A REPORT ON FRIENDS VISITATION
AMONG THE BURNED CHURCHES OF MISSISSIPPI

1964's long hot summer of racial tension and violence is at an end, but in Mississippi its tragic affects continue to be felt by the congregations of thirty-six Negro churches destroyed by fire there. Indeed, there is reason to believe this wanton destruction may be just the beginning of a long and bitter harvest of harassment which Mississippi's racial extremists are determined to heap upon the Negro citizens of that state in reprisal for the summer's Civil Rights activity.

What is to be done? Surely some effort must be made to relieve this tragic situation and rally the conscience of the people of Mississippi in public protest against further manifestations of violence there.

Origin of a Concern

Friends first became involved in the search for some solution to this pattern of violence during the National Council of Churches Orientation and Training Conference for the Mississippi Summer Project. Several of us had been invited to serve as resource persons for some of the workshop sessions on nonviolence there. Yet even as we met, the summer's tragic record of violent events began to unfold, as reports of three burned churches and three missing Civil Rights workers reached the conference. There, in the heat of a continuing debate over the relative effectiveness of violence and nonviolence in the Civil Rights struggle, several pointed questions were brought to us: "What is it that you proponents of nonviolence would have us do in the face of this unfolding pattern of violence?" "Must we stand passively by while one after another of these churches are burned down around us?" "Have you no constructive nonviolent action to suggest as a response to such harassment?"

Of course there were no easy answers available. But after some thought and consultation with Bayard Rustin and other conference resource leaders, it occured to us that one possible means of engaging the situation might be the recruitment of several inter-faith and inter-racial work teams which would travel to the sites of the burned churches and offer their assistance in helping these congregations repair or re-build their sanctuaries. It was our feeling that such a response might serve to buoy the morale of the summer volunteers, establish an on-going basis of concern for the beleaguered condition of the Mississippi Negro and perhaps serve as a psychological deterent to those who were burning the churches -- at least in so far as they might be brought to realize that such vicious acts could only serve to increase the occassion for that very kind of inter-racial contact and cooperation they so violently oppose.

This proposal was subsequently shared and discussed with representatives of the American Friends Service Committee, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, The Fellowship of Reconciliation and the National Council of Churches, as well as with a number of small gatherings of New York Friends. Response to the idea was generally sympathetic. Colin Bell of the AFSC expressed a personal interest in the proposal and Art Thomas, Bruce Hanson and J. Oscar Lee of the National Council of Churches offered their encouragement. The latter explained that the National Council was already fully engaged in administering a variety of summer programs in Mississippi and that it had become almost completely identified with COFO's program of Civil Rights activity in the minds of most white Mississippians, with the result that the Council's name had become anathema to the white community there. For this reason, they felt it would be most helpful if Friends were to assume responsibility for the

further exploration and implementation of this particular concern.

Yet despite such expressions of general interest and support for the proposal, it was difficult to find a Friends organization prepared to assume responsibility for carrying forward this concern. Consequently Friends desire to be of service in the reconstruction of Mississippi's burned churches remained little more then an idea until July 28th, at which time Friends assembled at New York Yearly Meeting gave the matter their thorough consideration. Following a full and moving discussion of Friends general concerns and responsibilities in the field of race relations, the Yearly Meeting minuted its support for a Friend or Friends "to visit Mississippi in August for the purpose of assessing the need and opportunity for the reconstruction of churches damaged by violence there." The Yearly Meeting further approved the establishment of a Human Relations Fund to underwrite the expenses of this visitation, collected more than a thousand dollars from assembled Friends and authorized the Peace Action Steering Committee "to assume whatever additional administrative responsibilities might arise from this concern."

Less than a week later representatives of the Peace Action Steering Committee met and selected Thomas Purdy, Headmaster of the Oakwood Friends School and Ross Flanagan to undertake an initial visitation among the pastors and congregations of the burned churches in Mississippi. A letter was sent out to the clerks of all Friends Yearly Meetings in the United States raising this concern and inviting Friends throughout the country to join in the effort to help bring relief to our beleaguered brothers in Mississippi. Baltimore and Pacific Yearly Meetings responded with expressions of support for the project. In a minute Pacific Yearly Meeting "united with the concern of New York Yearly Meeting to help re-build the burned churches in Mississippi" and released Herbert Foster of Santa Cruz Monthly Meeting to travel to Mississippi to join Ross Flanagan in completing the visitation of the churches there.

