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## HOUSE JOINT RESOLUTION NO. 561

Offered January 20, 1997

*Establishing a joint subcommittee to study the incidence of arson in Virginia and, specifically, the incidence of arson against church buildings.*

Patrons—Watts, Jones, D.C., Jones, J.C. and Scott; Senator: Howell

Referred to Committee for Courts of Justice

WHEREAS, over the past 18 months, fires have been reported in at least 40 predominantly black churches across the nation, mostly in the Southeast; and

WHEREAS, with some 300,000 churches nationwide, there are approximately 600 cases of arson against church buildings every year; and

WHEREAS, although the overall trend of arson against church buildings is down, this is not the case among black churches in the rural South; and

WHEREAS, according to a tally of cases considered by the federal Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms (ATF) to be "open," six black churches have burned in Tennessee, five each in Louisiana, South Carolina and Alabama, four in North Carolina, three in Mississippi, and one each in Georgia and Virginia; and

WHEREAS, President Clinton has ordered a stepped-up federal response to the suspected arsons and laid blame for them on a climate of "racial hostility"; and

WHEREAS, even with more than two dozen law-enforcement personnel from the ATF, the FBI, and local police agencies pouring over it, the stark fire scene only underlines the difficulty investigators face in solving these fires; and

WHEREAS, only a handful of people have been arrested in the apparent arsons, including several linked to extremist groups, and most of the fires remain unsolved, with investigators having found no evidence of a broader conspiracy; and

WHEREAS, the current penalties in Virginia for crimes against church property range from a Class 4 felony for arson to a Class 1 misdemeanor for vandalism; and

WHEREAS, President Clinton has encouraged states to use block grants from the Department of Housing and Urban Development to help congregations rebuild churches that have been destroyed; and

WHEREAS, there is a precedent for using federal money in this fashion without violating state constitutional protections; and

WHEREAS, even though proceeds from fire insurance policies and loans from banks and other financial institutions may be available to some churches to assist in their rebuilding, it is unknown the extent or availability of such funds; now, therefore, be it

RESOLVED by the House of Delegates, the Senate concurring, That a joint subcommittee be established to study the incidence of arson in Virginia and, specifically, the incidence of arson against church buildings. In addition, the joint subcommittee shall (i) identify what funds and services are available to assist churches in rebuilding and what might be done to augment the existing funds and services; (ii) examine the availability and affordability of fire coverage, response of insurance companies in processing claims, and increases in fire insurance premiums or policy cancellations; and (iii) review Virginia law relating to penalties for arson and other crimes against church buildings and recommend such changes as the joint subcommittee deems appropriate.

The joint subcommittee shall consist of seven members as follows: four members of the House of Delegates, to be appointed by the Speaker of the House and three members of the Senate, to be appointed by the Senate Committee on Privileges and Elections.

The direct costs of this study shall not exceed \$ 4,200.

The Division of Legislative Services shall provide staff support for the study. Technical assistance shall be provided by the Virginia Crime Commission. All agencies of the Commonwealth shall provide assistance to the joint subcommittee, upon request.

The joint subcommittee shall complete its work in time to submit its findings and recommendations to the Governor and the 1998 Session of the General Assembly as provided in the procedures of the Division of Legislative Automated Systems for processing legislative documents.

Implementation of this resolution is subject to subsequent approval and certification by the Joint Rules Committee. The Committee may withhold expenditures or delay the period for the conduct of the study.

INTRODUCED

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