

## MINISTERIAL MISSION TO McCOMB MISSISSIPPI

October 19-29, 1964

(This following is a sequential summary of events and experiences encountered during a week in McComb, Mississippi. Little attempt has been made to organize these thoughts but, rather, herein is the subjective recall and resume of the memory and notes of J. Frederick McKirachan, Executive Secretary for the United Presbyterian Synod of Pennsylvania's Commission on Religion and Race)

The Reverend and Mrs. Donald D. Custis, the Reverend Robert Kwik and I left the Synod office in Camp Hill, Pennsylvania shortly after 8:00 a.m. on Monday, October 19, 1964. After a brief delay at the Harrisburg Buick garage we embarked at 9:00 a.m. for McComb Mississippi in response to an appeal by the National Council of Churches for ministers to live and work in McComb with representatives of COFO (the Council of Federated Organizations).

Our trip progressed through a rainy morning and afternoon. As we went south we were greeted by the beautiful rolling wooded countryside of Virginia. At dusk the sky cleared and a red sunset cheered the dreary day. After dark a full moon lighted the sky. Throughout the afternoon and into the evening we discussed the options of staying overnight or pushing on through Tennessee and Alabama to Mississippi. The question hinged on the relative safety of traveling through these areas at night in a car bearing Pennsylvania license plates. At approximately 9:00 p.m. we stopped for supper south of Bristol Tennessee and called Bob Beech in Hattiesburg. Bob is the Director of the Ministers' Project in Hattiesburg and, this past summer, moved with his family to that community. Bob encouraged us to come along through the night assuring us that no undue harassment should be expected.

When we entered Alabama I must confess to a heightened sense of caution and apprehension. In one community we passed a local police car. I was even more careful, after this, to watch the rear view mirror in order to detect following vehicles.

At 4:00 a.m. we had breakfast in Birmingham. We were impressed with the friendliness of the waitress and the jovial nature of the gasoline station attendant who gave us directions out of the city. Our sensitivity to the people around us is indicative of the tension we felt as Civil Rights workers moving through, what we believed to be, hostile territory. At 8 o'clock Harrisburg time (which is 6:00 a.m. Mississippi time) we entered Mississippi driving west to Meridian and south to Hattiesburg. At the edge of Hattiesburg we were confused by directions and were stopped reading a map when a station wagon pulled up next to us and a man jumped out. My immediate thought was that we were in trouble. This man, however, was very friendly and gave us directions to Pine and Market Streets. We felt it symbolic that the company name on the side of the station wagon represented him as working for a company whose business was "Pest Control." We reached Bob Beech's office and he was waiting for us. While visiting with him John Cameron entered and talked with us at some length. John has been Associate Director of the Ministers' Project at Hattiesburg and is a candidate for Congress for the Freedom Democratic Party. He is a young Negro pastor in Hattiesburg and is engaged in lecture tours throughout the nation interpreting the Mississippi situation.

During these talks I felt resentful. A lot of time was being taken and we were

hearing stories of incidents and conditions with which we had been familiar before coming. We were all very tired. We were generally relieved to be in Hattiesburg and pleasantly surprised that no incidents had been encountered. The scenery of rolling hills and tall straight Pine trees was beautiful and we did not want to face the fact that this was indeed Mississippi with all of its oppressive hostility.

(While in Hattiesburg we ate lunch. We had fried chicken, spaghetti and meat balls, peas, greens, tomatoe slices, sweet potatoes, white potatoes, ice cream and a pepsi-cola all for the price of .72¢.)

Bob Beech, however, succeeded in reawakening our sense of caution and danger. He told us that the previous week a woman with whom his wife had established a relationship of friendliness had come to her and said "I can't be your friend anymore." Also Bob told us that his son had been asked not to come to a private kindergarten because his father's occupation was too contraversial.

We left Hattiesburg somewhat refreshed and with great haste and renewed caution made our way to McComb. Arriving there we were greeted by a few of the COFO people. We were impressed by the chaotic scurrying about of countless people. They came and went with little regard to our presence. When supper time came the COFO group went into the Freedom House and sat down to eat. After a few minutes I went in and asked if we might eat with them. They were most surprised that we felt the need to ask and assured us that we could share their meal. After supper we were directed to the homes in which we would stay. Bob Kwik and I were taken to the home of Mr. and Mrs. Charles Bryant. Mr. Bryant was a delegate to the National Democratic Convention for the Freedom Democratic Party. He is a carpenter and barber. Mrs. Bryant is one of the women who visited President Johnson to seek his aid concerning the 16 bombings and the tension which had gone on in McComb in the summer and early fall. As we entered the house we were greeted by a shotgun in one corner and when we were taken to our bedroom there was a shotgun behind the bedroom door. Mrs. Bryant quickly picked up the gun and smiled saying "Oh, I guess you won't be needing this". Because we had not slept since Sunday night (and this was Tuesday night) I went to sleep immediately, somewhat confused as to how a state whose natural beauty was so impressive could be, in human terms, so ugly. This confusion was to grow through the days ahead until I was to feel that in many ways the psychological posture of the white community in Mississippi reflects definite paranoid tendencies.

