

GENERAL BOARD ACTION CONCERNING

A MINISTRY AMONG THE RESIDENTS OF THE DELTA AREA OF THE STATE OF MISSISSIPPI  
February 26, 1964

INFORMATION

The Mississippi Delta Project, a ministry initiated by the Commission on Religion and Race and the Division of Home Missions, is planned to deal with a critical area where civil rights, poverty and a drastic change in social structure are interlocked. A ministry to the people of that area requires a monumental effort of money and people with great skill in dealing with conflict situations. As the Delta area of Mississippi is now a symbol of the most hard core resistance to full racial equality, it must become a symbol of redemption and reconciliation.

Though American Christians have enough material wealth to underwrite the Mississippi ministry, our psychological and spiritual unwillingness to face the full nature of the seriousness of the crisis means we cannot do it alone. The churches of the United States have participated in many such ministries in other parts of the world, sending money and personnel through the Division of Inter-Church Aid and directly through Church World Service and denominational overseas agencies. It is equally fitting that the World Council of Churches be involved in the meeting of needs in America. Moreover, we need the experience of other Christians who in these recent years have ministered in the face of hostility and danger.

A background statement is attached as Exhibit IV.

VOTED --

- (1) That the National Council of Churches request the Division of Inter-Church Aid of the World Council of Churches to list for world-wide support a comprehensive project in the Mississippi Delta;
- (2) That the National Council of Churches offer the services of the Division of Home Missions of the National Council of Churches (as coordinating and administrative agent for the Council and its several concerned units) as the responsible agency of the churches of the National Council of Churches operate the project according to the regular procedures of such projects as developed over the years by the Division of Inter-Church Aid Refugee and World Service of the World Council of Churches.
- (3) That the National Council of Churches invite representatives of the judicatorial bodies of our member communions in Mississippi to further collaborate with, and advise concerning development of the proposed ministry in the Delta area.
- (4) That the judicatory heads of the several communions in Mississippi be consulted directly by the proper officer of the National Council of Churches and the positions of such church bodies be compiled in a memorandum to be presented to the June 4-5, 1964, meeting of the General Board.

PROPOSAL FOR A MINISTRY  
AMONG THE RESIDENTS OF THE  
DELTA AREA OF THE STATE OF MISSISSIPPI

EXHIBIT IV

All over the world people are confronting the pain that comes as old forms of social order give way to new ones. The "revolution of rising expectations" grips the life of Africa, Asia, and many other parts of the world. Americans are slowly coming to see that the Negro freedom movement in this country is a part of that world-wide struggle of people to assert their full humanity who have been disadvantaged because of color or class.

In such a world-wide struggle the whole body of Christ's church is deeply involved. The issues of justice are at stake. The suffering and misery that people face, the deep need for healing and reconciliation across lines of conflict are of primary concern for the world church. Through the World Council of Churches, churches of many nations are able to share resources that express the ecumenical ministry of the churches.

The churches of the United States have participated in many such ministries in other parts of the world, sending money and personnel through the Division of Inter-Church Aid and directly through Church World Service and denominational overseas agencies. It is equally fitting that the World Council of Churches be involved in the meeting of needs in America.

The achieving of racial justice throughout the nation must dominate the concerns of every Christian and every church. It is not alone because of how massively serious is the risk of a major rupture in our society, but racial injustice is a fundamental affront to the moral foundations of Christianity. Racial injustice is compounded by the vast economic gap between the affluent majority and the dispossessed minorities within the nation.

The fact of affluence in this country does not hide the hideous problems of persons caught in pockets of persistent poverty. As the nation's economic base continues to shift from agrarian to technological, the problems of those persons and groups of persons disadvantaged because of color or class, increase in geometric proportions.

The delta area of the State of Mississippi manifests in full display the total complexities of the problem of racial injustice and persistent poverty - it is an area of chronic need and at the same time pivotal for healing and redemption in all other areas. The interlocking of these problems on a national scale marks a major watershed in the life of the nation - especially as to the impossibility of solving these national problems by local means alone. The moral mandate that compels Christians anywhere to help all brothers everywhere demands this need be met. At such times and places in history the response of Christians has been decisive. The pattern of Christian mission is constant encounter with the real needs of

every age. The complex needs of the delta are such that the ministry of the World Council of Churches is necessary if the problems are to be resolved.

