

Memories, lessons recalled from historic bombed church

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BIRMINGHAM, Ala. (RNS)—Carolyn McKinstry pointed to a doorway in the balcony of Sixteenth Street Baptist Church and memories started rushing back—good ones.

“I used to run all over this place as a little kid,” she said. “That was my hiding place.”



Carolyn McKinstry has written a new book about her childhood at Birmingham's historic Sixteenth Street Baptist Church, bombed by the Ku Klux Klan in 1963. (RNS PHOTO/Beverly Taylor/The Birmingham News)

McKinstry also has some difficult memories, like Sept. 15, 1963, when a bomb exploded at the church and killed four of her close friends minutes after she had spoken to them in the girls' restroom. The Ku Klux Klan targeted the church after it had been a meeting place for marches organized by civil rights leaders Martin Luther King Jr. and Fred Shuttlesworth.

McKinstry also recalled another bombing that touched her personally, in April 1964.

A bomb targeted at her neighbor's house exploded across the street from McKinstry's childhood home. The explosion awakened her at about 3 a.m., shattered her bedroom window and knocked her two brothers out of their beds.

The neighbors had socialized with whites, violating segregation laws, and the Klan was sending a message, McKinstry said. "They were trying to scare people."

Another neighbor, Maurice Ryles, was targeted with a package of dynamite outside his house that was discovered before it exploded.

"We were terrorized our whole existence growing up," McKinstry said. "Bombing was so routine back then."

Those events and images have haunted and inspired her, as she recounts in a new book, [*While the World Watched*](#), published by Tyndale House.

"It's a powerful book," said Denise George, McKinstry's co-author. "She marched in the children's march. She was right in the middle of all of it. Had she not walked out of the restroom when she did, she would have been one of the girls killed."



Aftermath of the bombing of the
Sixteenth Street Baptist Church in
Birmingham, Ala. (Courtesy of
Birmingham Public Library Archive)

McKinstry, 63, has been a part of Sixteenth Street Baptist Church since she was two years old, and she continues to do volunteer work, including giving tours. Shortly after finishing the book, she was diagnosed with breast cancer in March 2010. She recently completed chemotherapy treatments.

McKinstry, a graduate of Fisk University, returned to school in recent years

to graduate from [Beeson Divinity School](#) at Samford University in 2007 with a master of divinity degree. She wanted to spread a message of love that she hoped could help counteract hatred based on racial prejudice.

“When I look at how we treat each other, I wonder, ‘How does this happen?’” McKinstry said. “We were all reading the same Bible.”

She wonders why some of the most belligerent segregationists giving orders to use police dogs and fire hoses against marchers, including Police Commissioner Eugene “Bull” Connor, saw no conflict with their roles as church deacons and Sunday school teachers.

“When people tell you that you can’t do something because your skin is brown or black, you recognize that this is not how God intended it to be,” McKinstry said.

“Segregation laws addressed every aspect of how blacks and whites could interact—no playing checkers together, no playing dominoes, no baseball, no football, no eating together, no socializing.”



Public schools, buses and water fountains were segregated by race. Those who violated those laws were at risk of police arrest and Klan bombings.

“Somebody could be put in jail and fined just for socializing,” McKinstry said.

King and Shuttlesworth had the courage to stand up and point out that was wrong, she said. Others stood by and watched injustice, taking no action, she said.

“It’s time to stop watching,” McKinstry said. “Everybody’s afraid. When it comes time to act, where is the courage?”

That's a message that she has tried to spread in person to visitors at the church and in the new book, she said.

"God just tacked something on my heart I couldn't get rid of," McKinstry said.

-Greg Garrison writes for The Birmingham News in Birmingham, Ala.