We received some orientation the next morning by the Rev. Harry Bowie who is the project coordinator for the National Council of Churches in McComb and from other members of the COFO staff. We were told that our work would be under the direction of the National Council coordinator and the COFO project director. We would be involved in canvassing homes in the Negro community to: 1. Register persons for the Freedom Democratic Party; 2. Encourage people to participate in Freedom Day which was scheduled for Monday, October 26. On that day it was hoped that large numbers of local persons would journey to the County Courthouse at Magnolia and attempt to register to vote. 3. We would be involved in publicizing and explaining the Freedom Vote. This was a mock election in which persons, Negro and White, would be given the opportunity to vote for candidates on the Democratic ticket, the Republican ticket and the Freedom Democratic ticket. It is hoped that these ballots will do two things. First, they will indicate that Negroes will register and will vote if given the opportunity. Secondly, the Freedom vote will give substantial evidence that if the Negro populus of Mississippi is given the opportunity to exercise its franchise the election results within the state might be quite different. (There was no doubt in anyone's mind but that the substantial majority of white Mississippians would vote for Senator Goldwater. We did not see one Johnson banner or sign along the highways in the state.

Although many Negro cars bore Johnson-Humphrey stickers we saw, during our week there, only two cars operated by white persons with Johnson stickers on the bumpers or in the windows.)

With these duties in mind Wednesday was spent canvassing in the neighborhoods. During that day I met one woman who was afraid to give us her name even for the purpose of conversation. She was afraid that she would lose her job if she became identified with the COFO project. I met another woman who said that all the efforts being exerted by COFO would not help. She said, "maybe someplace else, but not in Mississippi." On Wednesday evening I attended a neighborhood meeting in the home of a Mrs. Woods. During the meeting it was pointed out that in Pike County there were 15,000 Negroes. Other figures concerning population and voters: The State of Mississippi has 435,000 Negroes of voting age of whom only 26,500 are registered. This is in contrast to Alabama where there are 111,000 registered Negro voters and to Louisiana where there are 184,000 registered Negro voters. The importance of the COFO project and the ministers' participation is evidenced through the experience in Hattiesburg. There has been, in that community, a substantial increase in the numbers of persons attempting to register during the past four years. Figures we were given are: 1961 - no attempts; 1962 - 12; 1963 - 45; 1964 - 3,000 persons attempted to register.

The meeting in Mrs. Woods' house also brought up the question of the bombers. The question was asked. "Will the bombers be convicted?" To this the unanimous answer was "no." Further question, "What shall we do?" Answer, "punish them as they would punish us." A further comment, "It is not our job to punish but to act in such a way as to deter further violence." Another comment, "Let's not do anything that will make matters worse." To this one of the COFO members replied, "The sheriff is a friend of the bombers, how can things get any worse?"

This latter statement grew out of the knowledge that the mayor of McComb is President of the White Citizens' Council and that the Police Chief, the Mayor, the Sheriff and other prominent civic and community leaders were very much involved in the activities of the Ku Klux Klan, the Americans for the Preservation of the White Race, and other white community organizations. It is also known that functionally and in fact the State Police, the Sheriff's deputies, and local Police personnel operate as one force. They are closely coordinated in every way.

Intimidation of persons who have tried to register for voting and intimidation of Civil Rights workers is a part of the local landscape. One woman was fired from her job as a maid because she refused to remove an "LBJ" sign from her car. The previous spring, we were told, a widow with a number of children at home was taken from her home by two carloads of men and beaten severely. During the summer and early fall there were sixteen bombings in McComb. Among these were the Society Hill Baptist Church, the COFO Headquarters (Freedom House), the home of Mrs. Eylene Quin, the home of Mr. and Mrs. Charles Bryant, the home of Mr. and Mrs. Willie Dillon. In each of these instances the persons bombed have been harassed by the police. Mrs. Bryant was charged with discharging a firearm on public property. The police quickly dropped this charge. Mrs. Bryant had engaged in a gun battle with the bombers the night on which dynamite exploded in her front yard. She claims, still, that she "winged" one of them. Scratches on a buffet in her living room were made by flying shotgun pellets and holes in the screen witnessed to the battle held there.

The investigation of the bombing at the Dillon's house led to the arrest of Mr. Dillon. He was charged with operating a garage without a license and with stealing electricity. The first charge was based on the fact that a COFO car was parked in his yard

and he had been doing some work on that car. The second charge resulted from the work light which he had plugged into the electrical line on the outside of his home. The police contended that he tapped into the electric line before the line passed through the meter and was therefore stealing electricity. We were told that after investigation, a representative of the Mississippi Power and Light Company assured Mrs. Dillon that the tap had indeed been below the meter and Mr. Dillon was therefore well within his rights. However, Mr. Dillon was convicted on both charges and sentenced to 9 months at hard labor for the county and fined \$600. His case is presently under appeal.

