

The Kitchen (2010)

Houston Hodges, for Writer's Corner, WLRH Radio Huntsville, AL USA

I got to visit the 16th Street Baptist Church in Birmingham.

Yes, that's the church. In the 1960's, the gathering place for planning opposition to the segregation policies fettering that great Southern city. It was a rally point for change, and that made it a target.

Then came September 15, 1963. Sunday School was over, and four little girls headed for the rest room. Three of them were fourteen, Addie Mae and Carole and Cynthia; Denise McNair was only eleven, and must have been flattered to gather with the big girls, to debrief what the boys were like in Sunday School, who said what to whom, and to giggle. That's what you do after Sunday School. They didn't know that an anonymous caller had phoned a few minutes earlier. He said, "Three minutes," before he hung up.

After the 22 sticks of dynamite exploded in the stairwell, they say the bodies of the girls were stacked like cord-wood. All four.

You start the tour upstairs in the auditorium, with a thoughtful video about the church, its history, its role in the freedom-struggle. Then you get to go down to the basement, where the explosion took place. They didn't rebuild that outside staircase where the dynamite was planted; they remodeled it into a kitchen to prepare meals for church activities.

No plaque to mark it; a wooden frame around their pictures on the wall. You can't go in, but you can look in through the half-door for passing dishes in and out, to see the cabinets, the sink, the plates and cups and glasses stacked

neatly at the ready.

I wondered about the process of deciding how to rebuild; it's sacred ground. How do you rebuild Gettysburg or Valley Forge? I think the kitchen was a good idea; a new center for church life, a change from the past, a resource for new activities. I think the girls would have liked it.

We stood for a long time, looking at the kitchen through the door. It was very quiet... so quiet that if you listened closely you could almost hear the echoes of their laughter.

Pastor Houston Hodges is parish associate at the Big Cove Presbyterian Church out in the Hampton Cove area.