### SOME FACTS ABOUT THE DELTA

The delta is the area bordering the Mississippi River from Memphis, Tenn. to Vicksburg, Miss. that the following countries comprise: Bolivar, Coahoma, Humphreys, Issaquena, Leflore, Quitman, Sharkey, Sunflower, Tallachatchie, Tunica, and Washington. Seven other countries are partly Delta: Carrol, Grenada, Holmes, Panola, Warren, Yalobasha, and Yazoo. The part-Delta counties are not included in the following selected examples. (Tables are not included for purposes of brevity but they are available.)

MORTALITY RATES: In every county except Quitman and Washington the death rate for Whites was higher than the state average, and with the exception of Sunflower still higher for the non-whites.

HOUSING: Of the 13,370 houses in Leflore County, 4,998 had no flush toilets, 5,218 had no bathtub or shower, 6,028 were classified as less than sound, 3,700 had no piped water.

EDUCATION: In the Delta there are only 14 schools accredited by the Southern Association of Colleges and Secondary Schools - all of them White. There is no accredited Negro school, and in Tunica County with 5 times as many Negroes as Whites, there is one Negro high school. The school census for the other ten Delta counties is 36,652 for Whites and 78,956 for Negroes.

INCOME: The median income per person in the Delta for non-whites is \$456.00. This is in part a result of a large percent of the population being tenant farmers. However, the medium income of Whites is but \$1,850. The main problem at this point is the concentration of wealth among the few, e.g., on an average 5% of the farms control 50% of all farmland.

EMIGRATION: The People of the Delta themselves attempt to find relief from their plight by leaving the Delta. However, in most instances, this turns out to be no solution at all. The people who migrate usually go to large urban areas in the North or West. The emigrants from the Delta are largely unskilled and uneducated. The urban centers have no place for these people except the slum and the relief roll; this adds immensely to their problems, and provides no meaningful solution to the plight of the Delta migrant.

GOVERNMENT PROGRAMS: The federal government is acutely aware of the situation that besets such regions as the Delta, and together with state governments, has initiated a number of programs and agencies to deal specifically with these low-income rural areas. Four important ones are the Farmer's Home Administration, the Rural Areas Development, area Redevelopment Administration, and the Manpower Retraining and Development Act. These programs could and should be able to do considerable good.



However, they are not doing nearly as much as they could, and more important, where they do lend some assistance it is not given to the people who need it most. Two factors are responsible for the lack of effectiveness of government programs:

(a) The people who are in most need do not know about them, or if they do know about them, they do not know how to take advantage of them. A farmer whose income is below \$1000 a year does not have time from a practical standpoint to be out organizing other poor farmers in order to improve their conditions of life. In many instances he would be fired from his job as an "agitator" or "trouble maker" if he tried.

(b) The federal government's policy of local control allows local governments to thwart the intent of the federal program.

COMMODITY DISTRIBUTION: In a country that prides itself on being the agricultural giant of the world and has irrefutable evidence of the fact in the form of billions of dollars worth of stored surplus commodities, the fact that there are persons living in the Delta who are hungry is not only a national disgrace but a national crime. An increased and more equitable distribution of these commodities is immediately necessary.

#### NATIONAL COUNCIL RESPONSE

Residents of the area have sought help from various boards and agencies of the member communions and of units of the National Council of Churches. Their requests come under the general categories of relief from suffering, participation in acts of healing and reconciliation across lines of conflict, and for assistance in achieving human dignity. The communions and units of the National Council of Churches have responded in each of these areas in limited fashion. The gravity of the need in the Delta and the deep concern of member communions came into focus in the National Council of Churches' Commission on Religion and Race. The commission requested the Division of Home Missions to accept the responsibility for developing a proposal of ministry to the persons in the area.