Mrs. Quin had her beer license taken from her because she allowed COFO workers to eat in her restaurant. Later, her home was bombed while her two children slept inside. I saw the room where the children slept. It was on the front corner of the house where the bomb exploded and debris cluttered the entire room. It is a miracle that the children were not killed. Plaster, lathe, and objects of furniture, were all around the bed. We were told that the children were found standing outside the house shaking and crying and that the police, when they arrived, drew guns on neighbors who had come to help. Subsequently, these children (a boy 4 years old and a girl 9 years old) were subpoenaed by the Grand Jury. They were asked if they had indeed been inside the house. They said that they were. For this questioning they were separated from their mother. Other questions asked of them, "Does your mother still sell whiskey?" "Who is your mother's latest boyfriend?" It is hard for me to conceive of the motives which drive grown men of some education and some breeding to subject a four year old child to this kind of psychological brutality. The same kind of mentality attempted to charge Mrs. Quin with bombing her own house. In the Dillon situation, Willie Dillon was told that if he blamed COFO for bombing his house the county would "go easy on him." He refused to do so and drew the sentence sketched above.

The trial of the bombers was scheduled for 10:30 a.m. on October 23. Members of the COFO staff, a few ministers, and the Press were present at that time. The attorneys appeared and moved for a continuance. Court was recessed for the continuance and the Press, the COFO staff persons and the ministers left, believing that the trial was continued indefinitely. Court was reconvened at 12:00 noon that day. Jury trial was waived. The defendants pleaded either guilty or nolo-contendere, were sentenced and then the sentences were suspended. According to the McComb Enterprise Journal of October 23, 1964 three of the defendants paid \$500 fines plus costs. The rest, apparently, paid nothing, except, perhaps, the cost of the trial.

In the Enterprise Journal of Friday, October 23, 1964 (The McComb daily newspaper) carried the following headline

"NINE ENTER PLEAS IN BOMBING CASES, ALL DRAW SUSPENDED TERMS, REPRIMANDS."

Following are some quotes from the news article, written by an Enterprise Journal staff writer, Charles B. Gordon.

"Each of the nine was sentenced on his plea or pleas and was given suspended sentences, probation - and a stern admonition to mend his ways, particularly in the line of 'taking the law into your own hands.'

"When the time came to let the men change their pleas to guilty to the charges to take the imposed sentences, Judge Watkins lectured them on the responsibilities of citizenship at length.

"He told the men they were being treated as they were for three main reasons:

"THE REASONS:

1. They are 'mostly young men, just starting out.'
2. All came from 'good families,' who were perhaps 'more surprised than anyone else at the implication' of the men in the acts of violence.
3. 'You were unduly provoked and were ill advised.'

"He added that 'what you have done has been to some extent at least provoked by outside influences. Some of these outsiders who have come into this community are people of low morality, some of them are unhygienic. Their presence here was unnerving, unwanted.'"

The same page 1 of the same newspaper on that same day carried an article headed

"MIZE OVERRULES DILLON AND CRITICIZES COFO."

Excerpts from the article follow:

"U. S. District Judge Sidney Mize has ordered the case of a Pike County Negro remanded to Pike County where the Judge said he can receive a fair trial.

"The Negro, Willie J. Dillon, had filed a petition for removal to Federal Court on the grounds he could not receive a fair trial here because of his race.

"Dillon was charged with larceny by tampering with electrical meters and operating a garage without a license after officers went to his home the night of August 28 to investigate a bombing in the front yard.

"CONVICTED. He was subsequently tried in Judge Charles Herring's Justice of the Peace Court and fined \$100 and sentenced to three months in jail on one charge and fined \$500 and sentenced to six months in jail on the other.

"In his ruling, Judge Mize said he found Pike County Courts to be fair, and he also slammed Civil Rights workers in the state, charging he knows of instances where four of them have committed perjury.

"CONSIDERED RECORD

"'I have considered the record on all of these affidavits and testimony,' the Judge wrote, and, as heretofore stated, make a finding of fact that there is no racial hostility in Pike County; that the various facilities are not segregated; that Negroes are not denied the right to vote or to serve on juries because of their race.

"There is no hostility by the general public in Pike County to the Negro race; there is considerable alarm over the invasion by COFO that is causing great concern and these investigations. The judges of the State of Mississippi are fair and honorable men; jurors, including Negroes, are fair and honorable and are reasonable members of the jury; Negroes do serve on juries; in practically every county in the state if not in all the counties."

Some of us, in McComb at the time, felt that this page 1 represented the paradox of

justice in Mississippi courts. I might rewrite that front page by saying "The Bombers Receive suspended sentences. The Bombed go to jail".

