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A MEMORANDUM ON A THREE DAY VISIT TO CANTON, MISSISSIPPI. March 1-4, 1964.  
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In response to an invitation of the Department of Christian Action and Community Service of the United Christian Missionary Society, Indianapolis, Indiana, working with the Council of Federated Organizations (COFO) of Jackson, Mississippi. I, with four other ministers came to Canton for three days, March 1 to 4 as an observer of the racial integration crisis which has developed there. While in Canton we shared most of our meals with the Headquarters of the Civil Rights staff at Freedom House, and at night stayed in the homes of the Negro community.

Canton is the county seat of Madison County, located about twenty miles north of Jackson in west central Mississippi. The county population is 32,904, of which 9,262 are white and 23,637 are Negro (72%). Canton is the county's largest town, with a population of 9,707, of which 6,220 are Negro. Madison County by anyone's standard, is poor. More than one-third of all families in Madison County have incomes below \$1,000 a year.

First, intentionally at least, our presence in Canton as ministers witnessed to our conviction that these values of the American heritage founded on the dignity of the individual are worth personal risk and sacrifice. Our presence there further put the civil rights issue in a moral perspective and identified racism as a moral problem thus challenging the assertion of the white citizen's councils that social discrimination is completely unrelated to the question of morality. The admission that it is of course would be the confession that immorality is the foundational keystone in the southern way of life.

Our presence there exercised some restraint upon excessive abuses of civil rights workers. The police did not arrest Scott Smith, Chicago C O R E instructing voter registrants in the Pleasant Green church until we left it that morning. Nor were the eight members of the field workers staff at Freedom House arrested until it was known that we were to depart by plane that afternoon, and then, while we were out of the house. Many of our Negro brethren assured us that we brought them new courage from the outside

world and strengthened them in their commitment.

On Monday afternoon we spoke to a mass meeting of students engaged in a school boycott - the first ever attempted in Madison County and estimated at 90% successful. We assured them that they were on the growing edge of history. Dismissed at 4:30 they departed at intervals two by two in different directions. Outside all the while were five squad cars, policemen standing in the road armed with shotguns and rifles, helpless before children who, led by a great idea walked this bristling gauntlet apparently unafraid.

In the judgement of some the school boycott in Canton is of questionable value, because of the white people's indifference to, if not fear of, educated Negroes - even children. To avoid federal enforcement of integrated schools and to preserve the "separate but equal" principle, there is no state compulsory school attendance law in Mississippi. However the amount of federal funds channeled through state, county and city for education is largely determined by the condition of the Negro schools, the argument in Canton is that all federal funds have been devoted to the equipment of Negro schools whereas white schools have depended upon funds through state bond drives.

Perhaps one of the most creative factors existent in the school boycott is its psychological effect on the students in revolt against a white controlled system.

On each of our two evenings in Canton we ministers addressed well attended mass meetings at the Pleasant Green Methodist Church. The people sang, clapped their hands and rejoiced. Meanwhile, white citizens in "pick up trucks and squad cars repeatedly circled the church peering through the windows. Here was true nobility for none of them knew (or knows) as a consequence of exercising his right as an American citizen and Christian what form of brutal reprisal will fall upon him or his family nor when.

Again the squad cars and pick-ups with their "two way" radios followed us, their deputized 'passengers' taking photographs and movies of us as the two of us moving along the streets around the court house square pausing frequently to observe

the number of voter registrants lined up outside the court house door. Once, three men about twenty five feet behind us were debating when they ought to "let us have it", but they did not attack us.

During our three days of observance the line of voter registrant varied, at given times from none at all to ten, the highest count. Registration time averaged from two to eight hours per applicant when they were admitted. Most of the registrants failed the test or were reported disqualified. We were responsibly informed that since July '63 only 60 Negro voters have been registered to date. There is only one registration desk, and from the beginning ~~an~~ an organized slow down process has existed.

Our role as observers at this point was the reporting of any violence recognizable delaying tactics or intimidation of registrants. On the basis of months of accumulated reliable evidence in which the F.B.I have played a major part, we were notified (March 3) that the justice Department in Washington had filed suit against the county officials allegedly guilty of these very practises. The Federal Government has now established a beach-head and a crack has appeared in the now ~~unshakable~~ police power structure of Mississippi. Further evidence of the widening fissure in this political monolith in the judgement of the friendly perceptive editor of the local paper is the persistent program of "selective buying" by the Negro community. The local merchants are feeling the squeeze and are uneasy.

