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approx 2600 wds

Mission in Mississippi

Lying mid-way between Jackson and the gulf coast in Mississippi is Hattiesburg, seat of Forrest County. The gulf coast cities form the moderate part of the state but firmly entrenched white supremacy is the way of life in Hattiesburg. Moderation in Hattiesburg means that this way of life is enforced through politics and law rather than through violence.

Hattiesburg is Gov. Paul Johnson's home, and home of the University of Southern Mississippi whose president is a frequent speaker for the White Citizens' Councils and whose law faculty engineered former-Gov. Barnett's refusal to admit James Meredith to Ole Miss. It is also home of Theron Lynd, the registrar who has one criminal and two civil suits pending against him by the Justice Department for his refusal to register qualified Negroes.

But Hattiesburg is also home of one of the largest and most active civil rights projects in the state. And home of two Negroes who ran for Congress and the Senate.

recreation and leisure time is something new to them. And when a summer comes and they're out of school, they have little adult contact of any kind. Also a certain rapport develops when playing sports with them.

"I've been talking to them informally. Yesterday we had an informal discussion about their futures. Such a relationship with an adult is new to them."

Other ministers have had contact with Negro youths at one of the five freedom schools in Hattiesburg at which a total of 800 students were enrolled in two sessions. Rev. John Rains of Indianapolis, who is also a teacher, taught a class in which he interpreted the Mississippi constitution. Rev. Slee helped with roll-playing at another school.

Still others have worked at the library, cataloging and helping check out and check in borrowed books. The 13-year-old son of Rev. Combs also worked in the library.

A number have helped Rev. Cameron paint and put new siding on his new church and parsonage. Rev. Cameron, a native of Hattiesburg, had a church for four and a half years in Laurel, some 30 miles away. A year ago he returned to Hattiesburg. His church, Faith Tabernacle, had three members then--his Laurel church had had 450--and has 68 members now. It's a small frame, former house located in a clump of pines on the edge of town.

The Ministers' Project has had a positive effect on the freedom movement in Hattiesburg--on those in the movement and those affected by it. "But not positive enough," Rev. King reminds one. The project and the movement can also have an effect on the church.

Rev. Slee explains, "There's a high agnostic outlook on the

part of SNCC workers, yet they are highly idealistic. If their spirits could be channeled into the church they could revive a dead body. Because the church has not been involved or taken a strong stand, they have forgotten the church. But we all here are rebels. We all agree the church has long lost its mission.

"The church has been late in getting completely involved in the civil rights organizations. A bishop told me, 'The clergy of our church need to be full-time workers in the movement itself.'"

The 300 ministers who have brought one spirit to Hattiesburg have undoubtedly brought another spirit, or another facet of the same spirit, back to their own churches.

"I've been greatly moved by the spirit I've seen among the SNCC people," Rev. Caldwell admitted. "This will have a positive effect on my ministry."

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2937 Delmar Lane, NW
Atlanta, Georgia 30311
August 19, 1964

Bob Beech
Hattiesburg Ministers' Project
Mobile Street
Hattiesburg, Miss.

Dear Bob:

Here's your carbon copy of my piece on the project.

If there are any changes you feel should be made please let me know. Also send a carbon of your letter to Harold Fey at Christian Century, 407 South Dearborn, Chicago.

Some of your quotes were taken from the project reports and to make them understandable out of this context I had to change some of the wording. But I think I remained true to your original meanings.

Best wishes,


Jerry Deluth

The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee began the project there in fall of 1962. On January 22, 1964, it scheduled a Freedom Day.

Freedom Days--a time of intensive voter registration activity--had been held before but this one was different in two ways. One, it was probably the first time a civil rights demonstration had lasted more than fifteen minutes in Mississippi without mass arrests. Two, over 50 ministers from the north had come to Hattiesburg to help. Their presence probably made the successful demonstration possible. More ministers came in the days and weeks that followed and a well-planned program, the Hattiesburg Ministers' Project, developed.

"I hope to try to indicate to those in the ministry that the church must have action to go along with the talk," Dr. Alan Pickering of the United Christian Campus Fellowship, University of Nebraska, said before coming to Hattiesburg for the Freedom Day.

The action has included picketing, canvassing, speaking at rallies and before small groups, and more lately contacting businessmen and members of the white power structure.

Rev. Art King of the First Presbyterian Church in Paulsboro, New Jersey, explains, "The Ministers' Project has grown out of a dramatic situation in which people are putting their bodies on the line. Now we have a long range, well organized project."