The afternoon of Friday, October 23 was eventful. At three o'clock police officers arrived and arrested Jesse Harris, the COFO project director, and two of the COFO girls on charges of operating a food handling establishment without a license. The three were quickly released on \$100 bail. At 7:30 that evening we were in the Freedom House eating sandwiches and there was a loud rap on the door frame (the door was open) and six policemen entered the house saying, "everybody here is under arrest." Harry Bowie asked to see the warrant. He read it and said that the warrant was for the residents of 702 Wall Street. The policeman said "Yes, everybody here is under arrest" and Harry said, "But not all of these people live here. You may arrest everyone if you wish. We will go quietly, but you will be sued for false arrest." This police officer, who withdrew for conversation with his men, returned to say that only those persons who actually resided in the two houses on the premises were under arrest. This left a few of us in charge of the operation and brought the total number of arrests on that day to 13. The group arrested in the evening was held in jail overnight. During the night these persons were moved to the Pike County Jail in Magnolia.

We spent the night telephoning contact people throughout the United States who in turn raised bail money and phoned the Pike County Jail, the sheriff (a Mr. R. R. Warren) and the Police Chief of McComb (Mr. George Guy). In this way we alerted the County and Local officials that many eyes were watching the McComb situation and many persons, including Senators Javitz and Keating from New York, Salinger from California, Clark and Scott from Pennsylvania, Congresswoman Edith Green from Washington, members of the Justice Department etc., were concerned for the welfare of persons being held in jail. One interesting note: we were told by the officials at the jail that Dennis Sweeney (one of the COFO workers) was not in jail but had attempted to escape and was being sought by the police. This increased our anxiety because Dennis has not been popular with local authorities and we feared for his safety. When Congresswoman Green called concerning Dennis Sweeney's whereabouts she was assured that he was in jail and safely asleep.

During that night we stood watch on the Freedom House grounds and were assisted by local Negroes who were nearby and armed. It is difficult to fully assess the thoughts and feelings we had that night. All of us were frightened for our own safety. We were concerned for the welfare of those who had been arrested. We did not know what would happen in the morning. We had no confidence that the bombers would not begin their reign of terror again. Through it all we kept reminding ourselves that this was indeed America. We were reinforced in this belief by the presence of two field representatives of the Federal Civil Rights Commission who had been in McComb throughout the week and one of whom stayed with us at Freedom House on the night of October 23 until 2:00 a.m. the following morning. Although he was not able to advise us as to what we should do it was most reassuring to know that his presence was helpful for our own safety and for an accurate accounting of the situation to higher authorities.

Saturday morning the ten COFO staff persons were released from jail on \$100 bond each and the day was spent canvassing and encouraging support of the Freedom Day the following Monday and the Freedom Rally to be held on Sunday evening at the Rose Hill Baptist Church.

There is one episode which I particularly want to note for posterity. It occurred on Thursday evening, October 22. The COFO staff people were informed that Robert Moses, National Director of SNCC (the Student Non-violent Coordinating Council) was addressing a dinner in New Orleans. A delegation of four COFO men decided to journey to New Orleans to encourage him to come and address the Freedom Rally in McComb on

Sunday evening October 25. In their company we left McComb driving my car, at approximately 8:30 p.m. and arrived in New Orleans at the Hilton Inn at 10:45 as dinner was finishing. The meeting was a dinner for SCEF (The Southern Conference Educational Fund). We walked into the ante-room of the dining hall. The host was making closing remarks. He was informed and then announced that COFO workers from McComb were there. We entered to applause from the group.

The group was smartly dressed and was racially mixed. There was an atmosphere of cheerful conviviality. The meeting ended and Dennis Sweeney engaged Bob Moses in conversation at the head table. Many young people surrounded Moses as did several older folks. We were given coffee, rolls and butter to eat.

Dennis Sweeney told me that the Louisiana UnAmerican Activities Committee had labeled SCEF as "the nerve center of the communist activity in the South." I noted this point of interest immediately.

We were invited to stay at the Inn for awhile and to retire to one of the rooms where a social gathering was to be held. I left the dining hall and went to the car to get cigarettes and to lock the car before leaving it. As I left the dining hall, walking toward the car, I noticed two men standing at the end of the walkway. One of them held a camera. I thought that they were news photographers awaiting the dignitaries who would be leaving the dinner hall momentarily. As I was looking at them and holding a cigarette to my mouth with my right hand my picture was taken. This was somewhat disconcerting. I proceeded to the car. Got the cigarettes from the glove compartment, locked the car and began to return to the Inn. By this time many others were exiting and the photographer was snapping a picture of all persons leaving the room. Several groups poked fun at the camera men.

About thirty yards away from the first cameraman I saw a second man with a camera. Beside each cameraman stood another man. I approached cameraman number two and said, "as an interested person may I ask the purpose of the pictures?" He looked at me then quickly turned away. I followed a few steps and then thought better of it.

