

Portland  
Observer  
**Metro**

# Volunteers rebuild burned churches, help promote interracial harmony

Over the past four years, more than 1,800 volunteers have helped to rebuild 14 African-American churches that were destroyed in an extraordinary rash of racially motivated arson attacks across the country during the 1990s.

"We have to stand up against acts of terrorism," said Jim Leamon, a volunteer from Verona, N.J., who helped to rebuild the Rice Chapel AME Zion Church in Buffalo, S.C., last year. "This church family has been hurt and it takes a partnership effort to heal the hurt."

The reconstructed churches, most of which are the center of community as well as spiritual life in rural areas of the southeast, were reconstructed by volunteers organized by the Unitarian Universalist Service Committee, a nonsectarian, human rights organization based in Cambridge, Mass.

Dr. Volora Washington, executive director of UUSC, said the volunteer workcamps bring together people of all cultural and social backgrounds who want to take a stand against racism while helping to promote understanding and rebuild communities as well as places of worship.

"This had been a truly great and rewarding experience. I got to help others and show that love prevails over hate. This was an experience full of love," said Emily Eisenberg, of McLean, Va., who was among 236 volunteers who helped rebuild the Spring Hill AME Zion Church in Dillon, S.C.

The Rev. Robert Perry, pastor of Rice's Chapel in Buffalo, S.C., said the new church was rebuilt at a cost of about \$260,000, but the cost to the church was reduced by 40 percent because of the 6,000 hours of volunteer labor.



Dr. Washington said the workcamps have attracted people as young as 12 and as old as 81 who have attested that the experience has changed their lives and has made them even more sensitive to issues of social justice.

Moreover, many individuals and groups have returned for a second or third church rebuilding project, and some have made it part of a more formal learning experience. For example:

Bob Nakamaru, of Davenport, Iowa, a sociology professor at Black Hawk College in Moline, Ill. has organized high school students from his Unitarian Universalist church to participate in church rebuilding workcamps for the past three years. "Our youth have been studying black history and attending black churches," he said. "It was time to quit studying and get out and do something."



Tim McCarthy, a former professor at Columbia University in New York City, organized groups of 25 undergraduates to participate in "alternative spring break" workcamps in South Carolina for the past two years. Now a professor at Harvard University in Cambridge, he is developing a new course, "Race, Justice and the American South," and is working with the Service Committee to make participation in a church rebuilding workcamp the "centerpiece of the course."

McCarthy said the church

rebuilding workcamps have always been a valuable experience for the students, as well as an opportunity to make a moral statement against racism. He recalled that when he arrived in Gadsden, S.C., in March 1998 with a group of Columbia students, leaders of the South Richland Bible Way Church were nervous about how the volunteers would be accepted. "The community was really struggling with the issue. It was difficult for them to accept the idea of white people coming in to rebuild their church that white people had burned down."

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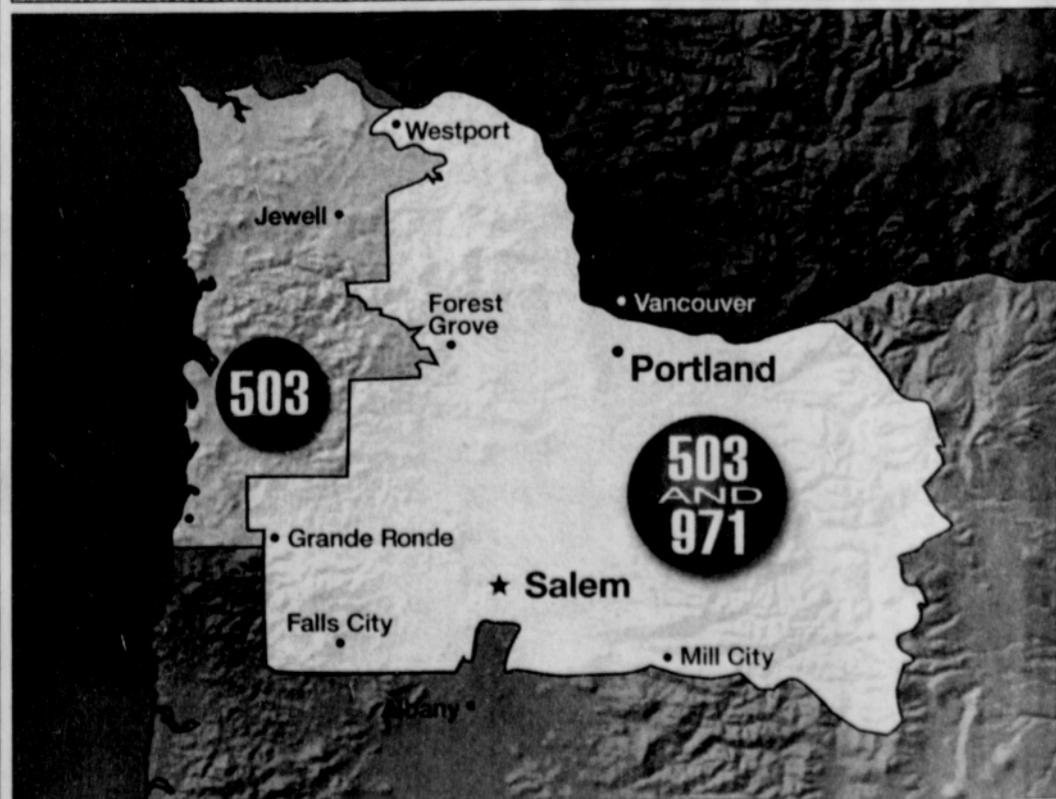
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