

Oakland Police Didn't Expect a Priest

Roughly 10 squad cars surrounded the church and the officers, two to a car, raised their shotguns. They came to the church following reports that a man with a gun was seen running inside. In fact, members of the Black Panther Party, a group of young African Americans who initiated armed patrols to monitor police behavior in Oakland neighborhoods, had been using St. Augustine's for twice-weekly meetings.

"David Hilliard, the Panthers' chief of staff, and I went to the door and asked police to describe the man since we didn't allow guns in our meetings," Neil says of the April 3, 1968, standoff.

"There was a tense back and forth, to say the least. Finally, luckily, the command sergeant told them to break. So they left."

Neil began working as a community liaison with the Panthers after cofounder Huey P. Newton's high-profile 1967 altercation with two Oakland police officers left one officer dead and the other (along with Newton) wounded. Neil attended the court hearings with a church member who knew Newton's girlfriend, and he offered to visit Newton in prison.

Police harassment had left the Panthers without a regular place to meet, so Neil also agreed to allow the group to use his church. He was acutely aware of media images of militant young black men in berets and leather jackets looking to cause trouble. By the end of the 1960s, the Panthers had launched chapters in most major U.S. cities, prompting FBI director J. Edgar Hoover to call them the "greatest threat to internal security of the country."

It's true that the Panthers often were armed (for self-protection, says Neil) and, in some cases, committed criminal acts of violence—polarizing methods of protest that Neil didn't always condone. But Neil also knew that the group was trying to combat real problems in poor African American communities. They helped establish free health clinics, prison visits, clothing drives, alternative schools, and food programs—most notably Free Breakfast for School Children at St. Augustine's, the first nationally organized breakfast program in the United States.

It wasn't an easy sell to his congregation—in fact, Neil chose not to ask them for approval to use the church—though there was a breakthrough the weekend of King's murder.



“Tensions were high in the community that week . . . a shooting had also happened at a house near the church and [prominent Panther member] Bobby Hutton was killed. The community needed to emote, so we held a memorial service for both,” Neil says. “Members of my congregation and members of the Panthers began to talk with one another. They began to relate on a human level.

“Members of the congregation weren’t just seen as handkerchief heads and Uncle Toms, as they were often called in those days. And those same members saw for the first time that a lot of the Panthers were just teenagers who were reacting to the needs of their community. We broke down a lot of barriers.”