

A sermon preached to the congregation of First Congregational United Church of Christ, Washington, D.C., on Sunday, August 2, 1964, by the Assistant Pastor, Rev. Bruce Hanson.

It is very good and very surprising to be here this morning. Four days ago I was in Mississippi and did not fully expect to be in Washington. We were trying to find a place where an orientation and training program could be held for about 40 people who will be teaching in Mississippi during August. They were being recruited by the Civil Rights Organization in Mississippi from Boston, New York, Philadelphia and Washington and it seemed only natural to have a training place at the farthest place south, which was Washington. And once we decided to have a training session in Washington it seemed most natural to come to this Church.

It's good to be here and I've missed you very much.

I'm not going to try in a few minutes this morning to go into the great detail of the Mississippi Project or even to describe fully what the National Council of Churches has been doing in relation to this Project. I haven't really gotten a chance to remove myself from the situation to write that kind of sermon just yet. I didn't really have a chance to write any sermon for today.

What I do want to do is share with you some of the feelings that I have at the present time in hopes that these might communicate some of the more objective truths about the situation as it relates to Mississippi and the young people who are working there, as it relates to the church and to our life as a nation.

Since March I have been working for the National Council of Churches Commission on Religion and Race organizing orientation and training programs for people who are recruited by Civil Rights Organizations to work in Mississippi, to work in voter registration, or community center or summer schools. These orientation programs have taken place in Oxford, Ohio, Memphis, Tenn., Jackson, Missisip, and now one in Washington, D.C. They will continue to take place for part of our responsibility as churchmen is to make certain that people are given as adequate a training as can be provided in a short time for a very difficult kind of teaching or working situation. We have also in Mississippi been supplying minister-counselors, and laymen from churches, and rabbis who are working in relation to projects there serving as minister-counselors, helping in certain instances with voter registration, talking with white members of the various communities concerning themselves both with the issues of justice and with reconciliation. By the end of August there will have been 200 ministers, rabbis, and laymen working in Mississippi for periods of time ranging from one week up until two months.

Now some of the reflections that I have can best be shared by referring to places rather than people at the outset. Oxford, Ohio is a small community located in the rolling hills of southern Ohio. There at Western College for Women, which is a lovely campus, we had an orientation and training program the last 2 weeks in June. It's very difficult to communicate what happens in the course of these training programs except to say that a context is provided where seasoned veterans of civil rights work, some of whom are still in their early twenties and have been living under constant pressure and tension for two or three years, are given an opportunity to confront and level with people whom they've recruited to work in the south this summer.

One very memorable illustration of what happens comes to mind. The third day of that training program while about 100 field staff from all over the country and 250 volunteers were gathered in an auditorium we were watching a showing of a film called, 'Mississippi and the 15th Amendment.' This is a film that dealt with the deprivation of voting rights in the state of Mississippi and was put together by CBS a couple of years ago. Some of the individuals in the auditorium saw themselves in the film. And in the course of the film there were some conversation with white southerners and with Mississippi Negroes. And for some reason through nervousness or because of a funny accent

or because of the completely implausible argument that was given on the film some of the volunteers laughed. And when they laughed, three of the field staff who had been working in Mississippi got up and walked out. And when the film was over one man who had been working in Mississippi got up and said to the entire group - 'I wonder if you know what you did with your laughter. You made light of what has been for these people the very essence of their life and purpose and hope the last three years. You made light of arguments about for segregation that may seem very silly to you but can be the difference between life and death in a local community in Mississippi and certainly mean that some people are still being denied their humanity. You made light of some of the Negroes because they couldn't speak very well, and yet these are the very people who are sometimes risking their jobs to have you live with them this summer. You people who are coming from the north have a lot to learn before you go and work in Mississippi, if what you do is going to be responsible and constructive and work towards a new society within the whole state.' There was silence and the meeting was over.

And Bob Moses who is ^{the}head of the Mississippi Summer Project who is a representative of the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee, a brilliant young man of 29 years, who graduated from Hamilton College and has a masters in philosophy from Harvard, called a meeting of his staff. Most of the staff stayed right there to talk about the implications of what had happened. And some of the other staff members walked back with the volunteers, and in a place about 400 yards away the volunteers and the staff started to go at each other. The volunteers saying quite properly - 'we don't understand what is wrong with you for taking objection to what, for us, was a natural response.' And the staff saying - 'you've got to try to understand how we feel. You've got to understand why sometimes we become very close to being racists ourselves while we're working in this. You've got to understand why local people are placed in jeopardy by individuals working with them. You've got to understand at the same time why it's so crucial that people give of themselves enough to work in a local situation developing schools and centers, helping people to vote so that responsible citizenship to the good of the whole state can be the result. For these are issues that are never easily resolved among white people or among Negroes.'

