

(Ed. note: As the mailing was being prepared this second letter was received and is included--dated July 5, 1964

Dear Church Members and Friends,

I have just finished my first week in Hattiesburg, Mississippi as a voter registration worker in the Mississippi Summer Project sponsored by COFO and NCC. It has been a hot and full week of long hours and little rest. It is Sunday morning July 5th and many things are going through my mind. (But before I describe this last week for you I want to urge you to write to me. We are as yet not sure how much mail is actually received, but Hattiesburg is well aware of who, if not what, we are and therefore there is no reason to limit communication through our office. Please write with any questions or observations about the project, about this kind of activity or anything else and I will try to answer them in succeeding letters.) Ed. note--any questions or observations can be sent through Dave Miller.

The program in Hattiesburg consists of Freedom schools, community centers and voter registration work. This last week fourteen more teachers were sent down from an orientation session in Nashville, Tennessee to help with the 500 plus applicants for the freedom schools which will be held throughout the city in negro churches. The curricula will include remedial work in English, math, science and courses in government, negro history (a subject not recognized in Mississippi schools), sewing, typing and art. These classes begin next week.

The community centers are still in a formative stage. They will house the library (which has been collected for each community in the north) and will conduct the adult literacy classes and the leadership training programs.

The voter registration work has progressed well. This past week we have canvassed all of the negro areas in the city announcing the freedom schools and the mass meetings which we held each evening to explain the project more fully to the community. Because the purpose this past week was informational, the number of voter registrants has not increased significantly. In the next few weeks we will again canvass the city but with greater depth, discussing the registration process and setting up small neighborhood discussion groups to deal with the processes, problems and mutual fears of people interested in registering to vote.

I would like to speak for a moment about fear, for it is very real here and I had a difficult time realizing it as a reality. The two events below indicate how it is perpetuated in the lives of the negro community. Fear in Mississippi is very difficult to characterize and perhaps my understanding of it will grow in time. As people talk and as I notice my own reactions, fear here is an everyday problem. It is a constant of a negro's life in Mississippi. Sometimes it is amorphous and general. Sometimes it is clear and specific. But it is constant. There is general fear for one's self, one's home, and one's family, the fear of physical injury or death and economic destruction in the form of a job lost or threat of a job lost. And there are specific threats and examples of violence intended to frighten although the threat is small in itself.

Monday night rifle shots were fired into the engines of two cars used by the project in Hattiesburg. The incident itself was small and the damage could be repaired. However, it was done while people walked in the streets from a car without license plates. The implication for the negro community was clear in its reminder that neither property nor persons are immune to this violence if these people so decide. This incident was not big enough to bring the community together in face of a common ghreat but rather it tended to reinforce individuals in individual fears. There is also the natural human tendency to prefer the tentative safely of today to the increased tension of a potential-filled tomorrow with which we must deal.

Wednesday evening a group of volunteers were driving to Palmer's Crossing, a Negro ghetto about three miles outside of Hattiesburg. Outside of the city limits they were followed by an unidentifiable car. After a chase, the car suddenly turned on its siren and forced them to the side of the road. As we were taught at Oxford, the windows were rolled down an inch and the doors remained locked. By holding a flashlight in their eyes so as not to be identified, the officer (later identified) began a verbage of profanity about the volunteers, their families, their relationships etc. which only increased when he perceived a negro girl volunteer in the back seat. Moving around the car he ordered the door to be opened. They hesitated, seeing the flashlight in one hand and his night stick in the other, whereupon he reached through the window and slapped one volunteer about the face, all the while using the most obscene profanity. They opened the door and began to ask his name and badge number thereby distracting him from whatever he had planned for them. The officer reconsidered his position and retreated to his car ordering the volunteers to proceed home. He followed them to the first of their houses. They all got inside the house, looked it and turned out the lights after which the officer waited in front for twenty minutes before leaving. This has been the extent of the harrassment except for some harmless but unnerving cruising of the office by white cars.

In fairness to Hattiesburg, there has been a general tone of moderation expressed by the leading citizens and by the police primarily because of the national publicity focused on any blatantly violent acts. Mississippi is very publicity sensitive and because of the national attention this summer there is a measure of safety here. This cannot be said as easily for state officials or for other areas of the state like the southwest.

In the next letter I will talk about the disappearance of the three civil rights workers in Mississippi, its effect on the volunteers and upon the negro community in Mississippi.

I send my best wishes for a good summer.

Larry Spears