

Hattiesburg- Phyllis Cunningham

I feel very strongly about voter education, or maybe I should say, community education. As far as I can see, it does not exist to any great extent... not in actuality at any rate. The phrase, " federal programs ", seems so distant to most people, and most people find it difficult to relate it to the movement... to the needs of the people. I am at a loss for words due to the fact that so many words have been used to mean so many different things. I wish to extend the area of federal programs to the area of civil rights. It seems to me that we are just putting our finger in the dike instead of building a foundation for a new dike. We have to organize people around their needs... Freedom Schools, Community Centers, Health organizations, etc. but it seems to me that we have been missing the boat because we are attempting to meet these needs through the various programs and we never can effectively. We do not have the time nor the personnel. We as COFO set up a Board of Education, a Board of Health, and effective Recreation Dept. etc. These things should be provided by the power structure, whether it be local, state, or federal. In other words, there is a deprivation of Civil Rights. We must not only educate people concerning the specific issues of civil rights they are deprived of, but we must also inform them of the tools that might be effectively used in securing these civil rights.

For example, I am in the process of setting up a community health organization. I am organizing it around people's needs and hope to involve those who have not been previously active in the movement, but who a health organization would speak to because of their needs. Gradually they may make the connection between the deprivation of needs (health first, and then others) and the movement and the vote. I intend to develop leadership through this group and not only devise a program, or assist in devising a program for meeting the immediate needs, in so far as that is possible, but help them to study (we will do this together because I am no expert) the existing health situation in the community and the needs, all in relationship to rights in the health field which should be met by the power structure, which includes the government...charitable organizations, etc. For example, the Lions Club in Hattiesburg subsidizes dental work for indigent people...Is there discrimination here and if so, can a change be affected? People must know who to contact, how to contact and the method of contact in order to secure the necessary information about a subject. Simple research techniques must be transmitted and encouraged. Prudent (for lack of a better term) action must be the desired. Prudent in that things must be well planned as opposed to political mess up.

I do hope that I am making myself clear. In other words, the person who is involved in research and dissemination of this material is a MOST important person in the movement. I think that we probably have the personnel available, but that we are probably wasting them in other ways. I am afraid that we are getting people to register to vote, but we may be nurturing a bad monster. We must have concurrent teaching going on while we are encouraging voter registration. God help us if we, in the South go through what is involved in the north politically. I could go on for hours. I find very few people who agree with me, but I really feel that it is a lack of understanding (so nice that I can attribute it to this). At any rate, nothing is justifiable in my mind unless it is directed toward people for the purpose of intelligent voting and political or direct action. Then the power structure will have to meet the needs of the people... idealistic, huh????

Now, on the Black-White issue... I could go on for hours... Granted, there are .

many unknowns and we are all learning together, but I think there should be some type of a requirement for a white to work in the south, in such a crucial movement. Too many people are naive'' I have met kids here who have hardly spoken to a negro in the north and have had no experiences in civil rights work, nor have they had any meaningful experiences with negroes. It is pretty hard to say who should be excluded and where latent qualities lie, but all I can say is that a hell of a lot of this internal struggle could be avoided here in Mississippi if people could face these things somewhere else. No, maybe I shouldn't say this, because we are all products of an accumulation of things and I guess this internal strife can be expected. I do think there might be some way of handling it though. My orientation program helped immensely, but one even had to have some basis of experience in order that discussion be relevant. I would like to see the necessity for black leadership discussed and also the understanding of all of the support that whites should give in the development of this leadership. How you discuss this, I do not know, but I would like to voice my opinion on this at the meeting. It might sound like I am trying to give a course in group dynamics... it is needed, but I am not certain that I qualify nor that the meeting be the place. Whoever chairs the meeting must be very aware of the situation and really handle the discussion of the Black-White issue in a superlative way or else it will degenerate into destruction. Now, this leads me into another gripe. We need some type of personnel committee. I don't want to see a sophisticated thing, but something. I think the director should do this thing full time. He should be at all orientations and make it a point to really get to know people. He should be travelling to projects in order to get to know people and should be available (at least Jackson should know his whereabouts) at all times. Possibly this director should have a committee in the field. Possibly one person in each district so that if situations come up and the personnel director (I have literally murdered this word throughout this letter) sees fit, that committee member can trouble shoot. I don't know how the director or committee will be set up. It should be determined at the meeting, but something should be set up. A person who is having difficulty working should have recourse to this committee if things can not be worked out on a local or individual of the movement but... would help the individual and give possibly the support needed for making known a real problem concerning the project or... as the case might be... support in making a decision to leave for the sake of himself. I hope that I am making myself clear, but I am not too coherent at this point. The personnel apparatus could also be a liason between the individual and the Medical Committee when there are problems. For instance... there are some people who refuse to carry out a recommended suggestion like getting medical care and we are doing them a disservice by not giving the almost man-handling support that is sometimes so necessary. Enuf for that.

As far as the Hattiesburg project goes... may I refer back to my initial subject and that is education concerning civil rights... Federal Programs and the like, etc.,, I do not see this happening in my project. I don't think there has been enough thought on the subject. We are now discussing it, but it is due to basic dissatisfaction with the response of the community. Mary Stevens is now here and is working in the area of research... community and federal programs. I see her as a crucial person. I think that she can be very helpful if she is allowed to pursue research. It seems that frequently, if immediate

results are not to be seen by one's work... one is asked to do other work like door to door canvassing, etc.

We have had a rather turbulent struggle trying to understand ourselves here. It has been very healthy in my estimation. People have grown. Doug Smith is great as a project director. He has allowed people to be creative and to come forth with their ideas. He asks for consensus and often for opinions. Many things have brought this about. For one thing, the summer is over. We did not have a democracy here this summer for practical purposes, I feel. Now that people are finally becoming settled in Hattiesburg, they are reflecting and thinking about what has been done... all this is in relation to the future. The time was not right before this. We all feel that it will be hard to lose Doug when he goes back to school... which he must do. In a tight situation, under pressure, Doug may make ultimate decisions, but this is not the usual. We have an overwhelming number of whites in the project which can be very detrimental, but we have discussed this and I feel have come to realize the role of the white in relationship to the development of black leadership. Granted, we are all products of society and bring its effects with us, but... one can alter himself when he is aware of the fact that change has to come about. I really feel that Doug is very capable and openminded. I would be willing to discuss his capabilities as I see them, with anyone who is really interested. At this point it might sound like I am very defensive about this... I am because I feel that there are some who really question Doug for the position that he is in.

See you on the 4th.

Phyllis Cunningham