And what was being discussed in some of those conversations that lasted late in to the night between the volunteers and the staff people who were to have responsibility for them are the issues that are at stake throughout our whole country. The issues that are at stake within the Christian Church which are going to build or not build within our life time in our country a place where people can be honest with each other and set upon a vision which makes sense for the total fulfillment of mankind.

And down where the staff was meeting Robert Moses who has been beaten, who has been shot at, who is in his own way a genius in organization and leadership talked with his staff. Talked again about the meaning of the Summer Program and the risk of the Summer Program and while he was doing so, because of the frustration because people were now talking in a way that people have to talk for there to be real life, this battle-hardened veteran broke down and cried in front of his own staff. This was the kind of thing that was going on in Oxford, Ohio.

And when at the end of Oxford I was asked by a television network my feelings as volunteers were going off to work in Mississippi I said that I felt fear and trembling admiration and hope. But felt one other thing as well which was not picked up and that was sadness. Just a sense of sadness. That at this time in our history in a country that abounds with churches, and with religious people, abounds with resources that are adequate not only for our own needs but can be stretched across the world. There are people in Mississippi who feel such a project, like the Mississippi Summer Project, is a necessity.

Macomb, Mississippi is about an hour and a half southwest of the city of Jackson. It is in a place which is called lawless. That is to say there is some real question about whether the local law enforcement agencies, however well intentioned they may be,

can control fully what is happening in the state. Three years ago people working in Mississippi tried to set up a voter registration program in Macomb and were beaten so badly over a period of time that they withdrew. All the time during the orientation program and for the first week after people went to Mississippi, and after the three young volunteers, two of whom were experienced field staff, had disappeared and are presumed dead, Robert Moses and his staff made the agonizing decision to go in to Macomb and begin work there again. They decided that only experienced staff people could go and so there were some volunteers who came forward. And seven people went down to Macomb.

And you ask them how do they feel. They say 'scared.' You ask them 'why?' Because they say 'it's only a matter of hours.' 'Only a matter of hours' what?' 'Only a matter of hours until someone makes an attempt to kill us.' Now is this dramatic, is it exaggerated, what is it? It's a legitimate feeling at any point - so off they go. We sent a minister in there with them because whatever the situation is the Church must make itself available so a minister went with them. Seventy-two hours after they arrived in Macomb, at 2:30 in the morning, a bomb exploded outside the house. It knocked in an entire wall of the house, spreading beams, wallpaper, bricks over some people who were sleeping in that front room. The only reason that it didn't kill people was that it was lodged at a place where the substance of the foundation deflected the blast up instead of going straight through the house. People were cut and bruised; one person had a concussion.

Some of the people in Macomb thought it must be a hoax. They thought it must be a hoax because they saw the house the next morning and said that if anyone had been in there, they would have been killed. Seven people were in there. Two hours after the explosion these seven people were going around the neighborhood knocking on doors to tell the community 'we're going to stay.' They sent up to Jackson for more voter registration materials. And they sent to Jackson and said that we're going to start a freedom school here. Four hours afterwards while the FBI who sent their special bomb-squad in from Washington was still investigating the area, the volunteers sat out in back of the house and started to sing. White members of the community and Negroes alike were standing incredulous at the gaul and courage, and sense or non-sense, whatever it was, of these people because they started to sing and walk around the house and they sang a song which is indigenous to the Mississippi movement called 'Ain't Nobody Gonna Turn Us Around.' They started walking around this bombed house with FBI, and police, local white citizens, local Negro citizens around saying 'Ain't nobody gonna turn us around; ain't no bomber gonna turn us around; ain't no harassment gonna turn us around; ain't nobody gonna turn us around.'

There was a mass meeting that night, 200 people from the local community came. Two-hundred people knowing that by their presence they were placing their jobs in jeopardy. Two-hundred people came in response to what they knew now was going to be a movement within their own area. Three of the people who were trained here yesterday are going to Macomb to teach. There's a freedom school there, conducted first on the lawn out in front of this bombed house, now in a church which one of the local citizens finally risked opening to the people there.

