty-seven whites were charged with hate crimes because there was evidence of a racial motivation for their attack upon black churches. Only six of those 37 had ties to an organized hate group. The majority of church arsonists of all races seem to have been motivated by pyromania, vandalism, burglary, or insurance fraud.

It's hard to call the church-arson story of 1996 a complete fraud. Yes, black churches were burned and continue to burn. And yes, some arsonists have been motivated by racial hatred. But there is no compelling evidence to show that black churches were any more vulnerable to attack over the last decade than non-black churches.

The arson story was created, in part, by a failing church group trying to revive its sagging political and financial fortunes. But the NCC remains on the brink of collapse. One of its final legacies may be the creation of a myth that needlessly incited racial fears and raised millions of dollars under false pretenses.

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The death of a social movement is an instructive and sobering phenomenon. After years of greatness and influence, an idea eventually sickens and dies, until its adherents are reduced to a pathetic handful. Somewhere in history, there must have lived the last Albigensian, the last Ranter, the last native practitioner of ancient Egyptian religion. Somewhere in the not-too-distant future, this select band of ultimate diehards will be joined by yet another, when Marxism breathes its last. And while I do not know the name of the last Marxist, I can, with some confidence, identify the profession of this heroic loser: He or she will unquestionably teach humanities at an American university—and almost certainly in the history department.

Academic historians rarely make much impact on the wider world, which explains why the public at large generally pays so little attention to their weird and wonderful tribal practices. Over the last year or two, however, historians have ventured beyond the forest clearing and into public view, and the sight has been something to behold. I suppose the new age started in the mid-1990's with the controversy over the Smithsonian's scheme for a revisionist exhibit of the *Enola Gay*, which condemned the U.S. decision to drop the atomic bomb. Crucial to the controversy was the exhibit's insanely inaccurate projection of the number of casualties the Allies were likely to incur in an invasion of Japan. The Smithsonian said the figure for American dead would be "only" about 30,000, while most competent scholars suggested figures closer to a half-million. Though the exhibit was (very properly) closed down, the affair lingers in liberal mythology as a victory by ignorant racist yahoos over sound scholarship.

Shortly afterward, the once-respected scholar John Hope Franklin agreed to chair President Clinton's ludicrous inquiry into American race relations, which was deputed to explore any av-

enues whatever, as long as they placed enough emphasis on white guilt and provided ammunition for expanding affirmative-action policies. (You remember the "National Dialogue.") Then, vast numbers of historians chose to sign pro-Clinton petitions during the impeachment crisis, all basically swearing to assertions about the origins of impeachment that were contrary to fact. In 2000, the Organization of American Historians (OAH) went into a spasm of New Left revivalism when it turned out that the group had chosen to hold its annual convention at the Adam's Mark Hotel in St. Louis, although the hotel chain was under attack over dubious charges concerning civil-rights violations.

The 2000 election really brought the professors out of the woodwork when Princeton professor Sean Wilentz organized breathless anti-Bush petitions that even middle-of-the-road liberal media thought hysterical. (The fate of American democracy allegedly stood or fell on whether Florida's Palm Beach County was allowed to vote again, presumably until a Democratic majority was secured.) Most recently (in January), almost 500 historians signed a petition shrieking about the Bush victory and complaining that the majority on the U.S. Supreme Court "acted as it did in order to install a Republican president and to expand its political position on the Court." The historians professed themselves "outraged and saddened at this wound inflicted upon American democracy." The letter was signed by some of the biggest names in the field, including Lizabeth Cohen of Harvard, Todd Gitlin of New York University, David Brion Davis of Yale, George Fredrickson of Stanford, and—of course—the ineffable Wilentz. Incidentally, all of those named are not only solid historians but can actually write very well, and, presumably, can read.

Several observations come to mind about these eruptions: Most obviously, the fact that historians can make such screaming misstatements about a well-known contemporary event casts an utterly damning light on their critical abilities to explore the remoter past. All the readers of the election protests lived through the events concerned and have at least as much knowledge of what went on as the professors. Wilentz and his merry men are not claiming that they had personal access to secret documents from the World League of Racists, Homophobes, and Other Bad People, order-