

Subversive
Fires of Bigotry

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By Helen Dewar
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SOUTH HILL, Va. — The Rev. M. Raymond Turner, pastor of the South Hill Methodist Church, returned home one evening early this month to find a note reading, "One down, one to go—get it?"

Although anonymous notes were nothing new to the ministers of this small southern Virginia town, Mr. Turner was bewildered about the meaning of this one.

So he called a friend, the Rev. Philip E. Weeks, who offered an explanation: Mr. Weeks had announced his resignation the night before as rector of All Saints Episcopal Church.

If there were any doubt left, it was erased four days later when a fire broke out in the basement of the Methodist parsonage.

The parsonage is next door to Mr. Weeks's Episcopal Church. The church had been extensively damaged in a fire of mysterious origin only two weeks before.

Within a week, the Virginia Fire Marshal's office confirmed what the ministers had feared.

Both blazes were the work of arsonists.

Now the small Episcopal Church stands vacant, its interior burned so badly that it can't be used for worship and its minister bound for a new parish in West Virginia.

Pastor Commutes

The modest Methodist parsonage next door is vacant, too. Mr. Turner has temporarily moved his family to another community, from which he commutes when needed at South Hill. Residents of South Hill, from the

mayor on down, are reluctant to talk about the ordeal of intimidation and harassment—with overtones of racial and religious bigotry—that its leading clergymen have been living with for more than a year now.

This chronology was pieced together from people who were willing to tell what they knew, so long as their names weren't used:

In late fall last year the ministers of four major Protestant churches — Episcopal, Methodist, Presbyterian and Baptist—decided to hold an interdenominational Thanksgiving service and invited the local Catholic priest and his congregation to participate.

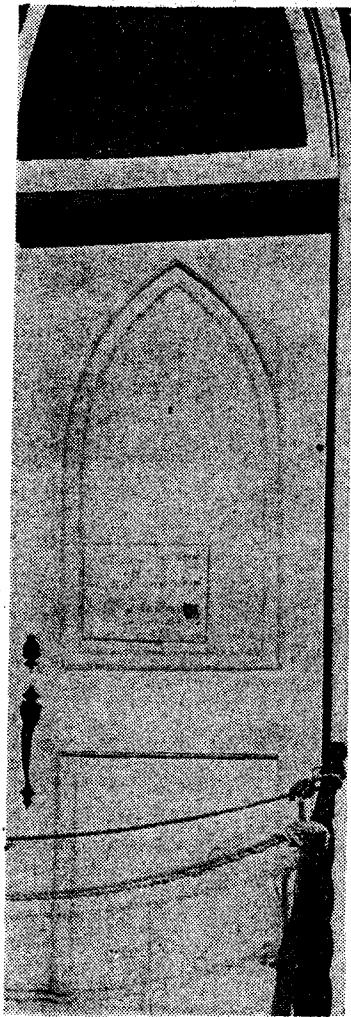
The Catholic congregation had one Negro member. The Protestant churches were all white.

Shortly after the service was announced in the local newspaper, Mr. Turner, at whose church the service was to be held, started receiving anonymous notes and phone calls.

Late one night an anonymous caller suggested that the minister go look at his study. Joined by other clergymen and a State policeman, Mr. Turner found the curtains torn, ink on the walls and a scrawled message reading: "Forgive us, Father (the word 'Catholic' was written in as an apparent afterthought, we know not what we do."

All four Protestant ministers immediately went on radio, with time donated by the local station, to denounce the act and reaffirm their plans to hold the interchurch service.

The service was held as scheduled on Thanksgiving eve, under police surveillance and without incident. It drew a surprisingly large crowd of nearly 500 persons.



Episcopal Church is closed because of damage from fire.



Photos by Bob Burchette—The Washington Post

H. J. Carlos of Crewe, Va., pulls away fire-damaged covering from altar of All Saints Episcopal.

Engulf 2 Virginia Ministers

The following Sunday Mr. Turner found mustard and catsup spilled on the carpet in front of the altar in his church. A denunciatory note was left behind.

Except for some mysterious calls received by the ministers, there were no further incidents until April, when the death of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. brought the Protestant ministers together again in a plan for a memorial service at a local Negro church.

This time the ministers escaped harassment, but others did not. Three grocery stores that closed in observance of Dr. King's funeral were fired upon. Later the home of a Negro family, with two people asleep upstairs, was set afire.

One Meeting

The next month the ministers organized an interracial, interdenominational committee under the direction of a church layman. It held one meeting and was never reconvened.

Later in the summer the ministers became involved in efforts to ease the community anxiety that was expected in the wake of Federal court action to speed the pace of school desegregation in Mecklenburg County where South Hill lies. The "freedom-of-choice" assignment plan used by Mecklenburg County appeared to be doomed and, along with it, the County's days of token desegregation.

Mecklenburg lies in Virginia's "Black Belt," and, like many other counties in the area, has a predominantly Negro public school enrollment. There is already one all-white private academy in Mecklenburg and another is planned. Public school supporters look apprehensively to nearby Prince Edward County, which has remained segregated after years of civil rights efforts under a public school system attended by Negroes and private school system attended by whites.