The gulf coast of Mississippi is beautiful as is much of Mississippi. One day Bob Moses and I were on our way to a project in Mosspoint which is over near the Alabama border, and had driven for four hours. We hadn't stopped to eat though we were hungry because when you're driving in an integrated car like that you don't stop to eat at a place along the road. And it had been hot but we were at that time in a delightfully air-conditioned car. We came off the road into Biloxi and its very commercial area. It's beautiful. Motels, hotels. A lot of people come up from around the country to get to the gulf coast. And then we turned off the air-conditioning and rolled down the windows to taste the salt from the sea. At about 100 yards off to the right from where we were driving you could see it all. The sand and the sea and the sun and the sky. There for the asking and presenting a very, very sore temptation but we were on a road where just

a short time before one of our ministers had been arrested for driving an integrated car. And we couldn't have gone to that beach anyway, because Bob Moses is a Negro. But we didn't talk about this at all, we just continued to taste the salt and I just had a very great heaviness in my heart.

The community of Harmony is near Carthage, Mississippi which is up in that middle section of the country near Neshoba County where the three young workers were working at the time of their disappearance. Now Harmony is a community of about 100 families, mostly Negro, there are two or three white families. There's just one dirt road going into Harmony off the main road and the houses are rough in construction but very neat and clean. The residents of Harmony are sturdy, independent people. They're farmers many of whom own their own land. Some of whom work the farm and ^{also} commute into Jackson which is about an hour and a half away and then return. It's a proud place. The people have their own protective association. In Mississippi generally all Negroes and whites carry weapons, this is part of the tradition. It's always a question of what one does with the weapons. But the people have their own protective association so that some of the local whites are less prone to harass the people in that community. Some of the summer volunteers were there and the other day when we were out there you could see on the lawn at one point a lot of wood. The citizens of Harmony were bringing this wood and putting it into piles, and we asked - 'what's going to happen here?' And they said - 'we're building a community center.' We're building a community center! With the help of the volunteers after some of the schools that had been going on most of the summer the residents of this community are going to build a center that can serve such needs as pre-natal care, nutrition, adult education, literacy, work on voter registration. And this is open in Harmony to white citizens as well. There's one white child, or two, who are going to the freedom school.

Harmony is a very special place. But in some ways it's the kind of place that a number of Mississippians within the Civil Rights movement in Mississippi hope will come to pass in other parts of that state. And across racial lines so that Harmony will become more than a name for one small community but will have the kind of spirit that can be communicated to other places. Now our minister who's stationed in Harmony was very badly beaten yesterday when he took a girl into a clinic. He was outside of Harmony but he had to take her into another town and he's back there working now. But it's a great place to see, a great place to be because in Mississippi it represents a spirit that some people hope before any kind of federal troops, or before there's a race war, or anything else, can become effective through the state. It's a joy to see.

Now this is Communion Sunday and I was wondering when I was thinking early this morning about what I might say, what all this had to do with Communion. And I decided it has everything to do with Communion.

I went to church in Jackson, a big church, the week before last. And the minister in that church urged his people to comply with the Civil Rights Bill which was really kind of a brave thing for him to do. He urged them to comply with the Civil Rights Bill because the Civil Rights Bill had been passed. Not because there's a rhythm of life, and hope, and love, and reconciliation and justice within the Gospel of Jesus Christ that requires the Christian to look at anyone regardless of their situation or color as a person. And there was an emptiness within that church, an emptiness, because of this. Because in the church the minister was urging to comply with the Bill and outside there were a couple of big deacons to see that no Negroes came into the church.

Now within the Church of Jesus Christ, Communion, I think, for some of us will finally have the effect of cleansing, deeply revitalizing, and making very concrete the Grace of Christ when we are in a full community, when we've been able to get at the walls. Until then, there is for a lot of us I think the sense of emptiness about it. And so it's appropriate that we have Communion on a day like this because Communion points up our division as well as the points where we ^{have} come together ^{within} / ^{line} Church of Jesus Christ. And I thank God for His Grace which enables us even while we continue to work through these problems to be fed by His Grace, to be given a new opportunity to seize His hope for all people; that together we may all seek His will for our common life. It's good to be here. The Grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with us all. Amen.