And thus the concern was born.

The Situation in Mississippi

During the visitations which Tom Purdy, Herb Foster and I conducted among the burned churches in Mississippi from August 11th to September 3rd, we discovered that some twenty-two Negro churches or church-related buildings had been damaged or destroyed by fire and/or explosives since the beginning of the summer. (Since our departure an additional fourteen churches have been reported burned, bringing the known total to thirty-six.) To our knowledge only eight of these thirty-six churches had been used for Civil Rights activities.

Almost all of the buildings involved were small, rural, one-room, wood-frame churches. One brick church, the Zion Hill Baptist near McComb, was only two years old and several others had been recently refurnished with new benches, electric fans, hymn books or a piano.

Thirteen of the fifteen churches we actually visited had been totally destroyed. Most of the dispossessed congregations had an average membership of sixty to seventy-five persons, though a few ran as high as two-hundred. To date the total number of persons dispossessed by the church burnings is estimated to be approximately three thousand.

In the matter of insurance, the maximum converage carried by any of the burned churches contacted was eight thousand dollars. Several churches had been insured for

less than two thousand dollars and a good proportion indicated that they had no insurance whatsoever. Most of the pastors we visited expressed their congregation's determination to re-build of stone, cement block or brick. It has been estimated that the cost of labor and materials required to build a church of this sort would probably run around twenty thousand dollars. If we consider (as I believe we should) the reconstruction of all those churches totally destroyed to this date, then we can anticipate an overall financial undertaking of something on the order of four hundred to five hundred thousand dollars.

Yet even this sort of massive reconstruction effort will not resolve the matter. Indeed, not a few churches face even more pressing and profound problems -- many of them problems which money can't solve. These too must be understood and explored if we are truely concerned to minister to the affliction and redress the injustice suffered by these congregations. Perhaps I can best illustrate the variety of problems now facing these congregations by relating the stories of four churches as we encountered them in our visitations. Out of concern for the welfare of the individuals involved it has seemed wise to omit the names of the actual people and churches visited.

(1) The first of these four churches was burned mid-way through the summer in the central region of the state and, perhaps because it was the first church we visited, the peculiar plight of its congregation made a rather deep impression upon us. The church had been totally destroyed by fire "of unknown origin" only two weeks before, and yet it was clear from the moment of our arrival that its members had already managed to set aside their understandable burden of bitterness, sorrow and dispair and turn themselves to the task of building anew.

The major problem confronting this congregation was how and where to carry on church services until such time as the necessary money and materials could be secured to rebuild. For whereas most of the churches we visited were close to a sister church of the same denomination and frequently shared the same pastor, this particular congregation apparently had no such sister church to whom it could turn in this hour of need. And as we quickly learned, no white church would even consider the idea of opening <u>its</u> doors or making its own facilities available at an alternate hour. Indeed there were those in the white Christian community who were convinced that the mere conduct of a Negro service in a white church would somehow contaminate or otherwise violate the sanctity of that facility, thereby necessitating its destruction. For these reasons then, the members of this dispossessed congregation found themselves without an alternate place of worship and consequently obliged to conduct their services among the ashes of their former church. Later we had occassion to visit with the congregation during one such service.

So far as the congregation's own feelings about their situation where concerned, one of the church deacons with whom we spoke suggested that the thing which most bothered him about the burning was its effect upon the children and the disruption of their Sabbath School. The children, meanwhile were already busily engaged in an effort to make their own contribution to the reconstruction of their church, having collected approxamitely six dollars among themselves at their first meeting together since the church burning.

It was the ladies of the church, however, who seemed the most concerned about the immediate situation and the need to try to find some relief through the construction of a temporary shelter. Anything to provide some protection from the rain and that blazing Mississippi sun. A suggestion was made that perhaps we could provide the materials and some volunteer labor if the men of the church would join us and organize

the work and the ladies would undertake to keep us fed. The women were enthusiastic about their role in this plan and offered to fix us some of the best food we'd ever eaten "and plenty of it".

As to where to locate such a temporary shelter, there was some feeling that the original site was too exposed, situated as it was on a public highway out of sight of any of the church members' homes. And while there was no reason to suspect the white neighbors with whom the congregation had always been friendly, clearly someone seemed to bear a continuing grudge against the church in as much as garbage had been rather deliberately dumped on the church site on several occassions since the burning. For this reason it was felt to be safer and more secure to erect the proposed temporary church shelter deeper within the Negro community, perhaps in a field belonging to one of the deacons.