I re-entered the dining hall and met Mr. and Mrs. John Beecher. Beecher is "poet in residence" at Santa Clara University in California and is a correspondent for the San Francisco Chronicle. He had been in McComb during the week. I had met him there. He had read some of his poetry at the dinner. His wife was carrying a heavy briefcase. I relieved her of the brief case and walked with Mr. and Mrs. Beecher from the hall. As the Beechers left the cameras popped and Beecher approached photographer number one demanding his identification. A brief verbal encounter ensued and one man accused Mrs. Beecher (he was the man who stood guard beside photographer number one) of pushing the photographer. He said, "You have assaulted him! You have assaulted him!" Shortly, the Beechers turned, and with a group including myself, walked away. The men still had not identified themselves. I am sure that my picture will appear standing with the Beechers. As we left pictures were taken of the group retiring to the room of the Inn. The photographer who had covered the dinner and who had taken pictures inside the dining hall took pictures of these unidentified photographers. The conversation following this rather unpleasant episode tentatively identified the photographers as representatives of the Louisiana UnAmerican Activities Committee. Others tentatively identified them as either FBI or CIA. However, the Louisiana Un-American Activities Committee was the final consensus of the group and I, personally, will be most interested to know what use is made of these unsolicited, unwanted, and harassing photographs.

Later in the evening I had an opportunity to talk with Bob Moses in a small group. He is a brilliant young man whose vision is astounding. He discussed the vast social

and economic changes being felt throughout the world. He had just returned from a conference in Guinea to which leaders of the SNCC Movement had been invited. He compared some of the struggles in Africa with the struggles in Mississippi. In the end we found ourselves discussing theology. I shall look forward to meeting Bob Moses again and trust that my Calvinistic world view will not unduly irritate him.

Three of us slept in Bob Moses' room, which he shared with Ed King who is Chaplain at Tougaloo College and a leader in the Freedom Democratic Party. Two of the group slept in my car outside the Motel. At 6:00 A.M. we departed New Orleans for McComb and arrived there at approximately 8:30 A.M., October 23, 1964.

End of New Orleans episode - back to sequence.

On Sunday morning COFO staff people and ministers were assigned to visit the Negro churches in the area. Harry Bowie told me that I might be called upon to preach. I said that would be alright. He said "now these people don't want you to talk. You Presbyterians talk. They want you to preach!" I told him he was a bigot and that Presbyterians knew how to preach just as well as they knew how to talk. He laughed and sent me on my way.

I was assigned to attend service, along with Candy Brown, a COFO worker, at the St. Mary's #2 Church in Baertown (one of the Negro quarters of McComb). Because there were no services being held in St. Mary's #1 Church, Marshall Ganz (a SNCC staff person and a graduate of Harvard University) attended the service as did Mr. and Mrs. Beecher. Also present was a Swedish journalist from Stockholm who was in this country covering the Presidential election and who had come to McComb for a bit of local color.

As Harry indicated I was asked to make some remarks. I did so and was rather "Baptist" in my technique. When the service was over Marshall assured me that I had "preached." Following the service, outside the church, Candy took Freedom Democratic Party registrations and also made Freedom vote ballots available to the worshipers. The procedure was simple. They would take a ballot, mark it, sign their name in a registration book and deposit the ballot in a cardboard box marked for this purpose. These boxes, these books and these ballots were to appear throughout McComb during the following week in stores, restaurants, bars, barbershops, garages as well as in churches and the homes of private citizens. This was the vote toward which much of our work had been directed and it began on that Sunday, October 25, 1964.

Candy, Marshall, the Swedish Journalist and I got in a car and were returning to Freedom House. Along the way we stopped at the Society Hill Baptist Church which had been bombed on September 20, 1964. The structure was demolished. The walls buckled, the roof was caved in. There is no hope to repair the building. A new building must be erected.

While parked in front of the church another car pulled off to the side of the road and parked behind us. A man was driving. A woman was with him. The man got out of his car and approached the journalist. He said, "are you one of those Civil Rights reporters?" The journalist replied, "No, I am a journalist from Europe." To this the man said, "I was in Europe during the Second World War. I was in the Air Force. I received the Distinguished Flying Cross with three Oak Leaf Clusters. If I had it to do over again I would fight for the Germans for this (he pointed to his left arm with his right index finger), my skin (the man was white). I never stand up anymore when they play the National Anthem." To this the Swedish journalist remarked, "That's a pity."

Sunday dinner was provided by one of the local ladies. It was delicious. For the first time all week we had enough salad for seconds. A lot of starch makes one very hungry for salads and so the lettuce, tomatoes, and sliced onions were most welcome. I over ate.

On Sunday afternoon a meeting for young people was held at one of the local churches. I did not attend this. Instead, I stayed at Freedom House and spent most of the afternoon talking with two of the COFO people. We talked about everything from Tillich to electronics. At this point I would like to say something about the COFO people themselves. Most of the COFO workers are college students or have been college students in the recent past. Marshall Ganz, as indicated above is a graduate of Harvard. Dennis Sweeney has finished his Junior year at Stanford. Nancy Jervis has finished two years at Mount Holyoke. Jesse Harris, the project director, is a graduate of Jackson State College in Jackson, Mississippi.

The group also included three persons from overseas and one Canadian. Two of the girls are from Germany and one of these girls is married to J. D. Smith, an American boy. The other, Miss Ursula Junk, was studying Art History at the University of Minnesota before joining the Mississippi project. Lori Smith, the other German girl, is a wonderfully warm and lovely person whose ability to work with small children is little short of amazing. The other overseas person Bill Powell a young man from Cambridge, England who had flipped a coin outside of the travel agency in London. His decision was between working with refugees in Algeria and coming to America. The coin indicated America. He came, worked in New York at several jobs, was ready to return to England and decided to visit Mississippi first. He has stayed, hasn't the money to return to England now and doesn't seem to care. He is totally committed to the Mississippi movement and is quite an enjoyable person to know.

