

To: MCC Peace Section Executive Committee
MCC Executive Committee

From: Edgar Stoesz and Edgar Metzler

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Subject: REPORT ON MISSISSIPPI DELTA INVESTIGATION, JULY 30-AUGUST 2

1. The Mississippi Delta.

The Delta is a definite geographical area approximately the shape of an elongated football stretching from just south of Memphis to Vicksburg, bounded on the west by the Mississippi River and on the east approximately by a line drawn from Memphis through Greenwood to Vicksburg. The Delta area proper would be about 200 miles long and 80 miles across at the widest point.

The Delta area is determined by the extent of land which was annually flooded by the Mississippi until the advent of flood control about 50 years ago. This annual flooding left a large deposit of alluvial soil and it is now estimated that the top soil on much of the area is 20 or 30 feet deep and some of the richest in the world.

Specifically the Mississippi Delta comprises the following 11 counties: Bolivar, Coahoma, Humphreys, Issaquena, Leflore, Quitman, Sharkey, Sunflower, Tallahatchie, Tunica and Washington. Also part of the following counties: Carroll, Holmes, Panola, Warren, Yalobusha and Yazoo. (Statistics quoted do not include the part-Delta counties.)

The Delta is almost exclusively an agricultural rural area. One county, Issaquena, has no hospital or high school and the population of the county seat is 145. The largest city in the Delta is Greenville, population 41,500, with the next largest towns being Greenwood 21,500, Clarksdale, 21,100, and Cleveland 10,200.

The population of the total Delta region in 1960 was 368,739. Sixty-two percent of the population was non-white.

The economy has been based primarily on cotton, a crop which formerly required a large amount of manual labor. With the increasing mechanization of the plantations there is very little work available for Negroes. There are few industries in the Delta and what is there generally has only white labor. Many Negroes have left the area, moving to large cities in the north. The lack of education and skills often results in such a move creating more problems. The economic pressure of technology and discrimination is much greater on the Negroes in the Delta area than other parts of Mississippi. The "hill Negroes," as those living in western and southern Mississippi are called, are traditionally somewhat more economically independent, many owning small farms or plots of ground. For many of them the plight of poverty is also very real, but there is more opportunity for economic and agricultural development projects which seem less practical in the Delta. An example of such project is the distribution of cows to needy Negro families by Heifer Project working through the Prentiss Institute in Jefferson Davis County about half way between Gulfport and Jackson.

Extensive studies are available on the condition of the Negro in Mississippi and in the Delta particularly. These are on file at Akron but a few excerpts will

give some idea of the needs in the Delta, which by many indices of economic development are more needy than many countries overseas to which United States is giving foreign aid. In Mississippi the chances of a Negro baby dying within the first year of life are at best twice those of a white baby. The median annual income in 1960 for whites was \$2,023 and for Negroes \$606. The housing conditions are inadequate, for example in Sharkey County with 3,093 homes there are 2,088 without flush toilets and 1,200 without piped water of any kind. Almost a third of these homes were considered either deteriorating or dilapidated. Part of the reason for the situation of Negroes in the Delta area is the lack of educational facilities. In the entire Delta there are only 14 schools credited by the Southern Association of Colleges and Secondary Schools. These are all white schools; there are no accredited Negro schools in the Delta. One of the counties has no high school for whites or Negroes and three counties have no high school for Negroes.

2. Mennonites in Mississippi.

There are approximately 200 Mennonites in Mississippi in five churches and three service projects. None of these are in the Mississippi Delta area. At Gulfport are two congregations affiliated with the South Central Conference (Mennonite Church), Crossroads, 37 members, and Gulfhaven, 44 members. The General Conference Mennonite Church has a service project at North Gulfport, Camp Landon. The Conservative Mennonite Church has VS units at Whitfield, southeast of Jackson and at Meridian. At Meridian a new church has been started, the Fellowship Mennonite Church. At Noxapater, about 35 miles north of Meridian, is the Nanih Wayia, Indian Church, affiliated with the Ohio and Eastern Conference (MC). At Macon, 58 miles north of Meridian is the Magnolia Church, 45 members, affiliated with the Conservative Mennonite Conference.

