

REPORT ON A VISIT TO FAYETTE AND HAYWOOD COUNTIES, TENNESSEE,
made on January 3, 4 and 5, 1961, by Ross Anderson, Wallace Nelson
and Maurice McCrackin, a deputation team from Peacemakers

We have just returned from Fayette and Haywood Counties, which have been much in the news. Conditions are fully as bad as the press has pictured them, and the needs are much more varied and overwhelming than just food and clothing for Freedom Village - important as that is. If the lives and future welfare of these courageous and unified people are to be safeguarded, information concerning their plight must be given widespread, immediate attention. Hence we have drawn up the following:

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Fayette and Haywood Counties lie in the extreme southwest corner of Tennessee. The population of Haywood County is 27,000, 52% of whom are Negro, and that of Fayette County is 35,000, 78% of whom are Negro.

Early in 1960 State Charters were granted to the Fayette County Civic and Welfare League and to the Haywood County Civic and Welfare League. The immediate purpose of these organizations was to launch a Negro registration and voting campaign. Counter organizations of White Citizens' Council groups, meeting in local churches, were formed immediately. The names of the charter members of the two Negro Leagues were circulated promptly among all white business and professional people in the two Counties and later the names of those who had registered were added and all, under threat of themselves being boycotted if they did not comply, were ordered to have no business or professional dealings with League members or voting registrants. O'Dell Senders, Haywood County Negro leader, was forced to close his grocery in Brownsville. Thirty salesmen once called upon him but they all quit within a two-week period under pressure from white landowners. Health services have been cut off and these farmers are unable to buy food, clothing or gasoline for their machinery.

PRESENT SITUATION

In Haywood County 300 families and in Fayette County, 400, were ordered to move by January 1, 1961. Only one of the 700 had not registered to vote. Machines are displacing tenant farmers and sharecroppers all over the south, and in the past some have moved from Haywood and Fayette Counties for this reason. However, this is not the issue in these present evictions. To say that it is is to sell these heroic people short in the stand that they have taken and who as a result are undergoing such hardship and suffering.

Most of the 700 families have lived on their places many years, 10, 20, 50 years or more. Some were born there and have lived there all their lives. Some families, faring better than most of their neighbors, have been able to purchase farms of their own. But most have been kept in economic servitude, though it is their labor that has been the economic mainstay of Haywood and Fayette Counties.

At White Citizens Council meetings leaders said, "If we don't get rid of these N----, you'll be seeing them sitting in office in the Court House. We'll go easy until the cotton crop is in and then we'll freeze them out." It has been a "deep freeze," of hostility, boycott, cruelty and violence.

The injunction order of the Circuit Federal Court of Appeals on December 30 effected a six weeks injunction, ordering that there be no evictions until the court can determine why the eviction orders have been given. The Federal Civil Rights law says that no action shall be taken which seeks to prevent a citizen from exercising his voting rights. The government contends that this right has been breached in these eviction orders in Fayette and Haywood Counties.

Because of the injunction order, only nine of the 700 families have actually left their farms. Under threat a few have left, since the court injunction. The others wait the final court decision. It can be expected that resentment of landlords will increase persecution of the families who refuse to leave.

The nine families already evicted are resettled on the land of a Negro farm owner, Shepherd Toles. They call their settlement "Freedom Village." The morale of the village is high but living conditions are hazardous and difficult. Families are living on dirt floors. Drainage and sanitary facilities must be made safe, or serious illness is a threat. Forty-three children and 16 adults are now living in Freedom Village.

In Fayette County there are no Negro doctors, and hospitals and clinical services are denied to any Negro registrant in the County. With a health center two miles away last week, Mrs. John McFerren, wife of the Fayette County League chairman, had to take her sick baby to a doctor 41 miles away.

Freedom Village is under attack. It is charged that this is purely a propaganda scheme. Newspapers have carried stories that jobs have been offered to these families but they don't want to work. Freedom Village is a symbol of the plight of thousands of Negroes suffering from prejudice and persecution. Reports that legitimate job offers have been made and refused have been proved cruel and false. One mother said, "They say I'm lazy, but how could I be lazy when I've worked so hard on the same place for 36 years?...Some have come and talked to us and then have been untrue in what they have said and have hurt us. Please, if you can't help us, don't hurt us." These people have been hurt and hurt again. Yet they are not in despair. We felt here the same high courage and dedication to a great cause that we felt when we visited Montgomery in the midst of the bus boycott movement. We talked with a man whose farm machinery was to be repossessed the next day because all of his credit had been cut off. His whole economic future was at stake. When the man issuing the foreclosure order said to him, "I hope you don't hate me for what I'm doing," Wilkes replied, "No, I don't hate you for what you are doing. I'm a Christian and I can't hate anyone."

These men, women and children in Fayette and Haywood Counties face the future, dark though it is, with courage and quiet patience and determination. As one man said who had endured much, "We are suffering, but we won't run away." This is the way they are facing the future - - May it not be that they must face the future alone!