COFO staff people have a genuine concern for the persons with whom they work. They would like to see openings for communication with the white community. At present this seems unfeasible. And so they dedicate themselves to organizing the Negro community, to conducting Freedom Schools and Day Nurseries, to tutoring high school students, teaching courses in Negro History and guiding the people in such a way as to facilitate their voter registration. Many of them see the Mississippi movement as the seeds of a vast social revolution. They hold the present structure of society responsible for many of the inequities and injustices inflicted upon the Negro in Mississippi. They see the Freedom Democratic Party as a possible rallying point for Negroes, lower class whites, "disenchanted northern liberals" as well as other minority groups. It is their hope to establish a newspaper in McComb in the near future and to create, 'ere:long, a radio station which will broadcast throughout Mississippi and which will be called "Radio Free Mississippi." These young people, most of whom are from middle and upper class homes, live in the presence of imminent personal danger. Some of them knew Cheney, Schwerner, and Goodman who were killed this past summer. It is their friends who were beaten in Vicksburg and Jackson and Greenwood. Freedom House itself was bombed early in the summer. Yet these young people dedicate themselves, day after day, to the routine work of visiting with people in the neighborhoods and to building a fire of hope for full freedom.

I cannot help but feel that their long-range goals for a totally new and continually better society will be frustrated. My Calvinistic orientation tells me that any system has within it the seeds of its own destruction because man, in his sinful nature, cannot resist the temptation to grasp for power and to turn even noble ends to his own use. However, I can share with these fine folks a concern for social reform and, certainly, our immediate goals and aims are identical. They are thoroughly committed to non-violence as a strategy in the Mississippi situation and firmly

believe that when the Negro population of Mississippi has gained the full freedom of the vote that a new day will dawn and change will become possible.

During our stay in Mississippi we saw a radio tower erected at the McComb COFO house. It is a part of COFO's communication system. Eight such towers will be erected across the State of Mississippi so that every station within the state can reach every other station and any radio car operating within the state will never be out of communication with some home base. This will greatly facilitate the coordination of program as well as add to the safety of personnel. This radio system and the necessary equipment is financed by concerned groups in the north. Rabbi Richard Schenberger of White Plains who was with us in McComb helped raise a goodly portion of this money in his community.

Monday was Freedom Day. Our strategy was to transport carloads of people to Magnolia and attempt to register them at the County Clerk's office in the Court House. We had been informed that the registrar would not be in his office and that registration would be impossible. COFO had been told this in the past. It seems that the registrar's office closes whenever COFO schedules a Freedom day. On this day, October 26, 1964 the reason given was that the registrar, who is also the Court Clerk, would be involved in a murder trial. COFO decided to go ahead with the scheduled Freedom day. The leaders felt that in view of the tradition of closing the office, etc., and because Freedom day had been postponed in the past for similar reasons that we could not postpone this activity again. At 10:00 a.m. the first carload of registrants, accompanied by ministers, arrived in the parking lot of the Pike County Court House in Magnolia. The driver of the car was Jesse Harris. They were greeted by Sheriff's deputies and approximately 15 uniformed State Policemen. The sheriff approached and informed them that the registrar's office was closed by a Court order and that they should leave. This encounter took place at the side of the car in the parking lot. They informed the sheriff that they would not leave that they had come to register and that they would go into the Court House and see the order for themselves. He told them that they should leave. The upshot of this encounter was that three of the group, including Jesse Harris, were arrested.

We were, at first, told that the charge against these people was contempt of court. Later we learned that they were charged with trespassing and refusing to obey an officer. While the discussion was being held in the parking lot I arrived driving the second carload of potential registrants. As I came down the street toward the Court House and entered the block on which the Court House is located a State Policeman, in uniform, stepped from the curb and photographed the car and occupants with a moving picture camera. This was before we had entered the parking lot. It was before we had come to a stop at the curb. He was obviously expecting us and when he saw the car he immediately began photographing it and us.

My passengers disembarked at the curb, I turned around in the parking lot driveway and, on orders from Freedom House, broadcast via radio, left the scene immediately. I made a second trip from McComb to Magnolia later in the morning with five passengers. When we arrived in Magnolia we were informed, via radio, that anyone attempting to enter the courthouse to register to vote would be arrested on charges of trespassing and refusing to obey an officer. All of the persons in our car decided to return to McComb and to regroup. We did so without incident and I spent the remainder of the day, until approximately 3:30 P.M., canvassing homes whose occupants had indicated an interest in traveling to Magnolia on that day to attempt to register. At 4:00 P.M. Reverend Donald Custis, in the company of five local Negro persons, was arrested in the parking lot. To my knowledge, all of the persons arrested did not enter the Court House, did not reach the Court House steps but were met and incarcerated in

the parking lot. All of the charges were the same, trespassing and refusing to obey an officer.