My last contact with this congregation was a conversation I had with the wife of one of the church trustees. She said simply "I sure hope something can be done. The way it is now our worship depends on the weather." It shouldn't require too much empathy to imagine some of the anguished and bitter feelings which must well up in these people when, in the midst of their worship together, there comes a sudden downpour and they are forced to scurry back to their cars and their homes, tramping through and tripping over the charred remains of their former church.

(2) A completely different sort of problem confronted the congregation of the second church we visited. That church, located as it was in the cotton-rich Delta region of the state, was apparently burned in an effort to force sale of the church site. As we got the story from the pastor.... For almost a hundred years the land in that area had been owned and farmed by Negroes. In the past few years, however, members of the white community had expressed increasing interest in developing this land as a white middle-income residential area. And so a variety of pressures and inducements had been employed to persuade the original Negro land owners to sell out to the whites. And they all did... all,that is, except the church in question. As the pastor explained it, "we have a bunch of proud old deacons in our church. Many of them have invested a life-time of hope and hard work in that little church and they simply were not willing to throw it all away for the little amount of money the whites were willing to pay us."

In mid-July the church was fired, and for all practical purposed totally destroyed, while a city fire truck stood idly by, -- apparently powerless to assist for want of an available water supply. Nor did this put an end to the church's woes. Apparently the local office of the insurance company which holds the fire insurance policy on this church has requested as part of its "routine" investigation of the church's claim, information as to <u>where</u> the congregation intends to rebuild. Naturally the pastor is reluctant to disclose this information until he and the congregation actually receive their insurance payment. However, even if they should succeed in collecting the insurance payment due them, they shall still have to contend with the prospect of further intimidation, harassment and violence if and when they should decide to rebuild on their present site.

For this reason our offer of personal assistance and volunteer help was doubly welcome. In the words of one church deacon with whom we spoke -- "let me be clear now. Some folks say that we must meet certain 'conditions' if we want their cooperation. Are you saying you'll help us rebuild nomatter <u>where</u> we decide to rebuild? Well that is good news! We've been on that land for eighty years and it seems like we've got a right to stay there."

(3) Yet a third kind of situation confronting some of the burned churches is suggested in this story of a church and pastor visited in south-western Mississippi. As is generally known the south-west region of Mississippi is considered to be the most dangerous and explosive strong-hold of racist activity in the state. Consequently any Negro church which has the misfortune of being located there starts with an immediate handicap. Its primary problem is nothing more nor less than how to survive and keep functioning as a Negro congregation in an area where some people regard any congregation of Negroes as a threat to white supremacy thus an excuse for violence.

However, to fully appreciate the situation, one must understand that in this part of Mississippi violence against Negroes is not simply a matter of political or social reprisal; it is perhaps just as frequently a matter of emotional release. For whereas most Southern gentlemen choose to blow off their tensions, frustrations and excess steam in a good stiff workout at the gym, there are unfortunately some men to be found in this part of the state who seem to regard the Negro as their favorite sport. To such men a black skin is always fair game and you don't have to have a license, just an appreciation of the ground rules and a proper sense of timing. I am sure there will be some who may regard this analogy as unnecessarily stark and revolting. Nonetheless, this was the image of south-west Mississippi conveyed to us by those who live and work there... people like the pastor of one burned church which overnight became the target and victum of racist violence.

This particular church was less than two years old and had wisely been built of brick. Nevertheless the damage done to the church was extensive.... only two walls remained in tact. And the violence and intimidation continued. The church deacons were warned not to seek outside help; crosses were burned on the lawns of local whites who made contributions toward the reconstruction of the church. Indeed, there developed such an oppressing climate of fear and terror in that area that many members of this particular congregation and other nearby Negro congregations simply stopped coming to church.

For these reasons the pastor explained that any obvious display of direct material assistance from outside groups, (such as a work team), would probably only serve to further inflame the activity of the racists in that area. He therefore suggested that any donated church supplies, cash or building materials be held in Jackson where he and his deacons would make arrangements to pick them up.

During the course of our conversation together it became increasingly clear that the pastor himself had anxieties about the possible consequences of even this limited contact with "outsiders". Not wishing to add to his miseries, we quickly terminated our visit with him. But I can still recall his parting words: "The Bible says that the Devil will be loose for a while in the land. I guess that's what's happening to us down here now."

