

One Mississippi, two Mississippi: methodists, murder, and the struggle for racial justice in Neshoba County

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Abstrak

What can the small Mt. Zion methodist church in rural Mississippi teach us about the American dilemma over race? Quite a lot, it turns out. Founded by reconstruction methodists in 1879, Mt. Zion would later endure decades of harsh control by the white supremacist state. Segregated by Jim Crow laws and attitudes, Mt. Zion was also separated from its parent religious body, the Methodist denomination, between 1939 and 1968, as white Methodists created the segregated Central Jurisdiction for its black members: the move appeared as church-mandated Jim Crow. Mt. Zion survived the attacks by the state, and the benign neglect of the Methodists, maintaining its belief in an inclusive society by hosting the civil rights workers of freedom summer, who planned a school for black voters at the church. The church was drawn into the Klan conspiracy that included the murder of the three civil rights workers, the burning of Mt. Zion, and the beating of some of its members. Instead of grieving, the members of Mt. Zion began an annual ceremony that commemorated the death of the three and their mission to advance black rights, especially voting. The commemorative service is now an integral part of state and local efforts to create something new in this very red state, an alternate Mississippi that is inclusive, modern, and open.