

A REPORT OF A VISIT TO CANTON, MISSISSIPPI
February 26-29, 1964

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In response to a telephone call from Garry Oniki of the United Church of Christ's Committee for Racial Justice Now, I diverted my return trip from a Stewardship Council Regional Leaders Meeting in Atlanta (February 24-26) by way of Jackson and Canton, Mississippi. Upon the invitation of COFO (The Council of Federated Organizations, co-ordinating the civil rights activities of the NAACP, CORE, and SNCC in Mississippi), The National Council of Churches Commission on Race had asked for a team of clergy to be in Canton as observers on Friday, February 28th. On this date a mass effort to register voters was scheduled after repeated efforts to register voters in the normal way had been met by a stretch of systems^{b4} to which very few were actually enrolled.

Approximately 15 pastors and staff people responded, including seven United Presbyterian, four Disciples, one Methodist, one Church of the Brethren. Some of these men had come from Hattiesburg where the Presbyterians had taken responsibility for the support of a registration drive. Arthur Thomas, Field Secretary for the NCC Commission on Church and Race, coordinated our activities. I was the only United Church of Christ minister in the group. Kenneth Thompson, a lay member of our church, was present as Commission Photographer, the Reverend Elton Cox in his capacity as CORE regional director, and the Reverend Herbert Oliver in support of the movement. There were no Negroes and no women among the 15 NCC observers.

I arrived in Jackson on Wednesday in mid-afternoon, checked into a motel, and made a brief visit to Tougaloo College. Dr. Beittel, ^{President previously informed us and} reviewed some of the harassing incidents to which students and faculty members had been subjected and provided my three companions and myself with copies of the report of the Mississippi Advisory Committee for the United States Commission on Civil Rights.

That evening the clergy observers were briefed on the Canton situation by Mr. Thomas, as well as by CORE and SNCC representatives. It was agreed that on Thursday

we would be deployed in three groups - one to visit Negro clergy and citizens, one to visit the white clergy, and one to attempt to make contact with the white power structure. The latter group succeeded in talking with the state's deputy attorney general, the editor of the local Canton newspaper, and the chairman of the Canton Citizens Council. While the latter made it clear that our presence as observers was a needless intrusion to their peaceful community, he invited this sub-group to observe from his office on the courthouse square.

As a member of the team detailed to visit the white ministers, I called on the pastors of two local churches. Several calls failed to locate the third.

From the first interview we got the impression that the white people of Canton are on the whole fine people, but when it came to race, they were "insane." This clergyman advised us that we were taking our lives into our hands if we showed up at the courthouse the next day. He reported some consternation in his congregation when three young Negroes (presumably students) noisily entered the church during a communion service on one occasion. He, however, had served them and when the issue was brought up, he defended the right of anyone to worship there. On another occasion, he informed two police officers who were waiting in front of the church anticipating a student "invasion" of the community, that the church was open to all and that it could handle any such problems without their help. We got the impression that a number of persons had ^{is}resisted joining the Citizen's Council, but that following a recent public meeting great pressure amounting to threat of boycott had been placed on the remaining business people to join. Observation of the stickers on virtually every store testified to the effectiveness of this effort.

The second minister visited had a quite different view of things. He was sure that there would be no trouble. The people of Mississippi, according to him, bear no animosity toward Negroes. The latter, however, are "different" and Mississippi's "problem" is different. White men will never want to live under a government controlled

by Negroes. While quite willing to talk with us without becoming intemperate, he reflected the quality of a fear behind white resistance to Negro demands and seemed to share the usual rationalizations of Southern segregation. He was quite willing to leave the problem of justice to law enforcement officials and stay away from the courthouse the next day because there was nothing he could, or needed to, do. The real need was the love of Jesus; the problem of relating love to justice either did not trouble him or was being taken care of by others.

Reports from other observer teams were that the other white ministers of Canton reflected various degrees of concern, helplessness, and acceptance of the situation. One was on the Steering Committee of the Citizen's Council and chaplain of ^{the} police force. (He was seen in action the next day photographing registrants and others who walked into or out of the courthouse area, especially white non-residents, and engaging ^{not only} ~~accuse~~ ^{intoxics} but also ~~all~~, including the visiting clergy with "hail, fellow" cordiality.) Another clergyman was reportedly boxed in by the leadership given to the Citizen's Council by many of his leading laymen. The most recent clergyman to take up residence in Canton had been stopped by police when walking through a Negro neighborhood and asked to identify himself. He reported, told the police that they had not identified themselves or given any reason for stopping him! There was no interracial ministerial association, although the white group did include the Roman Catholic as well as Protestant clergy in their meetings. As far as we could ascertain, however, they had not addressed themselves to the problem of voter registration. Neither was there any sort of interracial committee or any but the most superficial contact between the races.

