

LET'S HAVE A PEOPLES' CONFERENCE

A paper prepared in haste for the May, 1965
staff conference by Mike Lesser.

In the past several weeks there has been a good deal of lively discussion among Louisiana project staff and in the southern office about what we are going to do this summer and how we are going to do it: we have talked about community centers and voter registration; pre-school education and political organization; about agricultural cooperatives and building a third party. We have used terms such as community organization, direct action, indigenous leadership and felt needs. We have spoken of program and structure. And it seems to me the only thing we haven't much talked about is people.

I would like to explore here some of the things we have been talking about--our goals, programs and methodology--and attempt to relate them to what we have been avoiding--or talking around--people.

A good place to begin is with Project Head Start:

At the Monroe staff meeting where project head start was discussed there were two basic schools of thought: one group argued that setting up pre-school centers was a good idea because it would provide us with an organizational tool--a free one at that--which would reap for us organizational benefits that would outweigh our expenditure in time, effort and money personnel. The other group argued that this project was not civil rights but social work, and that we needed to be focusing upon more basic issues and organizing people for mass action and political power.

Noone was really discussing what the program would or could mean to the children and their parents, and to the community--in short, to the people. We were engrossed in our program; thinking about what we wanted and what we felt would be best for the community. And, even those of us who supported Project Head Start were thinking in terms of how we could use it to MANIPULATE others--in an altruistic sense, of course, and couched in much different terms, but manipulate nonetheless.

We just were not talking about people.

But anyway, we left Monroe with the agreement to go to the parishes to see if any of the communities "felt the need" to have a project head start. Three communities did, and we wrote up applications for them and sent them into Washington. And, two days ago I received a letter from Mr. Freddie Mack in Caddo Parish telling why he would like to be director of the Caddo Parish head start program. He says, "I would like to have the opportunity of planning a program that would enlighten, encourage, young boys and girls that their fight for survival is not a lost cause. And that they are wanted and needed in an American Democracy of the later years. That there is something in life that they can do."

Obviously Mr. Freddie Mack sees something in project head start that we at the Monroe meeting did not. He sees something of intrinsic value, or of potential value that we did not. And, if this is true perhaps we CORE staff need to hire Mr. Mack and some of the other people from Caddo Parish to come in some week soon and "community organize" us. Or perhaps a less ego-shattering alternative would be for us to begin to have more faith in the people we are supposed to be working with--to believe more in their ability to think--understand--create.

Project head start need not be: "Jack and Jill", "be a good, neat, little boy," social work. It could be Langston Hughes, Frederick Douglass, and freedom. Mr. Mack seems to have seen that. Why didn't we?

Maybe we need to have our sights raised.

The point that needs to be made here is not that project head start or other programs of the same nature--such as freedom schools and community

centers and adult education programs are the answer to the civil rights fight. Rather, it is the concept upon which such programs operate which determines their value. If we limit our own view to seeing project head start or a freedom school as a means for getting people to rally around us so we can get them to act on our issues, of course it will have little value--intrinsic value, and produce little of meaning in terms of itself. On the other hand we can look at it as a stimulus or catalyst which challenges people--kids or adults--to look at themselves and their environment in a new way which provides the basis for a real dialogue--an honest dialogue between the individuals who make up a community. And that includes CORE workers too.

Which brings me to my next point:

The new thing here in Louisiana seems to be, "We are going to organize people around their felt needs." But, the "NEW, new thing" is that we are going to build a state-wide political movement. Possibly a third party. How do we reconcile these two? How do we help people organize around THEIR felt needs, and then talk about OUR solutions? It sounds unlikely, but that is exactly what we have been doing--sitting in our office designing solutions for other people's problems, and then, which is far worse, figuring out how to handle, or manipulate, these OTHER people into accepting OUR grand design.

What about a third party? Well, I think it is a great idea. It appears to me that ours is a political society in which the big decisions are political ones, and, therefore, people must develop political power if they expect to bring about meaningful social change. But, all that is meaningless rhetoric to Mr. Mack in Caddo Parish because it was not his idea; it was mine: it will not be his political party; it will be mine. And he will be a member because he trusts me; not because he trusts himself.

More important than that is the fact that we are also sitting around working out ways to get him to accept our solution, and doing it in the name of creating a democratic society, when our very actions indicate that we don't have any faith in Mr. Mack or the democratic process. If we did we wouldn't be attempting to manipulate--to handle--the people in the communities.

What I mean to say is that the process is important--the end does not justify the means. Ends are means. People are both. If we view the third party, or whatever shape our political movement takes, as middle-range objective towards a greater end, then it is also our means. It must truly be formed by a consensus of the people who form it, and not just a manipulated agreement.

I would give two more examples to illustrate my argument:

First, the latest developments in the Plaquemine "movement." Here, a new set of demands has been drawn up and sent to the mayor by the Iberville parish voters' league and CORE. The letter lists seven points to which the mayor has a certain amount of time to respond or face new demonstrations. Where did the demands come from? Whose demands are they? Who will enforce them? To the first question: they are almost identical to the demands of the Bogalusa movement, and if they come from anybody in Plaquemine it is the executive committee of the voters' league. To the second question one might be able to answer, "They are the demands of the people" IF one could say that the voters' league represented the people and the people knew about the letter and agreed with it. While the first point might have some validity for some members of the community, I daresay the second would be true for few. To the third question one must answer that the people who little or no part in framing the demands will be asked to demonstrate for them.

I do not hesitate to predict that CORE staff will now be rushed to Plaquemine to "organize the community" to massive support of demands it never made.

Now for my last example. We sit here today in a staff conference, and in a day or two we will return to Louisiana for a communities conference. Let me describe the scenario of these two one-act plays. Here, at the staff conference, we will work out a summer program, and

tomorrow we will go to the community conference and explain it to the people. After it is explained discussion will be invited--nay, begged--and there will be an embarrassing silence. The matters will be broken down a little, and after a somewhat halting exchange will be agreed upon. We will then go home to begin implementing our summer project in their communities.

This reminds me of a meeting of one of the Ohio CORE chapters where a rent strike which was in progress was being discussed. Because none of the people from the slum building who were on strike were there I went and got them and brought them to the meeting. The CORE members became suddenly inarticulate. After the meeting, when the community people had left, several of the CORE members began soundly abusing me for bringing them. They complained that the matters being discussed (the rent strike) were too important for them (the rent strikers) to be present for, and would be told to them later--after the CORE members had made the policy decisions.

It is my impression that neither we nor that CORE chapter think of ourselves as part of the communities in which we work. Rather, we see ourselves as an outside force working ON the people of the community, and that is bad. It implies a WE and a THEY, and that implies a sense of the superior, sophisticated and knowledgeable WE helping, guiding and manipulating the less knowledgeable, needy THEY.

Is that not closer to the social worker mentality than Project Head Start?

I think we will be making headway when we find that we do not need two conferences, but only one; when we have become part of the community, and the people of the community see us as such and identify with us. Then we will not need a staff conference and then a community conference, but only a PEOPLES' conference.