(4) In many respects I would guess this fourth and final case history represents the most compelling example of the plight of the Mississippi burned churches. For not only is the story especially moving, but the particular circumstances of this case help to point up some of the fundamental problems which will continue to beset the Mississippi Negro long after church-burning has gone out of style.

Early last spring a small Negro Baptist congregation, not far from Jackson, decided to begin construction of a new church. Unable to forsee the violent events of the summer

they elected to build their church of wood. About the same time they were approached by several Civil Rights groups with respect to the possibility of making their church social hall (across the road from their church site) available for use as a freedom school. The congregation agreed to permit the Civil Rights groups to use their social hall and for two months the two efforts -- church construction and freedom school -- proceeded without incident.

Then late one night in August a fire destroyed the church social hall and suddenly the congregation found itself confronted with two rather pressing questions -- one practical, one moral. Should they proceed with the construction of their wood frame church and should they continue to serve as the location for a freedom school?

Needless to say, these were not easy decisions to make. For as the pastor later explained, there was virtually no way of safeguarding the partially completed church -- isolated as it was from the rest of the rural Negro community. Nor could the congregation afford to make the obvious switch from wood to brick construction. Even so, the congregation was of the conviction that it was the will of the Lord and not the lumber that ought to concern them most. And then too, the record of summer violence left no assurance that the church would be spared even if they did decide to stop the freedom school. And so the congregation decided to stick to its guns, (Friends will excuse the expression), and carry on with both the building and the freedom school program.

For a while all went well. Then this fall, just as the building was nearing completion, several more disheartening developments came to light. It was discovered that not one of thirteen state insurance agencies would insure the new church. "Too great a risk", they said. And of course they may well have been right. Still the fact remained that the congregation had invested approximately ten thousand dollars in labor and materials in constructing their new church and now, as a result of the summer's wave of terror, they found themselves unable to protect their investment. But the crowning blow was still to come. Word got around that some of the deacons had an idea as to who had been responsible for the burning of the church social hall. Apparently, however, their suspicions must have been voiced around a bit too much, for shortly thereafter we learned that one of these same deacons had had a run-in with one of the rumored suspects. After that, all of the church members were convinced that just as soon as the new building was completed, it too would be burned. And by whom? -- why none other than the local Deputy Sheriff who lived down the road!

Ever since then this little congregation has been waiting, -- waiting without hope of justice or promise of relief. In the midst of their own everyday world of uncertainity these long-suffering people now feel bitterly certain of one thing, and that is simply that someday, sometime, somehow The Man will come and burn their beautiful new church to the ground. And there's nothing they can do about it. Not even sentries with shotguns will help. For how can they hope to change the man beneath the sheet? And what religious congregation can long survive the psychological strain of sitting up night after night defending their sanctuary with shotguns, waiting for someone who can afford to wait?

And so their anguished wait continues.

That was how I found them. "Trouble", the pastor said with a wry smile, "no you can't cause us any trouble. We've got all there is."

These then were a few of the situations we encountered and conversations we shared during our visitations among the burned churches of Mississippi.

But what of the white community? What was its response to the church burnings and what kind of interest did we find among Mississippi's white pastors and laymen for a sincere and cooperative program of church reconstruction?

Our first efforts to find answers to such questions were focused rather directly upon feeling out local sentiment on the subject of church burning and rebuilding in those individual communities where burnings had actually occurred. Toward this end we made it a general practice to first contact the white pastors (usually Baptist) in each of the communities we visited. Our interest here was in trying to determine to just what degree the local white congregations were concerned to assist their Negro counterparts. Our next stop was the city police department or sheriff's office where we briefly identified ourselves and our mission and asked their assistance in locating the sites of the churches burned in their area. While there were those who felt it rather foolish for us to deliberately call the attention of the local law enforcement officials to our presence in the area, it was our considered opinion that the interests of all concerned would best be served by trying to remove any misconceptions of who we were and what we were about. We also considered it our responsibility not to ignore the difficult position of those law enforcement officials who were genuinely trying to serve justice and maintain law and order in their communities. As someone so aptly put it: "When a man's sitting on a keg of dynamite, the very least one can do is inform the poor soul of one's mission as an itinerant torch bearer!"