One of the men arrested who was part of the National Council team in McComb was Dr. Kenneth Bell, Ph.D., a teacher of Botany in Forman Christian University, Pakistan. Dr. Bell is studying this year at the Pittsburgh Theological Seminary. After his arrest, Dr. Bell was in a room while County officials were fingerprinting and photographing the arrested persons. In his company was a young Negro housewife. The man who was fingerprinting her gripped her by the wrist and roughly pulled her toward him, tore her dress, charged her with not being cooperative and said, "come here you nigger bitch". In the process of this brief struggle Dr. Bell thought that the woman's arm had been broken. He said, "that's no way to treat a lady." Whereupon one of the men grabbed him by the shirt front and told him to mind his own business. Dr. Bell's shirt was torn around the collar. While the deputy sheriff was twisting the woman's arm she, in self defense, bit him and was subsequently charged with assaulting an officer. Because Dr. Bell was a witness to the scene he will appear at her trial. On Tuesday morning, because we had to return to Pennsylvania that day, Mrs. Custis, Bob Kwik and I went to Magnolia to post bail for Donald Custis. Parked the car in the parking lot, I entered the Court House, made the arrangements, having been met in the parking lot by a very courteous official-looking but civilian-dressed individual who asked "May I help you this morning?" I took the man's directions, entered the Court House and went through a door into an office. After entering the office I noticed there was another door on the other side of the room giving access to another counter. At this point I realized I had entered the "white entrance" and that the other door from the other hall giving access to the other counter was the "colored" entrance. This is symbolic of official life in Mississippi. The Sheriff's office has two doors. One, "white" and the other "colored." The Courtroom has two doors with the same designations and the Courtroom itself is segregated. All bathrooms are segregated and when our people were arrested they were racially separated within the jail itself.

After some delay I was taken to the jail by a Mr. Dunn who affected the release of Don Custis. While waiting for the jailer to unlock the door he was admonishing us as to how he didn't understand why these people felt they had to come down and cause all this trouble in Mississippi. He said the registration office was closed and that anybody could register to vote when the office was open. He said all of this was unnecessary difficulty. He said that the voter registrar was a very busy man. Not only does the man register voters but also serves as Clerk of Court, Issues Marriage licenses, etc. I asked him, "doesn't anybody get married while court is in session?" He replied, "of course, a deputy issues marriage licenses." Apparently they have not investigated the possibility of having a deputy register voters also.

Custis was released without incident and returned to the car which was parked in the parking lot. Because it was a radio car COFO headquarters asked us to stay on the scene to narrate for Freedom House what transpired when the registration people arrived. We did so, keeping an open microphone to Freedom House and giving a blow by blow description of what transpired. In the parking lot the small group (one minister, two Negro men and two Negro women) was met by the same friendly gentleman who had greeted me earlier. A pleasant conversation ensued while a uniformed State Policeman took moving pictures of the entire episode. At least thirty people were surveying the scene from the second floor windows of the Court House. I counted fifteen people in one window alone. On the steps of the Court House, behind the friendly gentleman, stood a contingent of approximately twenty-five white men in front of whom was one wearing a Texas-type five-gallon hat. We learned his identity. He was one Mr. Thornhill who is the Grand Dragon of the Ku Klux Klan in that area. Mr. Thornhill took a deep interest in this civic activity and was observed making comments to the friendly

man who was talking to the group. At one point a man wearing brown trousers with a green stripe down the side, a civilian sport jacket, with no hat (he had dark hair which was crew cut), approached the group and was physically pushed back by the friendly gentleman. Apparently man #2 was more eager for direct action and man #1 discouraged his aggression. Later in discussing this with people at the Freedom House it was pointed out that the whole thing might have been an act for us to observe. A real "good guys and bad guys" plot. The group split. The two women withdrew to the car and the two Negro men and the minister were arrested.

During the episode we continued to give a Mel Allen type description of what was going on and when the arrests were affected a State Policeman approached our car and told us we would have to move. We did so without protest and left the parking lot. Outside the parking lot we exchanged cars with Dennis Sweeney. He took the radio car and we were left with one of the cars leased by the National Council of Churches for the work in McComb. (NCC has leased two cars for the project.) We waited for nearly an hour while a Negro lawyer was in the jail affecting the release of Dr. Kenneth Bell. During this time we stayed by the car and had full view of the parking lot and the back of the Court House. The white men in the second story windows of the Court House made obscene gestures to us. Mr. and Mrs. Beecher arrived. Mr. Beecher, because he carries a Press card, went onto the parking lot to see what was happening. As he walked across the parking lot, (he has a full white beard) the men in the second story sang "Jingle Bells," Mr. Beecher waved to them and proceeded on to the place where Paul Good (a stringer for CBS and Washington Post) was standing.