WHAT THE BASIC NEEDS ARE

From the above background material it will be seen that there will be continuing needs of several kinds. For one thing, food, shelter and clothing for as many as five thousand people will need to be provided for an indefinite period.

There is immediate need for cash. Supplies of various kinds must be purchased. Lumber to put floors in the tents will cost an estimated six hundred dollars. Outside toilets are inadequate at present, and a shelter for incoming food and clothing should be erected. We suggest that cash gifts be sent for these needs. It should be kept in mind, too, that it may be far more economical to buy food locally in wholesale quantities than to ship it long distances.

There is need to raise a large sum of money for a loan fund. Even in normal times farmers must borrow money each spring in order "to make the crop." Fertilizer, seed and other supplies are bought on credit and paid for out of harvests. This year all regular bank facilities in the immediate vicinities of Haywood and Fayette Counties are boycotting the Negro farmers.

A considerable amount of loan capital is needed also to forestall foreclosures on both land and equipment, to protect farmers who own land or equity in land. Last fall those who registered to vote suffered especially from questionable methods of landlord bookkeeping. The word that went out, "Give them just enough to make the crop, and then freeze them out." This proved to be the policy. More tenant farmers than usual ended up not having earned enough "to pay off." Normally, advances could be had, but not this year. Every man who gets behind one payment is being asked to pay up at once or get out. A large fund is needed to be lent at very low interest or at no interest, and with no sure guarantee even of principal return.

It should be noted, too, that white farmers and business people, not many in number, but very important, who have refused to boycott Negro registrars or have testified for them against the White Citizens Council persecution are suffering right along with the Negroes. These people face complete economic ruin unless given loans or other forms of assistance.

All these people have intangible needs also. They are out in the front line, standing up for freedom and human dignity. They are laying their lives on the line. They need active support, as well as understanding and sympathy. They need to know that we are with them. Supplies and cash are indispensable, but so are human contacts. Visitors should go down and stand and sit and work with the persecuted. They do not need to have people tell them what they ought to do. They know, and they are doing it. But they do need to have friends and to meet those friends face to face from time to time. Go and share a bit of the danger. Stand watch for a few nights at a store which may be dynamited during the night. Let the weary owner get a few full nights' rest.

Go to the people who are joining to drive out the Negroes. Ask them in loving concern what they think they are doing. Be aware of their needs too. Many of them may be inwardly sick of what they are doing. Those who go to understand and help them realize their better selves may render the greatest of services.

It is well to note that persecution cannot be long continued if it is not carried on by more or less unanimous consent and support. A very few taking a strong stand against the boycott could dispell it like a bad dream.

SUGGESTIONS FOR MEETING THE NEEDS

Two needs arose in our discussions in Tennessee as being primary and urgent: (1) Installation of wooden floors in the tents, at an estimated cost of \$600 for lumber. (2) Loan capital.

Credit has always been readily available to these responsible farmers -- until they registered to vote. Now they are threatened with foreclosure of mortgages on land and farm equipment, with refusal of the customary loans to buy seed and fertilizer and to meet family expenses until the harvest.

Planting time is almost here; payments on long-term loans must be made to avoid being forced off the farms. Merchants (including a very few white supporters) are boycotted by suppliers and have to extend much credit for what business they have.

The need is immediate, and substantial sums of money are necessary. We are therefore beginning at once to collect money for a LOAN FUND. This is the plan:

The Civic and Welfare League in each County, with District organizations, will set up boards or committees to administer the fund. In addition, we will seek the right person, acceptable to the Leagues, to act as technical advisor in the area and as liaison between the Leagues and the fund-raisers. The loans would bear little or no interest, and the risk factor is high, of course. However, it is loan capital these people desire for this need, rather than gifts.

The sum of \$532 already loaned to meet one situation which came to the attention of the deputation, would be considered the first loan made by the fund. We believe it will be possible to obtain separate funds to pay the expenses of the liaison person, and no monies sent for the loan fund will be used for administrative expense or any other purpose. If you can buy some share in this financing of the loan fund, which we are calling OPERATION FREEDOM, please send your check and fill out the form below.

----- Mail to OPERATION FREEDOM, c/o Rev. Maurice McCrackin,
1111 Dayton St., Cincinnati 14, Ohio (MA 1-3784) -----

I want to participate in OPERATION FREEDOM. I / we enclose check for \$_____.

Please consider this as a gift ☐ OR a loan ☐ to the revolving loan fund;

OR ☐ Please use the enclosed for lumber or other such need.

If you are loaning money to the fund, please fill out the following:

☐ This loan is for an indefinite period of time.

☐ I would like this loan repaid in two years.

Name _____ Address _____

Remarks:

(If any individual or group would like to explore other avenues of assisting, we will be glad to make suggestions if a specific request is made for information.)

(While the need is for a large amount of money for the loan fund, it should be understood we are interested in small gifts or loans from persons or groups with little money. The number of persons supporting OPERATION FREEDOM is important, too.)