The geographic relation of the Delta area to Mennonite activities already in Mississippi may be indicated by the mileage from Cleveland, in the middle of the Delta and a likely center for a service project, to Meridian, 200 miles, and to Gulfport, 300 miles.

3. Itinerary for investigation.

We arrived in Jackson early Thursday morning, July 30. The day was spent in Jackson with Albert Gaedderts and Titus Bender, discussing the Mississippi Delta with Art Thomas of the National Council of Churches, Jesse Morris of the Council of Federated Organizations, and others. Friday we traveled with the Gaedderts to the Delta, visiting the Freedom School and Community Center at Greenville, also spending the evening with Bob Carpenter, white editor of a new periodical, The Delta Review. On Saturday, Titus Bender again joined us for contacts at Greenwood and Itta Bena. We also visited with one of the priests at the Catholic school and center in Greenwood and with Amzie Moore, a Negro businessman who helped distribute the material aid sent by MCC last winter. Sunday was spent in Meridian with the church and service unit there. Sunday evening and Monday morning we were in Atlanta, where we received a very favorable impression of the summer unit and the development of the longer term group at Houston Street.

4. Present and projected programs in the Delta.

The Council of Federated Organizations is the cooperative agency through which the civil rights organizations are working in Mississippi. Included are the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, the Congress of Racial Equality, and the National Association for the

Advancement of Colored People. However, most of the work is carried by SNCC. The Mississippi Summer Project includes three activities: freedom schools, community centers, and voter registration. The voter registration project is an intensification of work already underway and it is probably the most successful. The freedom schools are intended to enrich the education of Negro high school students, with some work among lower grades. The community centers are to work at adult education, literacy training, vocational training, recreation and community development. The community centers have been the slowest in development and are the kind of project which require a long term commitment. Most of the work done in this area during the summer is preparatory to establishing permanent centers. In Greenville, for example, an architect from Philadelphia donated a month of time and developed complete plans for a community center and began to organize the community to raise funds for it. In Leake County the community has already begun to erect a center with the help of some volunteer construction workers from California. The freedom schools are an extraordinary educational experiment, undoubtedly quite uneven in quality but at least pushing out the horizons of many Negro youth in ways which will permanently change their role in their communities.

We were impressed with the dedication, intelligence, and common sense of the top Negro leadership with whom we talked such as Jesse Morris and Charlie Cobb. However, there is such a wide diversity in the personnel that, as can be expected, some centers lack the discipline needed to do the difficult job in Mississippi. Perhaps the main impact of the summer project is simply the penetration of "The Closed Society."

The National Council of Churches has cooperated with the summer project in three ways: (1) Sponsoring training orientation classes at Oxford, Ohio, in June, (2) recruiting and training ministers to serve as counselors with the summer project, and (3) providing legal aid for summer project workers. The National Council of Churches is also moving ahead with a long range Delta project. Arthur Thomas has been appointed project director and we spent several hours with him in Jackson. The decision to involve the World Council of Churches in the project has delayed it and the continuing bureaucratic complexities of the NCC make it uncertain just how quickly the project will get underway. The plan is to continue this fall some of the work already begun in the freedom schools and community centers. But it is obvious there will be a period in which the work in the Delta, if continued at all will have to be mainly under the supervision of COFO before the NCC is ready to assume larger responsibilities. Art Thomas, when asked about the relationship between NCC and COFO, expressed the hope that the NCC Delta project will be distinctly Christian oriented, with an emphasis on staff commitment to a group discipline. In talking with COFO people one got the impression that while they welcomed the NCC interest and participation they were going ahead with their plans without too much confidence in the actual performance potential of the churches.

5. Needs in the Delta.

A brief summary of the needs which became obvious in the course of our investigation includes:

a. Reconciliation.

In the Delta area there is virtually no communication of any kind between the white and Negro communities. Even within the white community it is almost impossible to develop discussion on the Christian response to the needs

there. The attitudes of the white community are such that if one identified himself with the needs of the Negroes communication is almost impossible. It may be that direct work at racial reconciliation and building bridges of communication will have to be done somewhat separately from a service project.

b. Economic.

