

MISSISSIPPI TRIP REPORT
Edgar Stoesz
September 27-30, 1964

The purpose of this second trip to Mississippi was to make further plans for the initiation of an MCC program as approved by the MCC Executive Committee on September 19. It was attached to the end of the Mexico trip to save expenses.

Harold Regier of Gulfport and Titus Bender of Meridian joined me as advisors for this assignment. Their previous experience in Mississippi made their counsel especially helpful.

Generally things were not found to be appreciably different than reported in July. The "long hot summer" is now over with predictions for a "long cold winter". The number of churches bombed has now reached 34 including the Mennonite Church near Preston. During this week the house of a retired Negro educator who had housed summer workers was bombed as was the mayor of Natchez who had advocated moderate compliance. A large FBI force is investigating these cases but few arrests have been made. Some are speculating that they are waiting on a major "roundup". "Goldwater 64" signs were abundant but we did not notice anyone who had the courage to display a Johnson-Humphrey sign.

Following is a chronological account of our major meetings.

GULFPORT: It was good to visit this place which has been the center of so much service since CPS days and to meet its dedicated personnel. It is apparent that the Gulf coast with all its tourist activity is less radical on matters relating to race than the rest of the State. A quick tour through the north Gulfport community gave a sketchy picture of the program. The ready smile of many who met us convinced us of the appreciation this community has for what has been done over the years. In discussions with the staff it was heartening to see how they also had a concern for other parts of Mississippi including the Delta. They are presently engaged in a search to determine if they should move into the direction of an adult fellowship.

PRENTISS INSTITUTE: At this Negro school with over 300 students we met with the president and co-founder, Mrs. J. E. Johnson, her son A. L. Johnson and James Norman who is also the Heifer Project representative. On short notice we were called upon to address the student body where we were received warmly.

Our major purpose in visiting Prentiss was to review the HPI program. Over 300 heifers have been given to the poor - both Negro and white - of this four county area. For the most part recipients are Negroes with large families whose annual income as sharecroppers is between \$1,000 and \$1,500. We were impressed with how ideally the HPI approach is adapted to the needs of this area. One project which we visited, the mother had just given birth with the assistance of a midwife to her twelfth child. One child was a bedfast paralytic. Earlier the children had a poor school attendance record due to health factors which resulted primarily from a diet which consisted largely of bread and syrup. When milk from the HPI cow was added to the family diet, their school attendance record increased to the point that one child got an attendance award. A son told us he could make a whole meal out of milk.

For another family the produce they were able to sell above their family needs was the difference which permitted them to send their daughter to college. The daughter in turn assisted younger members of the family to receive a college education. Because one family was willing to contribute a heifer a whole family was able to receive an education and thus break the vicious circle of poverty.

This most worthwhile project which has only met a fraction of the needs has now expanded beyond the ability of one man to supervise it adequately. Thus we pursued the possibility of assigning two MCC men to assist along the lines of the Mexico program. HPI director Norman would welcome such assistance but in discussing it with the Johnsons at Prentiss Institute we learned that they did not feel it would be wise for two white men to move into the community. They had been subjected to a cross burning experience on Good Friday and did not feel that they were willing to enter into such a risk with us. Nevertheless we feel that this idea has potential and that it should be pursued when the local conditions permit.

DR. T. B. BROWN - JACKSON: Brown was formerly pastor of the Baptist Church in Gulfport where he learned to know and love Mennonites and is now dean of the Mississippi Baptist Seminary. Three things grew out of this meeting which are worth recording.

1. Without knowing of our previous interests in the community of Itta Bena, he encouraged us in this direction. He also provided us with an introduction to the Mississippi State Valley College which is located at Itta Bena through his brother who is the business manager.
2. We learned that a "Committee of Concerned" has just been organized to assist in the rebuilding of destroyed churches. The inter-faith committee is composed of influential churchmen from Jackson. Its chairman is Dr. William P. Davis who is secretary of the Department of work with Negroes of the Mississippi Baptist Convention Board and President of the Mississippi Baptist Seminary. Dr. Brown will be serving as an Executive Assistant to Dr. Davis. We expressed our interest in being related to this venture as it develops. Our expressed interest seemed to be appreciated.
3. Dr. Brown urged us to consider a project directed to the "poor whites" of Mississippi. He reported that some of the COFO activities in this area had been very fruitful and while we were in Mississippi COFO announced its intentions to continue this program.