The Executive Board of the Division of Home Missions recognized the validity and importance of mobilizing the concern of the churches in meeting the human need of the area and authorized the development of a project.

The processes leading up to the proposal have included consultation with White and Negro church and non-church leadership in the area, national and local governmental and private agencies, local and national denominational agencies and field survey units. Recognizing the world-wide implications of the challenge the church faces in the Delta region of Mississippi, and noting their experience in parallel situations in other parts of the world, the Division of Home Missions has also held consultations with representatives of the Division of Inter-Church Aid of the World Council of Churches.

The proposal is based on the following generalizations:

1. That the Christian concern is not only for individuals but to the society as a whole.
2. That acts of Christian mercy must be more than temporary relief. "Band-aids" are good only when corrective treatment is also administered.
3. In order to mobilize adequate skills, competencies and resources, and to give guidance to the project a committee of national prominence including representation from the state is essential.
4. The magnitude of the task requires a long term commitment of at least a decade and perhaps two.
5. Though agreed-upon goals are possible at the outset, the dynamics of today's world will demand constant study, reappraisal and adjustment of programs.
6. That though the concern of the church is for the total situation, there are other agencies of our society who have their contribution to make.
7. That the beginning point of the church's ministry is in the relieving of suffering and misery, and in healing and reconciliation.
8. That a project of this magnitude will need full participation of many units of the National Council of Churches and boards and agencies of the member communions.

#### THE PROPOSAL

That the National Council of Churches be the instrument to focus the concern and mobilize the resources of the churches in a ministry of service, reconciliation and social re-development with the persons of the Delta area of the State of Mississippi.

That a committee of persons of national prominence, including representatives of the area, be appointed to mobilize competence and resources and to give guidance to the project.

3. That the project be developed along three lines:
  - A. A ministry of services of direct relief developed to relieve suffering. In some situations this will include assisting those eligible for relief, to secure relief or direct assistance to those in need who are not otherwise eligible for relief, the establishment of local instrumentalities to administer such services, and the development of remedial self-help programs such as the present cooperative projects of dressmaking

B. A ministry of reconciliation and the securing of human dignity which would seek the following:

- (1) assisting in the establishing of communication between the White and Negro communities,
- (2) helping the people in drawing potential leadership from their midst, and helping such leaders acquire the knowledge and skills for competent and responsible leadership within the democratic setting of an American community,
- (3) aiding the people in identifying their common problems, needs, and concerns - especially those relating to their life and status as residents of the Mississippi Delta such as employment, welfare, housing, education, and legal matters,
- (4) developing indigenous centers in each county which would assist in the process of literacy and fundamental education, manpower retraining, communications and planning. Such centers can become the focal point of the ministry in each county.

C. The Christian message calls the church to a ministry of service and reconciliation. It also calls men to use the gifts which God has given them through the process of a developing technological society so as to meet the needs of all men. A ministry of community development which will mobilize technical skills, scientific knowledge, economic resources, and public opinion to the end of developing an adequate base for livelihood is of the essence. Though not the first to be implemented, from the beginning this basic objective needs to be built into the planning.

4. A director for the project should be secured as soon as funds are available. Under the direction of the project committee, the director would determine the size and nature of his staff and budget. The staff will be interracial and multi-disciplined. It is further recognized that staff presently engaged in such projects in other parts of the world will perhaps have some of the essential expertise needed. Preliminary planning includes a project director and a staff of persons for each of fifteen counties.

5. Tentative annual project costs will include the following:

Project director, clerical help, office and travel	\$ 25,000.00
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Up to fifteen field workers to be provided either by denominations and ecumenical organizations to the extent that they are available, or by special recruitment and funds - \$10,000 each (including auto and travel)	150,000.00
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Overall development, program, and administration	35,000.00
Rent, educational materials and tools	25,000.00
Moving expenses and equipment (nonrecurring)	<u>25,000.00</u>
(maximum)	\$260,000.00

Preliminary investigation would indicate that 60% of the above funds can be secured from boards and agencies of member communions of the National Council of Churches and that 40% might be sought through the World Council of Churches.