The economic problem in the Delta is acute and it is difficult to see how it can be alleviated without the development of some kind of industry. Five percent of all the farms control more than 50 percent of all the farmland. Amzie Moore had some ideas about developing a 30,000 acre tract of land which is currently for sale but the scope of this project would demand larger resources than a church or private group would have. Moore has also secured sewing machines for a self-help project. One of the difficulties in Mississippi is that federal programs designed to alleviate poverty and help develop rural areas are stymied by the federal government's insistence on working through local officials. That means in Mississippi that Negroes get little or no help from federal programs. Economic pressures are also being exerted on any Negroes who register to vote or participate in any way with the civil rights movement. We talked with Negroes who had lost their jobs because of pressure put on their employer after the Negro had registered to vote.

c. Educational.

There are many needs that could be worked at in educational projects outside the regular public schools such as tutorial and supplemental programs, vocational training, and basic literacy. Negroes in Mississippi over 25 have completed an average of only six grades of education. And the quality of the education they do get leaves much to be desired.

d. Health.

The high mortality rate of Negroes in Mississippi is only one indication of the great health needs that exist. The majority of Negro babies are born unattended in homes. Public health education and preventive medicine is urgently needed as well as basic medical resources such as clinics, hospitals and trained personnel.

e. Relief.

It is quite clear that there will be immediate relief needs this winter due to the economic pressure and the inadequacies of the surplus commodity distribution program. These inadequacies are due either to defects in the program or discrimination on the part of local authorities. One of the greatest needs is for shoes for school age children. Amzie Moore reported that church attendance in the Cleveland area increased considerably after the MCC distribution of shoes last winter because many children were able to go to church and school for the first time in the winter.

6. Recommendations.

Following the July 30 - August 2 visit of Ed Metzler and Edgar Stoesz, in the company of Albert Gaedderts and Titus Bender, it is recommended:

1. That MCC respond to the needs present in Mississippi which in terms of human suffering and tension are without equal in the United States and comparable to the needs in many foreign countries.
2. That MCC efforts be concentrated somewhere in the area known as the Delta.
3. That a decision on the specific location be made later this fall when
 - a) The National Council of Churches project in the Delta will be better defined.
 - b) The summer civil rights workers will have left and the potential response of given communities can be better evaluated.
 - c) The decision can be made more deliberately with the counsel of other informed persons.

Tentatively it was felt that the towns of Itta Bena and Cleveland, where MCC supplies were distributed in winter, should be considered. In making such a selection preference should be given to a town with intense need where resistance may already have been lessened due to previous efforts and where MCC efforts would not duplicate those put forth by civil rights organizations.

4. That the MCC response consist of:

A. SHORT TERM:

1. Distribution of material aid including specifically
 - Shoes - especially for school age children
 - Blankets
 - Warm children's clothing
 - Food supplies if Government surplus commodities not available in sufficient quantity.
2. Investigate the possible future opportunity for MDS to assist with the re-building of churches destroyed by fire (13 in Mississippi from June 20 - August 1) on the construction of community centers.
3. Medical assistances: Perhaps Mennonite physicians on a rotating basis and public health nurses.
4. Self Help: As much as possible even these material aid projects should be promoted on a self help basis. Perhaps service centers could be established to sew blankets and clothing.

Needed thereto will be:

- A couple for assignment from November - May
- A rented center
- A vehicle
- Material aid supplies comparable to the shipment made last winter initially.

B. LONG TERM

1. Community Center such as now being envisioned by NCC
 2. Some long range economic assistance
 3. The total program to be planned and carried out in close consultation with Mennonite interests in the South including especially Titus Bender, Vincent Harding and someone from the General Conference program at Gulfport.
5. That MCC Peace Section continue to work directly at the task of reconciliation and communication, such as the work of Albert Gaedderts this summer. This might be done by another special assignment or through the work of Vincent Harding and/or a white co-worker who may be appointed.