The almost relieved attitude of friendliness with which the sheriff and city attorney responded to our greeting as "outsiders" indicated a sense of troubled insecurity. While the business community represents roughly 15% of Canton's population pressured by the 85% into continued resistance to compromise on segregation, a weakening business center could turn Canton into a ghost town.

We interviewed the sheriff and the city attorney (Mr. Kane) on the "situation." "Our main trouble is from outside agitators who come in and stir up the nigras", they said. Before outsiders started coming in everybody here got along alright. All outsiders are agitators to us, we consider them white nigras", the sheriff continued. "Why do you northerners come down here to settle the race problem when you've got plenty of it up



there?" We expressed our appreciation for the degree of law and order they had maintained in the present tension and informed them that we were not "agitators" but were in the capacity of observers representing the departments of our respective church bodies and that we came with no ultimate solutions to the race problem but in order to learn and to share.

We suggested that Mississippi is a part of the United States with each state depending upon the other and the federal government for survival; that we are all Americans under the constitution guaranteeing the right to travel and freedom of assembly; that human rights precede state rights; that racial integration is a national problem for whose existence and solution we are all responsible and that all being thus involved there are no "outsiders"; and that the shadows of Harlem and Deerfield, Little Rock and Oxford, Birmingham and Dallas blight the image of America abroad and fall across the life of every American citizen. They remained silent. As a counter to the official charge of being "one-sided observers" living with the nigras and listening to their story only, and in the interest ~~of~~ wider communication, future observers might offer to spend some evenings in the homes of white citizens or in a Canton hotel. Jesus did visit in the <sup>Mo</sup> home of Simon.

One of the white clergymen we visited disclosed that we were regarded by some town's people not as ministers but as communists? The only solution he saw to the race problem in Mississippi was christian love. Further discussions revealed his concept of love had no room for the idea of justice that demanded social change, but mainly was conceived as charity leaving the class structure unchanged.

Another clergyman insisted that the church's mission in society is that of reconciliation rather than that of trouble making. But here too, reconciliation was interpreted not as the process of liquidating the barriers of racial arrogance that prevent it, but in terms of comfortable adjustment to the status quo.

Another minister who asked to remain anonymous sensed that white Mississippi had no plans even for desegregation and sees the state being "dragged screaming" into the twentieth century. He feels that the religion of the churches in Canton has had no impact on racial segregation there.

Among the solutions proposed, a young successful farmer is ready to touch off the 'incident' which would bring in the federal troops to break up, temporarily at least, the parochialism repression in Madison County. But he agreed that eventually "white violence" was certain to bring federal troops, and that the real victory included the demonstration that a non-violent non-Marxist social revolution could succeed in Mississippi despite the savage attempts to block it.

At this writing plans being developed envision a demonstration march of 5,000 Negroes in Canton, a systematic canvass of Canton and rural sections in Madison county. However as exemplified in the <sup>Feodal</sup> ~~federal~~ economy of Asia and Latin America political freedom <sup>of</sup> is/relative value to the landless culturally impoverished who are unequipped to use it.

As others have suggested, there is need in the long pull ahead, for establishing community centers at strategic areas in Madison county and elsewhere in Mississippi for citizenship and job training and vocational guidance. This could be a project jointly financed, staffed and directed by cooperating <sup>ing</sup> religious bodies, possibly channeling through the National Council of Churches in a working relationship with COFO.

The Center could work through a religious task force with responsible church leaders, lay and clergy for the development of social conscience, both as the exposure of the thin religious rationalizations of racism and the spiritual dynamic for creative social change. We could sense this trend at the meetings in the Negro religious community. The focus of religious interest is shifting from freedom in heaven by and by to freedom here and now. The same hymns and rythm are used but the words are different. The civil rights field worker is largely supplanting the traditional minister in the loyalty of the younger generation.

We left the town of Canton with a deeper understanding of the terrifying experience of the white citizens of Madison county, fighting desperately to preserve the tottering structures of a dying world - the only one they have ever known. We left with a guilty sense of deserting the truly brave little group of field workers at Freedom House, a heroic outpost for freedom. They and the others who will follow them in an ever expanding program of liberation represent an open door of hope and sanity in the pathological society in which, together we are trapped.