Thursday night about one-half of the group remained in Canton with Negro families, so as to have at least some representatives in the community on Friday in the event a road blockade was set up. The rest of us returned to Jackson, hoping that thus some of us would be in communication with the outside world. (This is not intended to be

humorous, although from this distance it appears so.)

On Friday morning we drove to Canton without encountering any interference. There was a car full of helmeted police near the road as we approached the town. Another car load was outside Freedom House (headquarters of COFO), taking pictures of everyone entering or leaving. Since an ordinance had been passed strictly limiting parking in the downtown area, we left our cars here. Two of us, assigned to the south side of the courthouse square, walked downtown to our posts. White people regarded us with curiosity or disapproval, Negroes with discreet silence, except for an occasional greeting or ^{cautious} smile.

As we neared the courthouse, helmeted police with guns were everywhere in evidence. The sheriff and his deputies, ^{plus} a police force of five men augmented by special police, accounted for nearly 100 armed officials covering the town. A few white persons were standing on the corners or along the buildings, and later a few Negroes stood at the corners to see what was going on. The shops were open and some people went about their business - a reassuring factor - but there was not much trade going on so far as we could observe.

The civil rights plans were for 15 persons to walk from the Pleasant Green Holiness Church to the courthouse to apply to register. These were to be followed after an interval by up to 100 more. About 9:30 the first contingent approached along West Peace Street, followed by some 75 persons who had not gathered at the church but attached themselves enroute. The police were alert, and directed those wishing to register to move in a single file on the pedestrian walkway across the street through the main (west) gate to the courthouse grounds. As long as the would-be registrants remained in single file, they admitted as many to the grounds as could be accommodated. There was no evident molestation of either registrants or observers, although we received later reports of verbal abuse of Negroes by police and civilians. Negroes standing along the sidewalk or buildings were told that unless they either got into line to register were kept moving, they would be arrested for blocking [redacted]

the sidewalks. This announcement was repeated at intervals. As far as we could see, the Negroes complied with this request and no one was arrested. White persons who remained in clusters along the route were, however, not arrested nor, as far as we could observe, required to move.

The procedure was orderly, and there was no violence. For this, the interest of press, radio, TV cameramen, and FBI must be given credit, perhaps more than the presence of 15 outside clergymen (whose interest may have stimulated the concern of the media and of the Justice Department). The editor of the local paper, the Madison County Herald, seems to have been a good influence in urging people not to start any trouble, but to leave the maintenance of order to the officials of the law.

However, only one person was allowed to go into the courthouse at a time to fill out the application. This procedure took an hour or more, with the result ^{that} of only four or five persons, of the 250 who had at one time or other stood in line, actually got into the courthouse to fill out the application and examination form. These were not actually registered, but told they would be notified of the results within 30 days.

During the course of the morning, my partner and I approached the courthouse from the east (back) side and walked to the southwest corner. From this vantage point we observed the line for sometime. It was then that we could very plainly see that it was not moving. No extra registrars or facilities had been provided. It was obvious that a slow-up was intended. After some 20 minutes we went into the courthouse without being stopped. Not knowing the interior, we looked around for the registrar's office. (Perhaps we should have been briefed on this, but as of Friday morning we did not know whether any of us would get that far.) At this point someone asked what we were looking for. When we stated ^{that} we wished to observe the examination, we were told to give our names and to ask the sheriff who was outside at the north gate for permission. When we explained our interest as observers to the sheriff, he told us that the courthouse was too small to accommodate any outsiders, and if we

did not have any legitimate business there, he would have to ask us to leave the grounds. Canton wanted no outside agitators, and if we were seen talking to any "Nigras" we would be regarded as outside agitators. We assured him that we did not regard ourselves as "outsiders"; that as fellow Americans, hopefully our presence would help prevent any rash conduct on either side. We left the grounds and saw no attempt to "tail" us or interfere with us.

I heard of several side incidents which I did not witness. Charles Evers of the NAACP, brother of the martyred Medger Evers, was picked up by the police. He told us that they had questioned him, but did not have anything with which to charge him. Those in charge of the demonstrations stated that officials asked everyone in line to give his name and address - ^{extensively} b to check whether they were residents of Madison County. It was suspected that this information might be used to harass them. One of the observers overheard one townsmen in conversation with another state that he was going to go down the line and he would fire any of his help he saw there.

