

Report to Warren McKenna from George H. Phelps
on work as minister-counsellor in the project
at Shaw, Mississippi. July 23, 1964.

I arrived in Shaw late afternoon of July 14 for a stay of ten days. At that time this project itself was only ten days old and I the first M-C in its experience. This is not to say, however, that some of the workers having been in other projects had not known a M-C. In fact, there seemed from the first to be a good-natured acceptance of my presence by all the volunteers - I was at least a friend of the cause. No one questioned why I was present, although I doubt that any of them had any notion as to why I was there. It was evident, however, that the last thing in the minds of these young volunteers was that I was in their midst to minister in any way to their own needs. At the first mass meeting on Wednesday night I was asked to give an opening and closing prayer, which is more obviously the function of a minister.

It has been hard to avoid the feeling that I am a fifth-wheel in the various functions of the project. This is understandable inasmuch as each of the volunteers has his own assignments and is busy going about performing ~~it~~ them. It is natural that the leadership should feel reluctant ever to ask me specifically to do anything. When they scheduled the kids (volunteers) to clean up the center, I insisted that my name be included, and it was. I also have attended all staff meetings, but my counsel at these is assiduously avoided, which also is understandable. However, the few times I have contributed a point or a question I have been received and dealt with respectfully. My personal contacts with the workers has been constant and most rewarding. In fact, my personal conception of my job as M-C has been to concentrate my efforts on being a pastor (in whatever sense) to these young college people. Some of them are loyal to the church and understand its shortcomings, most of them are rebelling from the church and Christian faith as they understand it, and a few are outright atheists confessing to be so. In one instance I was able to perform a natural pastoral function with one of the Jewish girls who was sick simply by helping her to diagnose her condition and supporting her in her distress by showing empathy and giving comfort.

It should be pointed out here that when I arrived the project was in the throes of some confusion for lack of clearly defined leadership. There were sixteen volunteers, seven being girls. On the morning of July 15 a long staff meeting was held with Stoughton & Lynd present. In the course of this long discussion much of the hostility and ego-centric concerns of the young people were revealed. This surprised me to discover that these people who had dedicated their summer lives to this kind of a cause could be so caught up in their own feelings. Leadership was a problem simply because some of the kids couldn't stand the sense of personal respect which would be lost if certain persons (anybody actually) were to be given authority over them. Then I saw these kids as the 18, 19, 20 year olds that they are with all the problems and tensions we expect in adolescents of this age. As a result of this meeting three boys were given leadership subject to the authority of John Bradford, project leader who was spending much time organizing the work in Nound Bayou. Also the Freedom School curriculum was re-adjusted to make it less academic and more practical in terms of political action and ideology. The air was cleared for the time being and there seemed to be a better spirit at work. Wally Roberts, who had written Stoughton Lynd such a depressed letter the

day I left Jackson and we read in your office, read his letter to the group at this meeting and the kids made their comments. It helped him greatly and by the end of the day when I asked how he felt now about things he smiled and said that he felt much better and thanked me for asking. He has been fine ever since with no more question of his leaving.

On Saturday and Sunday I went, at Bradford's request, to Mound Bayou. He was sure my presence there and my going to church there would help the cause. I did this glad to feel that I could be of help. I went to the Bethel Methodist church, was invited by pastor Jones to be on the platform with him, to read the Scripture lesson and, at the very end of the service (after two offerings and a strong appeal for an air conditioner) to speak. I urged the people to support the new project in every way they could including financially. Before I left I gave Bradford \$30 for use in the project as a gift from people in my own church, Delmar Presbyterian, Delmar, New York.

This week John Bradford came into Shaw for the purpose of holding a staff meeting to handle some of the complaints he'd been getting from the volunteers about the leadership and program here. He also decided that a number of people from this project must be transferred to Cleveland. All this was handled with much tension, but with final acceptance by all and, again, a good spirit to follow. It was at this meeting that much talk of hostilities came out and people talked freely and directly to each other. I took this occasion to suggest that as M-C I would be more than available as a liason between leadership and volunteers and/or as a listener to hostilities. This proposal was rejected nicely. One girl I noticed was shaking her head negatively as I made the suggestion. One of the fellas indicated that, at least for him, he had to know someone a long time before he could talk confidentially to anyone. Of course, I understand the dynamics of counselling and what he said is true of all of us. It is interesting, however, that right after this meeting, a group of five or six of the boys gathered with me at a place where we eat and we got into a good discussion on a number of subjects not related to the project. What I noticed about this was the obvious interest of the boys to engage in talk with me. I am impressed with the sensitivity of these kids and with their ultimate willingness to cooperate in spite of their personal outlooks.

For want of a car I have not made any effort to contact the white community or the white ministers. However, part of my reluctance at this point derives from a lack of conviction that contact with the white community is significant or particularly helpful to the work here. I have asked for and received some helpful ideas from the volunteers. And now that Henry ~~Burd~~ is here with a car, we may be able to catch a few of the white ministers. At any rate, Henry may see this as part of what he would like to do.

I thoroughly believe in the M-C idea even though I myself do not feel that in 10 days I have been very effective. However, I do feel that just my friendship, getting the kids to call me George, and just being here is more helpful to all than can easily be seen. I'm sure that my presence helps in keeping up the general morale of the group.