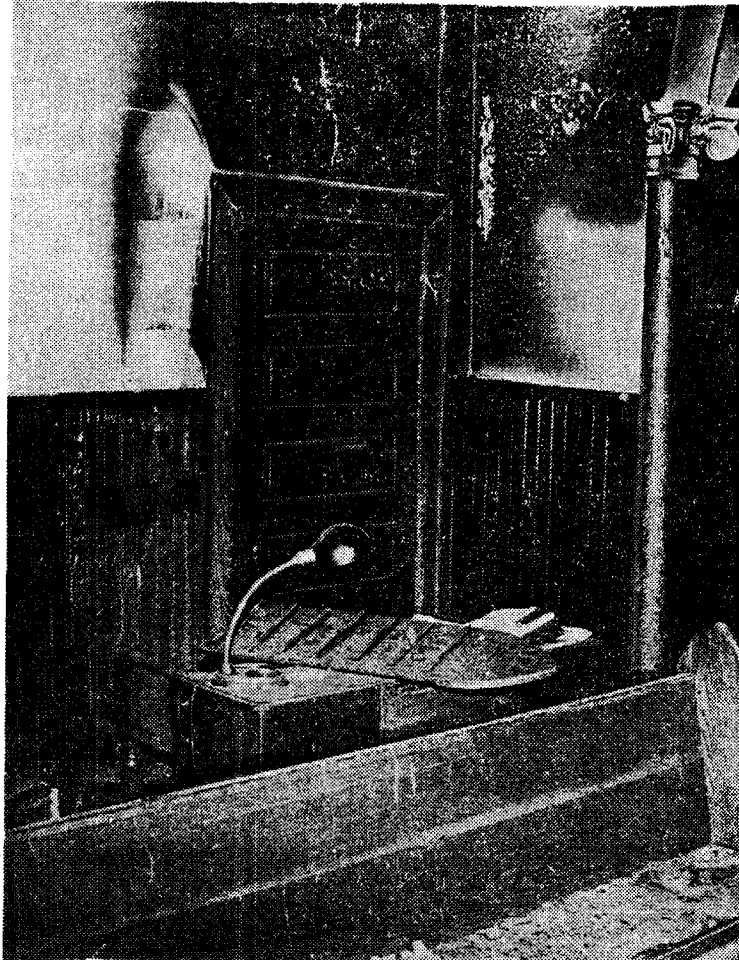
About this time Mr. Turner again began to receive anonymous notes. And on Oct. 31, the day after the Episcopal Church held an integrated church women's meeting, Mr. Weeks received the first of three notes.

The first note was primarily political in tone, apparently aimed at the fact that Mr. Weeks had a Nixon sticker on his car. The second and third were more openly racial in nature. The third note carried threatening comments about Mr. Weeks' wife and ended with the warning, "You've got to go dead or alive."

Early in the morning after he received the last note, Mr. Weeks was awakened by a call from Mr. Turner, who told him the Episcopal Church was on fire.

The blaze, apparently started in the sacristy, destroyed the organ and church vestments and did extensive damage to the sanctuary.

Two weeks later, Mr. Turner was



View from altar toward door of sacristy, where fire began.

about to go to bed when his wife, who was in the kitchen at the time, saw smoke curling up through the floor boards. Firemen had to break through the locked basement door to extinguish the blaze.

During the period between the two fires, Mrs. Turner had planned to honor the local high school football

team at a church service, after which the group—which was integrated—was to go to Petersburg to see a special football movie. There was opposition and the event fell through.

The anonymous notes have been turned over to the FBI, and the State Fire Marshal has pledged to continue his investigation of the case "until we have exhausted every lead."

Few Answers

But so far there appear to be few answers to the many questions that haunt the town and its clergy. Was it all a bizarre and frightening series of unrelated events? Was one person responsible, or several, or many? How and why did it all start? And where will it end?

Although friends of Mr. Turner say they're not sure whether he will remain in South Hill, Mr. Week's plans are irrevocable. He had been planning to leave for some time, having built the small church up from a mission to a self-supporting parish and feeling a desire now to move on to larger responsibilities. But he might have stayed on to help rebuild the church, he has indicated, had he not feared for

the safety of his wife and two young children.

South Hill is an outwardly placid town of about 4500 persons lying along U.S. Rte. 1 not far from the North Carolina border—a community that has prided itself on its civic moderation and Southern hospitality.

The Ku Klux Klan has been active in the area, but the town has taken several steps to keep it at bay. In addition to official acts, including efforts to restrict Klan parades, and posters local people stopped renting their land to the Klan for rallies.

Like most small towns, South Hill buzzes inwardly with talk. But it is reluctant to discuss its problems with outsiders.

"It won't help any to talk about it," said Mayor H. S. Montgomery. "It's potentially a dangerous situation.

Several people interviewed during a trip to the town earlier this month talking only after assurances of anonymity were given, suggested that fear is at the heart of South Hill's problem.

"If ever the fear is broken, the sickness will die of starvation," said one church leader.