Unfortunately, as one might expect, the response to such visits and inquiries was most often one of frightened curiosity and guarded detachment, although we occasionaly encountered a particularly sympathetic minister or pleasant-mannered sheriff. And we soon came to understand that while there were a good many people in Mississippi who were troubled about the church burnings and sincerely concerned to do something, few of these same people were prepared to make public expression of their concern. Their hesitancy, of course, stemmed largely from an uncertainty as to just where the real weight of the community -- particularly the press and the governor's office -- stood on this issue. Clearly a local effort was needed to help establish the cause and organize the concern for reconstructing burned churches. And to our pleasant surprise we learned that a number of efforts along these lines were just then getting under way in the capital city of Jackson.

On August 6th a lead editorial entitled "Smoke Over Mississippi" appeared in the Baptist Record, the official journal of the Mississippi Baptist Convention Board which claims to have the "largest circulation of any newspaper of any kind in Mississippi." The editorial spoke out forthrightly against the church burnings, asserting its view that: "Mississippians of both races are deeply destressed by these tragic events. They know that the burning of Negro church buildings is not going to resolve the racial tensions which now exist in the state, nor bring solution to a single Civil Rights problem. Indeed, these fires may do as much to prevent harmonious solution of the problems as anything that can happen....that is why these atrocious acts, whoever may be responsible for them, are clearly condemned by every right thinking citizen, and certainly, by every Christian in the state."

A week later, in response to a flood of inquiries about how people in churches might give help to rebuild the burned Negro churches, the Baptist Record carried a second editorial announcing the establishment of a "Negro Church Rebuilding Fund" and the assignment of Dr. William P. Davis, Secretary of the Mississippi Baptists' Negro Work Department, to serve as administrator of this effort. Shortly thereafter similar editorial appeals were published in several other state denominational newspapers including the Mississippi Catholic Register and the Mississippi Methodist Advocate.

About the same time, Rev. Robert B. Kochtitzky, a Methodist pastor presently working in the field of overseas service, was instrumental in bringing together a group of Jackson's most influential civic and religious leaders to see what might be done to provide some direct assistance to the Christian Union Baptist Church, which had been burned a few weeks before just north of Jackson. At this meeting plans were made to assist that congregation in their efforts to relocate and rebuild their church near the Tougaloo Community. Several local architects volunteered their services in drawing up the blueprints for the new church. And it wasn't long before Rev. Kochtitzky and the group had succeeded in securing pledges of support from a variety of business and labor leaders including Robert Ezelle, President-elect of the Jackson Chamber of Commerce and Claude Ramsey, Executive Director of the Mississippi Labor Council AFL-CIO. However, even more important perhaps, was Bob Kochtitzky's personal concern that the occasion of such material assistance be utilized as an opportunity to establish new bridges of understanding, respect and goodwill between the white and Negro people of Mississippi. Towards this end Bob initiated an effort to recruit lay members of the white churches in Jackson to volunteer their services, -- traveling out to the sites of several burned churches nearby to assist those dispossessed congregations in clearing away the debris and hauling in new materials.

But the big news was yet to come. On September 9th a group of 23 Mississippi church leaders representing nine denominations met together in the chapel of the Mississippi Baptist Building and formed the Mississippi Committee of Concern. This Committee was conceived as a united expression of the religious community in Mississippi and is composed of representatives of the Roman Catholic, Jewish and Protestant faiths, both white and Negro. A statewide effort, the Committee has declared its intention of assisting any Mississippi church known to have been damaged or destroyed by violence regardless of its location, denomination or involvement in Civil Rights activity.

In large part, of course, the Committee simply represents a merger of the two previous efforts with Dr. Davis serving as Committee Chairman and Rev. Kochtitzky as Chairman of the Sub-Committee responsible for investigating the needs of the burned churches. But it has proved a most significant merger. For its apparant effect has been to combine some of the strongest and best points of each effort in such a way as to avoid some of the problems and pitfalls which might have hindered the further development of either of the earlier efforts. From the Baptist initiative and continued leadership in this effort the Committee of Concern has been afforded public approval and community respect as well as more direct contact with some of the key Negro religious leadership of the state. And from the Jackson group of religious and civic leaders, the Committee has derived much of its concern for keeping sensitive to the needs and desires of the dispossessed congregations themselves and for trying to involve the white community in more meaningful contact and cooperation with the Negro community in the church rebuilding effort. Emerging as it has, then, from these two separate sources of experience and concern, Friends and other observers are hopeful that this new combined and coordinated effort of the Committee of Concern will be able to avoid some of the many pitfalls of paternalism, mis-guided assistance and mis-directed and mis-handled funds which are reported to have plagued a similar church rebuilding effort recently completed in south Georgia.