"The Hattiesburg Ministers' Project has been of invaluable service," Rev. John Cameron, co-director of the project and pastor at Faith Tabernacle Church in Hattiesburg, explained to a new group of ministers in mid-August. "Ninety-five percent of the Negroes you ask here will say they want you to stay. The project has eliminated a lot of fear that Negroes had. Because ministers

have presented their bodies they feel they can go to the courthouse to register. This was the first time they had seen white men stand with them. Negroes now have new zeal, courage and faith. They can go on with new strength. You have been a witness to them."

Co-director with Rev. Cameron, Rev. Bob Beech from Hebrin, Illinois, says, "There's a feeling on the part of Negroes that since the ministers have been here there's been a decline in violence and harassment and a slow but sure build-up of registered voters."

A young Negro who has helped canvass tells Rev. David McAlpin of Jrosse Point, Michigan, "A lot of older people didn't come out until after you ministers came down. But some are still scared."

Rev. McAlpin walks further down the narrow street and stops in front of the next house where two elderly men sit out front under a tree. He talks to them, inviting them ^{to} a precinct meeting that night. He asks them if they've been to the court house and one proudly says, "Yes, I've been to register. Some other preachers were by here. I didn't pass but I went back and took the test again. I'm to go back to see if I passed this Saturday. I'll just keep on going back every 33 days. I'm retired and I don't have anything else to do."

"Being a minister makes a difference," commented Rev. Chad Combs, pastor at Christ Presbyterian Church, Camp Hill, Penna., and chairman of the Church and Society Committee of the Pennsylvania Synod. "The people in the rural areas are very religiously oriented. When a group canvassing calls on them, they address their words to the minister. A woman said to me, 'I'd be glad to sign anything that will help us.' I said, 'God bless you.' She replied, 'May God bless you for what you're doing.'"

Rev. Combs explains, "I have a real belief these people have to know there are people sympathetic with them. They need encouragement. There's too much lack of hope and our work gives them a sense of hope and generates enthusiasm."

In early July, the ministers' voter registration work took its second change. On Freedom Day, they had picketed at the court house, then they began canvassing house to house with SNCC workers. Next began what Bob Beech terms the "house meeting approach." "Each evening," he explains, "several homes are the center of a voter registration clinic led by some of the college students and Ministers' Project volunteers. The meetings are well attended and accomplish more than can be accomplished in a brief doorstep visit by canvassers."

Bob Beech had been pastor at the First Presbyterian Church in Hebrin, Illinois. Last Easter he came down to Greenwood to participate in a Freedom Day there. "I got back home and realized that a short visit rather than actually being part of the activity was a fruitless task. A deep involvement is more important. I talked to my wife about coming down full-time and resigned from my church May 15. I met with NCC people in New York, then came here."

Bob Beech is presently looking for a house for he and his wife and their three children, all boys.

"In Hattiesburg," he explains, "my position has been kind of a liaison position. I've been able to open some channels of communication. I spent my first week here meeting key white leaders, such as the Mayor and sheriff, discussing what I was here for. I also got to know the well-to-do Negro businessmen and the SNCC people and the white community at large. I got a measure of acceptance from them all which means I've been able to act as a reconciling force.

"In our white community contact program we try to discover people who are open-minded in some way and put them in contact with each other. We've even gotten local interested whites together with local interested Negroes. But we've found no one yet in the power structure who is willing to step out and lead the way toward moderation.

"On the other hand, I enjoy an open channel of communication with them. If there's something I don't like I go right to Police Chief Herring's office and without an introduction walk in and talk to him. And when I tell people I'm staying for a couple years the reaction is, 'Well, if the National Council sends in someone I'm glad it's you.'"

The Ministers' Project got away from picketing and began contacting the white community in June. It would not have been possible to do both. Bob Beech explains, "Demonstrating is the salt that makes the wounds hurt more. So the attitude toward the ministers has changed since we aren't demonstrating any more." Still he does not dismiss demonstrating but points out, "A demonstration should point right at the grievance. It should be obvious why people are there."

The ministers began having contact with the faculty and administration at the University of Southern Mississippi. "One minister preached in a Negro pulpit," Bob Beech states, "and with a tape recorder went about taping reactions to the project. Then these tapes were taken to some of the professors at the university where they had a stunning effect. These men who have lived in Mississippi all their lives had never heard Negroes speak in this fashion."

But these contacts have not all been fruitful. Rev. Fred Roblee of Springfield, Illinois, says, "We called on the librarian at Southern Mississippi. He told us to sit down; he stood behind his desk. He asked if we were ministers and then said that anyone who comes from the summer project is not welcome in the room. 'One mention of it,' he said, 'and I'll call the police.' When we left Atlee Beechy put out his hand but he wouldn't even shake it. On the other hand at the Southern Baptist college a student took us around and we talked to one professor who was there. Both were on the whole cordial."