NATIONAL COUNCIL OF CHURCHES - ART THOMAS AND BRUCE HANSON: A breakfast meeting with these two gentlemen produced the following;

1. NCC would very much like to see MCC take the initiative in structuring a relief project for the Delta. They are planning to solicit commodities directly rather than go through the exceedingly involved and expensive regular channels.
2. NCC is continuing to import pastors to spend several weeks in such violent communities as McComb. It is difficult to evaluate the results of these efforts.

3. Bruce Hanson, who is somewhat freer of program responsibilities, observed that what is most needed is a creative response to crisis. His fear is that the church will expend all of its efforts in a grandiose program which may or not get off the ground and in the meanwhile we have lost many little opportunities to respond effectively to obvious needs. Certainly any relevant program in Mississippi will need to be directed to the crisis which makes the development of long-term program frustrating. The ideal would appear to be a program which responds to these emergencies with an eye toward the development of longer term program.
4. The NCC program seems to be slow getting off the ground and even at this time it is impossible to determine exactly what it will be. Art Thomas gives us to understand that he has good backing from the Division of Home Missions but we will need to wait longer for the program to emerge.

MEDICAL COMMITTEE FOR HUMAN RIGHTS - CLAIRE BRADLEY - ADM. SECRETARY - JACKSON;

This committee has been bringing in medical doctors to release the acute need for medical assistance. The committee is attempting to be very careful to avoid distracting from the limited services which are available privately and under state sponsorship. They invite Medical Association assistance.

MISSISSIPPI STATE VALLEY COLLEGE; At this new state teachers college with an all Negro student body and faculty we met with President White and Chaplain Matthews. They encouraged us to consider the establishment of a community center in Itta Bena and further offered the possible availability of an empty school building located in the Negro section. But before making definite plans and indeed before any commitments could be made for the school building in question, we were encouraged to see the Itta Bena city bosses. Even then already we suspected these gentlemen had learned to protect their positions which had been given to them by the state's white power structure even if it was at the expense of the Negro race.

NATIONAL COUNCIL OF CHURCHES - WARREN MCKENNA - GREENVILLE; Plans are to head-quarter the NCC project at Greenville which is known as a moderate city. McKenna is in the process of moving to Greenville where he is serving as an assistant to Art Thomas. At this meeting we were again urged to consider making experienced personnel available to operate the relief program.

AMZIE MOORE - CLEVELAND; Mr. Moore is an influential Negro who assisted with the distribution of the MCC shipment this spring. He informed us that the anticipated relief needs of his area are expected to be greater this winter than at any time in the past. He reported that the white power structure has decided that they can get along with 15,000 Negroes whereas their present Negro population is 37,000. Thus if conditions can be made so miserable that at least one-half of the Negroes will leave their objectives will have been accomplished. In addition to urging us to make another shipment this winter he also requested our assistance with a community center they are planning to build in the very near future. Cleveland, through the introduction of Amzie Moore, may offer the most realistic and immediate opportunity for us to be of assistance.

ITIA BENA CITY BOSSES; Following the advice of President White, and also to have a confrontation with the viewpoint of the Southern white, we felt that we should go through with this meeting. Mayor Paul Stowers had taken the liberty of inviting an insurance friend, Mr. Hanson, the Chief of Police and his deputy and attorney Davis. The exceedingly tense atmosphere relaxed after in reply to their questions we were able to assure them that we were neither members of any civil rights organization; of the National Council of Churches; nor were we related to the "troublemakers who have been disturbing us recently". Nevertheless I was very quickly told to direct my concern to the city of Brotherly Love where "conditions are much worse than they are down here" and my two Mississippi associates were told that they did not enjoy an advantageous position because as residents of Mississippi they should "know better than to get involved in the race conflict". They said that the Negroes of their town would have opportunity to work if they only wanted to but instead they "choose to live in immorality so that they can be eligible for relief assistance". Attorney Davis, who proved to be the most objective member of the delegation, felt a community center could be successful only if it enjoyed the support of influential white leaders and he added that we should not look to him or any other member of this group for such support. We were reminded of the expense which would be necessary to provide us with the necessary police protection.