Already the Committee is reported to have collected $45,000 and on Oct. 1st an attractive fund-raising brochure was published and distributed for circulation throughout the state. In this brochure the following message is conveyed: "The Committee wishes to make it possible for men, women and children of goodwill to respond to violence, hatred and destruction with concern, compassion and construction. With this motivation we initiated a united effort for concrete personal action in response to the

physical losses and personal injustices and indignities suffered by Negro congregations whose buildings have been set fire by unknown arsonists. .... Through personal acts of concern and compassion by Jews and Christians throughout our state we hope that a new spirit of goodwill springs up to 'let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an overflowing stream.' It is our prayer that all people will be guided by a sense of wisdom and justice which will destroy the will to violence of any sort."

Today in Mississippi there is hope that as the Committee of Concern continues its work to repair the physical and emotional damage done by racist violence in Mississippi, perhaps a new spirit of kinship and mutual respect may be born in the hearts of all Mississippians, black and white.

What Friends Can Do

Thus far Friends' role in the reconstruction of Mississippi's burned churches has been pretty largely a catalytic or enabling one. Our concern has not been to establish a Quaker Church Rebuilding Program, but to encourage and assist the development of an indigenous church rebuilding effort through which Friends might channel their assistance. Consequently we have sought no publicity but have chosen to work behind the scenes, lending whatever help and support we can to those white and Negro leaders within the state who have themselves expressed an interest in this matter. Such Quaker assistance is perhaps best illustrated by the fact that all of the significant data and material derived from Friends visitation among the burned churches has been made available to the leadership of the recently formed Committee of Concern.

Our reason for taking this position, of course, derives from a conviction that there are more than enough new programs currently being initiated and maintained by "outsiders" in Mississippi, while in this particular matter of church rebuilding there is opportunity for a highly constructive and promising endeavor which can most easily and appropriately be organized by the people of Mississippi themselves.

At the same time, I believe there are a number of rather significant, if somewhat intangible, contributions which Friends can make to the church rebuilding effort. First: We can help mobilize greater national interest and support for the plight of the burned churches through our efforts to identify and interpret some of the real needs and opportunities inherent in this situation. Second: We should remain alert to opportunities through which we can act to inter-relate the white and Negro communities in cooperative endeavors aimed at the resolution of their common and peculiar problems. Third: We can serve to stimulate, and in part provide, a most important dimension of personal involvement and concern in all those programs of material and financial assistance for which we share responsibility.

Just what is our understanding of the problems and opportunities arising out of the church burning situation in Mississippi? Before I went down to Mississippi I had a number of unresolved questions on my mind. Since returning I have encountered numerous other Friends who have been similarly troubled with these same questions. Briefly stated they are simply: "Why were the churches burned?" "Why should they be rebuilt?" and "What can outsiders do?" I have thought it might be helpful if I tried to share some of my own observations along these lines based upon our visitations in Mississippi.

Why were the churches burned? When we first arrived in Mississippi, there was all sorts of speculation as to just who had burned the churches. Some people thought that it was the work of teenage delinquents who were looking for a new thrill and simply

hit upon the Negro churches as a focus for their "fun." Others felt the church burnings were perhaps the work of Civil Rights workers themselves. Rumors were a dime a dozen. But as the summer wore on I think it became increasingly clear that all 36 of these church burnings could not have been unrelated incidents. Clearly there is someone or some group with some purpose behind them.

Without involving ourselves in extensive speculation over the possible identity and motive of those individuals or groups perpetuating this wanton violence, I believe it is important for us to give some consideration to the ultimate effect of the burnings upon the Mississippi Negro. Obviously one consequence of this wide-spread destruction of rural Negro churches has been to prevent their possible use as future freedom schools or bases of Civil Rights activity. At the same time their systematic destruction has served to intimidate a number of other Negro congregations and communities throughout the state from identifing themselves in any way with Civil Rights activity.

But most important, perhaps, has been the oppressing effect of the church burnings upon the emotional state of the Mississippi Negro. For whether intended or not, the cumulative psychological effect of this relentless burning of one church after another, without hope of justice or relief, has been to push the Mississippi Negro's face -- his self-respect and dignity -- back into the mud with the reminder that in Mississippi the white man can do anything he wants to the black man with impunity. In short, through these repeated and unredressed acts of violence, one can almost hear the white racist saying "You ain't nothing nigger and don't you forget it."