Ministers have also had contact with the area's public schools, with teachers, principals and superintendents for both Negro and white schools. Atlee Beechy, dean of students at Mennonite Goshen College in Indiana, explains, "I spoke to one white administrator who was quite hostile to say the least. But we stayed and talked for almost an hour and a half. He realized that we weren't interested in fighting back. I also tried to make him and others realize we're not coming down with smart, quick answers."

"At a Negro school we discussed education for culturally deprived youngsters and the resources needed. We also discussed the problems of unemployment and dropouts."

"Persons here are provincial. They don't seem to be aware of the winds of change. They still haven't made any plans for integration. Moderate whites are caught in a system and don't know how far they can go. Unless we can keep lines of communication open, we're in trouble. Some people closed them; we've tried to open them again."

For this reason, Rev. Roblee explains, "Even though there may be a rebuff by the whites, it's worthwhile."

"The white community contact program," states Rev. King, "is the type of thing we can do that SNCC can't.

"I've found a few moderate whites but its dangerous for them to speak out. It's like Negroes before the movement came. The white community needs to latch onto a movement. Then they wouldn't have to be so afraid of losing jobs."

Rev. Cameron summed it up before the group of ministers: "You have certainly been able to reach into the white community which has been forbidden to others. At first, ministers met total hostility but now a number of whites are receptive and sympathetic. You've been another witness that people can work together."

One display of the effect that the ministers have had occurred in early July when Bob Beech was arrested and charged with obtaining goods under false pretenses. The local bank had refused to honor a check he wrote--there were sufficient funds--because checks deposited had not cleared through out-of-state banks.

"Some of the local white citizens," commented Bob Beech, "came out into the open sufficiently that they felt compelled to call the mayor, sheriff and district attorney registering their concern over the fact of my arrest and the manner in which it was accomplished."

When the ministers had arrived in Hattiesburg, civil rights groups were already active there. In early August the project decided to work where this was not true. Bob Beech explains:

"Formerly there have been statements made by local community leaders and clergy in the places where groups have been active to the effect that we should have consulted the community leaders before beginning our work. Everybody was happy, we are told. All is well. They would have cooperated with us, had they been given

the chance. Persons who have been involved in the freedom movement probably share my skepticism at statements like this. However, we are eager to take a man at his word. So we sent a team into a new town in advance of any effort by any civil rights group."

"Four of us went into this town," Dr. Pickering relates. "We went to the Chamber of Commerce first and got some names and we called on the 'city fathers', so to speak. Alan Martin and I called on ministers."

Bob Beech sums up what happened. "We discovered two ministers who are very supportive but they feel they can't speak out. The general attitude of public officials is an awareness of the problem, but a failure to know what to do. They realize that nothing positive will be done till outsiders come in. But still they resent outsiders coming in."

"We will be giving support to welfare and community center work there. Meanwhile, SMC people have begun canvassing in a quiet way in the Negro community."

Project ministers have also been concerned with individuals in the Negro community. This includes visiting persons who have been jailed because of civil rights activities, or because of other things, such as in early August when Rev. King was visiting two Negroes jailed for perjury.

The voter registration test is "A Sworn Written Application." The two had failed to write down all of their arrests as required, thus had committed perjury. They were jailed under \$5000 bond each, impossible money to raise, and so one had been in jail for 80 days, the other for a month. Neither had been brought to trial yet, nor had a trial date even been set.

"Another definite part of our reason for being down here," feels Rev. Roblee, "is to counsel the SMCU kids."

"The SMCU workers are rebels, but good rebels," comments Rev. Jack Blee of Chicago's St. Alban's Episcopal Church. "They need a tremendous amount of direction they aren't getting."

When the public schools recessed in June, the Ministers' Project began having contact with Negro youths. The closest contact came at the community center at Palmers Crossing, outside of Hattiesburg. Two white students from the University of Southern Mississippi helped ministers and others clean and paint the small building which used to be a kindergarten and nursery. The center was opened in July with ministers in charge.

The first minister to devote all his time to the center was Rev. Gilbert Caldwell. Rev. Caldwell is pastor at Union Methodist Church in Boston and executive director of the Cooper Community Center there but his home is Greensboro, North Carolina. "Being a Southerner," he explained, "I felt it was time for me to return in some capacity."

Rev. Caldwell worked with about 50 youngsters, evenly divided between those in high school and those in the last years of grade school.

"I've been able to present a different view of the minister to them," he said. "In rural areas, the clergy-lay relationship is detached because the minister has several churches." (These churches are normally widely separated and services are held at each one only once a month.)

"I've been working informally with the older students, playing basketball and football. An adult showing some concern with their