Amid all of this we were able to inform them of our concern. We like to think that our meeting will have made them a little more aware of their responsibility for all residence of their community. Also, it was clear that they had never encountered a concern which was likewise motivated. They were particularly impressed with the fact that we would discuss these plans with them before making any definite plans. At the conclusion we were told that they "trust our intentions" (at the same time no doubt feeling that we were badly misdirected) and that they recognize that a program such as we were discussing had much to offer - "but now would not be the right time". The meeting ended on an amicable note which was in sharp contrast to the way in which it was begun.

NEVIN BENDER - PRESTON; The Mennonite Choctaw Indian Church had been destroyed weeks earlier. Sheriff Rainey (who was arrested by the FBI over this past week end) and the FBI made their investigation but no arrests. No adequate motive has been determined.

We had an opportunity to visit with the five MDS men who were in the process of rebuilding this church. One was grateful for vision and courage to rebuild so quickly. The job would be no smaller and the risks involved no less later. In the meanwhile we have left no doubt as to the continuation of our presence. The Benders were very grateful for the response of the wider constituency.

ADMINISTRATIVE RECOMMENDATIONS; Due to the many basic uncertainties these recommendations cannot be as specific as one would desire. Nevertheless there is need to state our intentions as precisely as possible allowing for a change as future developments might dictate. These recommendations are considered administrative in nature since in my opinion they come within the spirit of MCC authorization.

1. MCC should get a man (couple?) on the scene as soon as possible. While living in the area (perhaps initially in Greenville) he will determine the nature of the MCC program much as Vincent Hardings did when they moved to Atlanta. We still feel the longer-term objective should be to become meaningfully involved in a carefully selected community much as the program in Gulfport. Harold Regier has invited us to schedule several weeks of orientation for such a person at Gulfport.
2. NCC has plans to initiate a relief program as parts of its Delta ministry. A limited relief program is also being carried on by COFO - but as a reward for voter registration. There is need for an experienced person to direct this program. If such a person is not available on a longer-term basis, consideration should be given to someone to serve in an advisory relationship on a shorter term basis. He should be seconded to NCC who would be responsible for the program. In this way it would still be possible to maintain organizational distinction from NCC which we continue to feel is important.
3. We are pleased that MDS has already become involved. We would encourage them in their plans to send a delegation to Mississippi to study how they might proceed further. In addition to investigating how they might assist with the construction of individual churches we would encourage them to get in contact with the newly organized "Committee of Concern" Art Thomas of NCC and Amzie Moore of Cleveland. MDS as a disaster organization can be a very important part of a creative response to Mississippi crisis. Should plans for a fairly sizeable program materialize we would encourage having someone accompany the group who has skill in interpreting our Mennonite position of Christian reconciliation. Such a person could also serve as a chaplain for the men which could prove to be invaluable if they should encounter some form of local harassment.
4. Wilbert Shenk has expressed interest in behalf of the Mennonite Medical Association in establishing a relationship with the medical project. We would encourage MMA to investigate this possibility further with a possible thought of assigning two doctors for a period of two weeks initially. Future involvement would be based on their recommendations. The committee has requested that we select doctors who are not immediately antagonistic to civil rights organizations since they will of necessity need to have some relationship to them.
5. The MCC Peace Section continues to have an interest in additional assignments such as the one undertaken this summer by Albert Gaedderts.

We would like to encourage them to consider directing such a ministry to persons who have been the victim of violence. This could be the thirty-four congregations whose church buildings have been destroyed or it could be individuals who have suffered personal loss. Such a ministry could be particularly meaningful if it could be related directly to practical deeds such as MDS or as contemplated by the "Committee of Concern". Instead of allowing a spirit of retaliation to develop let us plead the Christian second mile principle.

6. Consideration should be given for two HPI assistants in Prentiss when the local atmosphere permits. Also, as a sponsoring agency of HPI, we might encourage one of our Mennonite communities to bring together a shipment of heifers.
7. MCC has again been urged to consider a limited relief program such as was sponsored in the Winter of 63-64. It is hoped that such a program could be decided upon in co-ordination with the larger NCC efforts (Recommendation No. 2). In light of these uncertainties it may be necessary to call for a response on rather short notice.

Edgar Stoesz

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