Why should the churches be rebuilt? Many Friends have asked why we should help to rebuild Negro churches, when to rebuild them is to perpetuate a segregated institution. Others have questioned whether the churches burned were all that important to the Negro community and whether it wouldn't make more sense to put the money and effort into building community centers or some other phase of the Civil Rights Program.

I believe the basic answer to both these questions is that the destruction of these churches was generally viewed by the congregations involved as a deep personal loss. To the great majority of Mississippi's rural Negro population the church represents the soul of the community and its great source of hope for a brighter tomorrow. There have been times in the history of the Mississippi Negro when the church was the only thing that kept him going. He would walk five or six miles each evening to come to services to find the strength and courage to go on. Today and tomorrow the church seems likely to remain the central focus of activity and the major source of inspiration in the life of the rural Mississippi Negro.

As for the argument that building Negro churches perpetuates segregation, I think it must be recognized that in most areas of Mississippi, desegregation of church services is not likely to become a significant reality for the next ten to fifteen years. To fail to rebuild churches for these congregations is thus to deny them the opportunity for worship. And to suggest that we utilize the occasion of their misfortune to urge them to challenge church segregation would seem to me the gravest sort of injustice and Northern liberal presumption.

Finally it must be said that, just as the most important thing about the destruction of the churches was not their physical loss but the manner and fact of their destruction, likewise the most important thing about their reconstruction is not the buildings replaced, but the manner and fact of their restoration. Seen in this light, the importance of reconstruction rests primarily in its restoration of Negro dignity and the opportunity which a cooperative building program may provide for bringing the white and Negro communities into more meaningful relationship.

What can outsiders do? Before going to Mississippi I, like many others, was deeply troubled over the possibility that my visitation would result in more harm and harrassment for the Mississippi Negro then help. Once in Mississippi, however, we were continually reasurred that our presence and work there couldn't possibly make things much worse then they already were, but could, on the contrary, help to keep alive the promise of a "new day comin."

As far as the specific contributions which "outsiders" can make, I would certainly agree with those who say that the overwhelming need in Mississippi today is for men and women and families of conviction who are prepared to sacrifice their own comfort and security and move to Mississippi for "the duration" as participants in what the Civil Rights groups might call a "live-in."

However, the experience of our own rather brief visitation in the state (five weeks in all) would seem to suggest that there are most certainly short-range contributions which can also be made.

In the first place we were able to make a fairly complete survey of the burned church situation. Until our arrival there had been no one with the time or concern to make an overall investigation of this particular problem. Consequently, people had been obliged to acknowledge each new report of a church burning with a frustrating and demoralizing: "There goes another church." So one thing we were able to do was to follow up these reports and gather together in one folder the various facts related to church burnings: the number of churches involved, the addresses of the pastors, photographs of the damage, information as to insurance coverage, etc.

Our second contribution was to offer the hand of concern, friendship and respect to our beleaguered Negro brethern. Prior to our arrival no white person with the exception of the law enforcement officials had taken the trouble to personally contact and visit the great majority of these dispossessed congregations. In many cases our visitation represented the first real opportunity some of these Negro people had had to meet and speak with a white man in an equitable and self-dignifying relationship.

I can still recall one particular discussion which Herb Foster and I had with an 84 year old deacon of a burned church north of Jackson. We spent an hour or so chatting about his long affiliation with the church, his land and some of his life history. And when the time came for us to go, he got up and shook our hands warmly and said: I'm sure glad you came by. Before I'd heard the good news, but now I've seen it."

Finally I believe our visitation made a contribution by providing concerned members of the white community, who wanted to reach out and relate to the afflicted Negro congregations, with an excuse to do so. For the unfortunate fact was that many of these same deeply concerned men had been intimidated by elements in the white community from making any contact with the burned Negro churches. Ironically, however, our visitation provided them with the very excuse they needed, for they were then able to justify their own interest and assistance on the grounds that: "We don't want another invasion of Northerners down here helping our Negroes rebuild their churches. Let's show them we can handle our own problems."