At 3:30 the Reverend Elton Cox, believing that the people had been standing long enough and that hardly anyone else would get into the courthouse, dismissed the crowd. They dispersed quickly. Shortly afterward, there was a report that a shot had been fired at a young Negro couple in a car. A closer checkup indicated that the windshield had been struck by a stone, but that the persons were not seriously injured. Later, police arrested a sixteen year old Negro lad who had previously been arrested for violating a leaflet distribution ordinance in connection with the much presented selective buying campaign. He had, at the time of the earlier offense been forbidden to go near Freedom House. For violating this order, he was threatened with a reformatory sentence. An attorney member of the church delegation later in the evening secured a promise from the Citizen's Council chairman (who also acted as Juvenile judge, as well as real estate and insurance agent) that he would have the boy released in the morning.

COFO leaders, happy that there had been no violence, but determined to push for bona fide registration, decided to repeat the effort on Saturday morning and for the first few days the following week. They asked our group to stay or get replacements who might be prepared to remain longer. The NCC mandate was for Friday and Saturday only, and some of our number had not been aware of the Saturday commitment. We supported a request to NCC for continued use of observers. Six of the Fifteen were able to arrange their plans to remain for Saturday.

Friday evening a mass meeting was held at the Asbury AME Church. Local ministers and Elton Cox spoke of the results of the day and of the task ahead. Our participation was touchingly noted and one of our group was called upon to respond. The meeting was dismissed about 9 o'clock. When I left Canton it appeared to be peaceful. Things seemed even more peaceful after I had left Jackson and Birmingham Saturday morning.

The experience was very revealing of the chasm that separates Negro and white in the south; the police state characteristic of Mississippi in particular; the mixture of fear, habit, ignorance, cynical reinforcement of the status quo, and impoverishment that fills the atmosphere. The awareness of the outside world - of an America that is committed to democracy and ^{of} for what that democracy means - of a church that assesses the relations of love, power, and justice responsibly - fellow Christians who can understand the problems of both southern white and southern Negro in this broader context - to all this Canton and other communities like it need to be exposed. This kind of effort must not be negated by letting Canton fall back. Somehow, there must be registered both appreciation for its having held violence in check - no small achievement when one considers the background of violence and fear - and also concern that it is not doing positive justice to the rights of fellow citizens and fellow human beings.

At the same time, there are questions. How many people can the churches send to how many Cantons? What coordination can be made when COFO is eager to hit Hattiesburg, Canton, Clarksdale, Jackson, and other places, all within a matter of weeks? What is

the relative urgency of such observation and support as against the legislative push in Washington and the economic action required elsewhere? What other programs are in the works? What is the relative effectiveness and need in the South for recruitment of lay persons to approach the Negro community or to attempt communication with the white clergy and the white power structure? Can northern Negroes offer more encouragement to southern Negroes by participation? Where do we put the limited resources we have? The needs are many and the questions are touch.

Two final observations:

1. While swift decisions and emergency calls are, on occasion, unavoidable - sometimes even effectiveness - there would be value in giving more time to arrange schedules and recruit manpower.
2. No group should go into a "hardened" situation such as this without having a lawyer along. Too many questions come up where information and the implications of decisions need to be made clear. Perhaps such legal assistance would be more effective if independent of that provided by the civil rights organizations. At Canton we had the good fortune that one of the staff persons sent by another denomination was by profession a lawyer. No lawyer was provided by NCC and the only hope~~k~~ of having legal aid in the event of arrest was through lawyers retained by the civil rights organizations.
3. It has been suggested that if effective contact is to be made with the local white clergy and officials, a team should make these approaches well in advance of the actual demonstrations and before its association with local Negro or civil rights leadership marks its members and closes off whatever possibility of communication exists. I am not sure that the effort would be successful, but it would appear that the outside white clergy and laymen are uniquely fitted to serve as active observers who not only make their presence and interest known at the time, but visit the community ahead of time. If the same persons later appear as observers, they are at least known to have approached the local white leaders beforehand.

4. No words can do justice to the devotion shown by the CORE, SNCC, AND NAACP leaders who organized this effort, or the courage and discipline shown by the Negroes of Madison County. The fact that only 250 out of nearly 17,000 possible voters stood in that line is silent witness to the risk of economic reprisal and perhaps physical danger to which they subjected themselves. But they stood patiently, purposefully, firmly, with magnificent faith in the cause of democracy and justice.

Huber F. Klemons