In all, during Monday and Tuesday 45 persons were arrested. Among these were many ministers. Also, a local Negro retired minister, who is 94 years old, spent some time in jail. All were booked on the same charges. On Tuesday a group of COFO staff people and local Negroes went to jail with the avowed intent of staying in jail until Federal intervention was affected. They were arrested but were evicted from jail on Wednesday without the requirement of posting bond. Since that time, we have been informed, the "trespassing" charge has been dropped against all persons and there is some hope that the second charge of "refusing to obey an officer" will also be dropped.

After lunch and after Custis and Bell had finished writing affidavits for the use of the lawyers we departed McComb and made our way north past Jackson through the Delta region and to Memphis, Tennessee where we stayed the night in a Holiday Inn. We were all relieved to be out of "the Pharaoh land." The next day we left Memphis at 6:00 a.m. and arrived in Harrisburg the following morning at 8:30 a.m.

The two overriding features of the emotional landscape in Mississippi are fear and hope. Fear is very real in both the Negro and the white community. The Negroes live under constant threat by the authorities. This past summer there was a good example of intimidation in the white community. A man named Heffner suggested that conversation should be held between the COFO people and the white community. He invited a COFO staff worker to his home. Heffner was a segregationist. He was a graduate of the University of Mississippi and this last year his daughter was Miss Mississippi in the Miss America contest. Heffner was an insurance man in McComb and part of the social elite. Because of his deviant views he was harassed by the police as well as by local citizens, many persons cancelled their insurance with him and he eventually was forced to leave McComb. He went to Jackson, Mississippi and rented an apartment. When the people in McComb found out where he was they brought pressure to bear on his landlord who in turn evicted Heffner and the family so that they moved, finally, to Washington, D. C. Fear is very real.

On the other hand there is real hope. The increase of voter registration in Hattiesburg reflects this hope. We stayed with the Bryants and they are hopeful for fruitful

issue from the struggle. Mrs. Dillon and Mrs. Quin, in spite of the harassment they have known in the past, each went to Magnolia and were arrested. 300 Negroes attended the Freedom Rally held on Sunday evening and 200 more came to another Rally on Monday night. Rosa Bates, a 64 year old widow who keeps children during the day, made other arrangements for the children on Monday, October 26 and went to jail while attempting to register to vote. Deacon White, age 80 was jailed as well as was the 94 year old retired minister noted above. The COFO people themselves are cheerful and selfless in their work. They are able bright young people who know that through persistence change can and will be affected.

What does this say to us in Pennsylvania? First of all I feel we must see Mississippi as a land set apart from the rest of the country. In Mississippi justice is, too often, injustice. The law there is the enemy. On Friday evening and, then, throughout the weekend everywhere we went in cars and afoot we were observed and followed by men in police cars, sheriff's cars and unmarked cars. It seemed to us, during our stay in McComb, that the eyes and ears of the white community are closed and hearts are hardened.

Secondly, we must, also, see Mississippi as a part of America. We must see that a sinister enemy is at work there. COFO workers and all Civil Rights persons are labeled "Communists." Yet at the same time the spirit of suspicion and fear which grips ordinarily fine and hospitable people is almost like an evil spirit possessing the hearts and souls and the minds of men. Mississippi is an area of our land which needs continued assistance if true freedom is to be realized.

Thirdly, we must accept the help Mississippi has to offer us. We must see the courage and the hope expressed. We must realize that in Pennsylvania too many Negroes are satisfied to live with half a loaf and not press for full civil and social rights. We must accept from Mississippi the courage to act. We have the law here but each one of us must reach out and make it our own.

The Church in Mississippi is indeed a troubling sight to behold. The ministers, Negro and white, are the last to raise their voices. They are very vulnerable. When a man does take a positive stance he is threatened and, most often, must leave the community. Sheriff Warren who is active in the harassment of Civil Rights workers is a member of the local Presbyterian Church of McComb. The Negro church is, in many ways, dependent upon whites for support. It is no wonder that many of the Civil Rights workers hold the church in very low regard if not in outright disgust.

Comparing the Mississippi situation to our situation in Pennsylvania I would offer one other subjective comment. It is this: Whereas fear and hope are the overriding sentiments in Mississippi I feel that cynicism and frustration grip the Negro communities of the north. Here there seems to be freedom but there is not. Here the rights are available but withheld. Here men can vote but the political structures are not responsive to them. Here men can gain skills for employment but are too often barred from that employment. Here, above all, the barriers to housing mobility are almost absolute. And so the northern Negro, because he has a little more to begin with and because there is less chance for radical change, becomes cynical and frustrated and settles back to live with his half a loaf.

I feel that the involvement of the Church in the Mississippi project must be continued. I feel that we should not only continue to support this work through the participation of the ministers but that we should increase the numbers of men sent to Mississippi. This will make the Church's witness more visible in the southern communities as well as provide an opportunity for these men to return home and to interpret the situation

there for their own people. Further, through sheer weight of numbers, we, as churchmen, should become more integrally involved in the decision making levels of the COFO Movement. These are my own observations but are shared by some other persons with whom I have spoken. In all, the week in McComb was deeply meaningful for me and I look forward to returning at some time in the future.

JFMcK