Now what about Friends' continuing relationship to the white and Negro communities in Mississippi? Most of the outside groups which are concerned to help stimulate change in Mississippi seem to end up choosing to work either in one community or the other. They either choose to lend their assistance to the political, social and economic revolution against oppression which is being carried forward by the Negro community or they choose to minister to the moral and spiritual revolution against racism which is taking

place in the white community. They make this choice in part because they find it understandably difficult to straddle the fence and meet the tests of loyalty demanded by both sides. But the unfortunate fact remains that the effect of their choice and subsequent identification with one or the other community, is to encourage that community's total preoccupation with itself. The almost inevitable result, of course, is a further breakdown in communication between the white and Negro communities.

Here again, however, the problem is not that the Negro Civil Rights workers have consciously conspired to exclude white Mississippians from "their revolution," but simply that their fear and bitterness over contact with the white community have had that effect. Likewise it seems clear that the "white moderate" has not consciously sought to avoid contact with Negro Mississippians, but again the fear and pride mixed up in his own self-image has had the effect of inhibiting the development of any new and more meaningful relationships with the Negro community.

The ultimate consequence of all this is that the two communities become further and further removed from any interest or understanding of each other's problems, and more and more convinced of their ability to go it alone and complete their respective revolutions without reference to the other community or anyone else.

Friends' role in all of this is, I believe, to try to bring both communities to an understanding of the urgent necessity for abandoning this point of view. This, it seems to me, we can best do by remaining alert to opportunities such as cooperative work camps through which the white and Negro communities can find the occasion to inter-relate and develop a deeper appreciation of one another's problems.

I should like to close this report with one of the many stories which have emerged from the past summer's Mississippi experience. I share it with you now because I believe that in the last analysis neither the harsh statistics nor the dramatic news headlines can adequately explain the essence of the transformation now taking place in Mississippi. For the real power of that adventure is reflected in the humanity of its participants. It is Ben Chaney's tears, Frannie Lou Hamer's jubilence, George Green's spirit which continue to fire the hearts and inspire the souls of all those brave individuals, white and Negro, who carry on.

It was my privelege while attending the Oxford, Ohio training program for Mississippi Summer Project volunteers to room with George Green. George is a 19 year old Negro born and raised in Mississippi who was given the assignment of trying to establish the freedom movement in the southwest part of the state. Southwest Mississippi is generally considered to be the state's most dangerous and racially tense area.

During the preliminary planning sessions at Oxford George was asked to make some initial remarks about his particular area of the state. I can still remember him saying to the group: "I'm not in this business to get people killed; I'm trying to accomplish some change." Following his remarks someone pressed George as to exactly what kind of political activity he contemplated for southwest Mississippi. Replied George: "I'm not going to take unjustifiable risks by holding large public meetings or freedom schools or any other kind of activity which might unneccessarily jeopardize the lives of many people in that area. I'll be satisified if we can just manage to get an inter-racial group into McComb and survive for 72 hours." I can recall the snickers and remarks of some people at Oxford who were inclined to feel that perhaps George was over-dramatizing the danger of the situation a little bit.

Some months later, after the announced expansion of FBI efforts in the state, George was given the green light to try to establish an inter-racial freedom house in McComb, Mississippi. Sure enough, less than 72 hours after his arrival in town, the house was bombed. Apparently the bomb was thrown between a car parked in the driveway next to the house and a window, inside which one of the summer volunteers was sleeping. However, as it happened this particular volunteer had felt an unexplained uneasiness earlier in the evening and had consequently gotten out of bed and decided to sleep on the floor beside the bed. Having been through a few blasts himself, George had erected a plywood partition around his bed. And another volunteer in the area of the explosion was protected by some furniture. As a result, when the blast came, it blew the debris over them and they were spared. Immediately after the blast George picked himself up and looked around to see if all the others were safe and, when he found that no one had been seriously injured or killed, he found himself thinking aloud, "Well, if the good Lord saw fit to bring us through that alive, I guess its time we got about proclaiming the good news!" And so George got the group together and they went out and started walking around the house singing "Ain't going to let no bombing turn me round!" And at the sound of the explosion and the subsequent singing of the civil rights volunteers the entire Negro community of McComb turned out to express its concern and support for the group, whereupon George sent off a wire to Jackson saying "Rush 250 voter registration kits. Freedom is in McComb to stay!"

I tell this story because it suggests to me, what I believe similar stories have revealed to others, -- that God is moving in Mississippi.

As one who has been privileged to witness something of this "holy experiment", I have come back from Mississippi with the hope that perhaps we Friends can find within ourselves the faith, the strength, the humility and compassion to share in His great work there.

Ross Flanagan,

October, 1964