

[TO: Arthur Thomas, NCC Southern Field Representative
From: A. Garnett Day, Jr., Program Coordinator]

REPORT ON THE COMMISSION TO CANTON, MISSISSIPPI

The trip to Canton, Mississippi (February 26-29, 1964) to act as observer at the voter registration demonstration by Negroes was my first direct acquaintance with such activity. Out of this experience I gained certain over-all impressions and reactions that may be helpful in future planning.

1. Regarding the general role of ministers in racial demonstrations:

Heretofore I have considered this role approvingly even though the accusation of "outsider agitator" has been leveled consistently. An experience in this role has caused me to be even more convinced that this direct involvement of ministers must be increased and extended. This must be done because the situation in Mississippi is so thoroughly difficult that justice and equality for Negroes can only be achieved by the cooperation of all of us together. Involvement of ministers in demonstrations must increase because this is the church's business and because this involvement of ministers may help to redeem the church from failure in the past. A further benefit is that a minister gains personally from this experience. He is better able to understand the deep wrongs of racial segregation and is more ably prepared to interpret the crisis to others.

2. The role of "observer" rather than participant:

There is, I think, a definite need for this particular role in addition to direct involvement participation. It might be that this is the role to be performed each time the NCC enters a community for the first time. There is, of course, the possibility that this approach could be followed again and again in the same community although my personal feeling is that the time always comes when complete involvement with the Civil Rights movement has to be made. Otherwise, our restraint begins to cast doubt on the advisability of demonstrations at all and our commitment will appear uncertain to the Negro who needs encouragement and assistance greatly.

I feel that our "observer" status in Canton definitely gave us an entree to certain white leaders in the community. I do not believe ministers should go ~~as~~ a community claiming to be impartial observers, however. This would be incongruent with our belief in the rightness of the civil rights movement. We ought not be asked to pretend or even attempt to be impartial. Our very presence ought to be a declaration of judgment against racial segregation. We can, nevertheless, make a strong position known while at the same time make every effort to seek the confidence and understanding of white leaders.

I feel this narrow line of identification was not achieved successfully in Canton. At first it appeared we had the cooperation of whites but lost it toward the end. This was caused, so we were told, by the fact that some of us stayed overnight in the homes of Negroes. Whether or not there is any reason to think this was a mistake is still a mute question, nevertheless. It is entirely possible that even the most determined effort toward neutrality would fail to change the basic intransigence of white leaders. As one white minister told me, these people are insane and they will die before allowing segregation to be compromised. The question almost becomes, it seems to me, a clear choice between the attempt to be moderate on the issue in the hope of placating whites or to enter fully and directly into the struggle in order to give the Negro absolute sanction.

Personally, I think the latter choice is to be desired, though this does not rule out the value of the observer's role. "Observer" must apply only to the demonstration itself and must not rule out other direct contact and identification with the Negroes, however. To do less than this is to compromise our own faith in the unity and equality of men before God. If this impartiality in favor of the Negro loses favor with the white community then that price must be paid. The only recourse is to keep up our efforts at negotiation and reconciliation in a spirit of sincerity and love.

3. Value of having legal agents accompany ministers:

Mr. Howard Veil, attorney and Presbyterian layman, was present in Canton, Mississippi with the delegation of ministers.

His presence was of great value and I strongly recommend that an attorney always accompany any group that goes to demonstrate. There are times when his counsel is extremely beneficial and he definitely has qualifications which strengthen conversations with white political leadership in a community. Since the danger of violating local ordinances and laws is so extreme an attorney's advice at times of arrest or confrontation with law enforcement officials would always be helpful.

4. Need to enlarge concept of delegating groups to aid demonstrations:

The use of ministers in this struggle has barely begun and yet the time has come, I think, when serious effort needs to be made in the direction of enlisting laymen and women in ~~the direct action type of~~ demonstration.

There surely are many laymen who could be secured for this task. Among the retired men of our churches there must be many who would be ready to bear witness in this way. Working men could be encouraged to devote a portion of their vacation time to the effort.

One of the strongest impacts on segregation can probably be made by women who are willing to march for justice and freedom. If United Church Women can be mobilized now into this ~~demonstration and observer activity~~ ^{effort} the results for good cannot be imagined ~~sufficiently~~ ^{adequately}. I urge that this new ~~diversion~~ ^{divers} of the church's involvement be inaugurated at once.

5. New attitude evident in Mississippi:

A new caution against ~~violent reaction~~ ^{violence} is the new policy among white leaders in Mississippi. Whether or not this policy of restraint will endure at all times in all places could hardly be determined at this point, but the ~~definite~~ fact is that a kind of enlightened mood is apparent now.

While we were in Canton, Governor Johnson of Mississippi made a television appeal to all the state urging local citizens to leave racial disputes to proper authorities. Local officials in Canton clearly made known their determination to keep violence from occurring, and in my opinion they would have used every means to accomplish this whether against whites or demonstrators. The power structures of the South seem to be aware at last that lawless resistance and mob violence harms their cause more than it helps.

In view of this new policy under Governor Johnson's influence, it seems especially important that more and more people be recruited to take part in demonstrations against segregation; again, therefore, I recommend that women be given the opportunity to make their own special contribution to the cause.