In college, Tim McCarthy ’93 was deeply involved in public service—as a Big Brother and head of the Freshman Urban Program steering committee, among other things—and also active in the anti-apartheid divestment movement. When he became a grad student at Columbia, he found the difference in lifestyle stark. As he wrote his dissertation, focused on interracial coalitions, he remembers, “I was in a library all the time. I was isolated, really struggling to figure out where I was going to have in the world.”

Thankfully, an opportunity for action presented itself. In the spring of 1997, two ministers and a rabbi from Columbia organized a trip to help rebuild the burned-out Rising Star Baptist Church in Greensboro, Alabama. One of McCarthy’s students had planned to go, but had to cancel at the last minute and offered him her spot. It was the first of many such trips. The next year he oversaw a trip to Summerton, South Carolina, for the same group, and in 2000 he brought the program to Harvard through the Phillips Brooks House Association (PBHA). He’s been organizing “Alternative Spring Break” trips to help rebuild African-American churches throughout the South ever since. He set up a similar program at the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill while there on a fellowship in 2005. (He’s now a lecturer on history and literature and adjunct lecturer in public policy at the Kennedy School.) Last December, he received the Humble Servant Award from the National Coalition for Burned Churches (ncfbc.org) for his decade of work.

“There’s this sense out there that [church burnings are] something that happened a long time ago, something that occurred during the battles of the civil-rights era and even earlier,” he says. “It hasn’t stopped. There are, on average, several dozen church-burnings per year.”

On McCarthy’s alternative spring-break trips, volunteers typically drive south in PBHA vans, and over the years have stayed in YMCAs, local church recreation centers, and even an army barracks. Participants pay a $100 fee, which covers transportation and lodging. Members of the church congregation usually provide lunch during the day, the group buys and prepares its own food for breakfast and dinner.

The Harvard students who go on the trips are “multi-faith and multi-racial,” McCarthy says. “The best part of the trips, for me, is seeing the kind of encounter that happens between these Ivy League students, who are themselves quite diverse and wonderful in their diversity, and the folks that we work with in these communities down South.” He emphasizes the transformative effects of people “leaving their comfort zones,” explaining that both the students and the church congregations are exposed to ideas, beliefs, and people who might have been entirely unfamiliar to them previously.

On that very first trip, for example, there were several Jewish students. At the end of the week, “there was a real desire to worship, they wanted to have a Shabbat service,” he says. “The pastor of the church, who I’m not sure had ever met a Jew before, offered the church sanctuary, which had not yet been fully rebuilt. There was a ceiling and a roof, but it wasn’t ready to be worshipped in. But we all went in: their congregation, our congregation—our kids, Jews, Gentiles, Christians, atheists, black and white, Asian, Hispanic—we came together Friday evening shortly after we had finished work for the week. The rabbi had booklets with Shabbat prayers and we worshipped together. Those types of crossings and encounters, I think, really change the way that people see themselves.”

— Ashton R. Lattimore