

To Bob Beatty

John Cameron

Confidential

To: Race Relations Committee

Date: July 28, 1964

Subject: Report of Visit to Mississippi,
July 19-25, 1964

From: A. Stauffer Curry

Discovering on Sunday morning, July 19 that tentative plans to go to Mississippi a week in August, my first choice, were not feasible, I began checking with available staff persons on the possibility of going the week of July 19-25, my second choice. These contacts led to several phone conversations with appropriate National Council of Churches personnel in New York City and Jackson, Mississippi. Similar contacts were made to cancel, if possible, other arrangements I had for this week. These activities led to my leaving Elgin the evening of July 19 and arriving in Jackson, Mississippi, about 9:00 a.m., Monday, July 20. I returned home early on Saturday, July 25.

Briefing in Jackson NCC Office

About 20 ministers, including staff workers, campus workers, pastors and others assembled in the NCC office at 507½ North Parish Street, Jackson (phone 601-355-9090) about midmorning for briefing by the Rev. Warren McKenna, an assistant to Arthur Thomas, and others working with them. The ministers were divided into two groups: (1) those who could stay two weeks or more and serve in a counselor-pastor-chaplain function among the youth summer workers; and (2) those who could stay less than two weeks and therefore would serve in voter registration, community education, and similar activities.

The briefing included the following:

- the role and services of NCC in the summer project
- the relationship of NCC to COFO (Council of Federated Organizations)
- the relationship of ministers to summer project youth workers
- the will of the people to "disbelieve"
- the role of lawyers in the summer program; the Lawyers Constitutional Defense Committee; the Lawyers Guild; the Lawyers Committee for Civil Rights Under the Law
- how to provide bail money
- offenses, legalities, illegalities, police harassment, etc.
- what to do if arrested; rights, procedures, cautions, etc., (entitled to one phone call from jail; follow officer if under arrest; inquire if under arrest)
- what to do if stopped by non-police who act like police
- many take attitude "this is war"
- use discretion; don't pat child on head; don't give name and address of Negroes with whom living
- the history of the Negro in America; slavery, freedom, reconstruction days; growth of white supremacy and segregation,
- various reactions of Negroes to the summer program
- various types of whites we will meet
- KKK and White Citizens Council much concerned about other whites. "Must keep them in line, especially poor whites."
- some major fears are: (1) Negroes controlling government; (2) Negroes out to get whites, women especially; (3) Negroes achieving economic status and thus keeping wealth from whites
- Negroes may suffer retaliation after summer is over, according to some observers

- how to fall down, cover head with hands, fold legs against self, etc., if attacked physically (the non-violent self defense)
- how to deal with police harrassment
- keeping away from white communities

Many other aspects of the situation were gleaned through personal conversations, literature distributed by CORE, SNCC, NAACP, SCLC, COFO, and other means.

Near the end of the first day of briefing, the 20 ministers were given assignments to Canton, Hattiesburg, and I believe a few stayed in Jackson.

I went to Hattiesburg next morning in a car driven by a Disciples Iowa state staff member in charge of women's work; other passengers were a pastor from Massachusetts and a woman campus worker from Iowa city.

Briefing on NCC "Hattiesburg Ministers Project"

On arrival at the NCC, "Hattiesburg Ministers Project" headquarters at 520 Mobile Street, a Negro section, we were met by Bob Beach, the director, a recent pastor of the Presbyterian Church at Hebron, just north of Elgin on Route 47 (headquarters phone: 4-7720). John Cameron a pastor of a Negro church on the edge of Hattiesburg is co-director. This headquarters office is a store front, in back of which are about 15-20 beds (mattresses and springs on the floor) a few feet apart for male ministers. The lady ministers slept out in homes of Negroes. This NCC office is diagonally across the street from COFO headquarters. The Hattiesburg area is estimated to have about 40,000 people (34,389 according to the Brethren Reminder), with somewhat less than half Negroes. The total of COFO, Ministers Project, and other civil rights workers in the area for the week was estimated to be about 80-100.

The briefing here was chiefly in the form of on-the-job experience, oral conversations with those on the scene, and printed materials. The following topics were treated:

- what to do if arrested
- voter registration procedures
- Freedom Party registration
- the use of "the moderate approach"
- the Mississippi constitution and its interpretation
- housekeeping procedures on the "Ministers Project"
- how and when to make white community contacts
- the set up of Freedom Schools and Community Centers
- some efforts at human relations commission activities
- current court cases
- many unusual evidences of discrimination

Voter Registration

After a short briefing, just after arrival, we were taken about 5 miles out in the country to Palmer's Crossing, a small village with several stores, churches, post office, filling stations, and residences. An extensive COFO voter registration campaign is going on here. Out in all directions from the village were dusty roads on which Negro shacks were located, often surrounded with trees and heavy foliage. Dinner was donated and served daily by the Negroes in one of the churches to 20-30 workers. Menu: chicken, string beans, back eyed peas, okra, fruit pudding, ham, and many other items. This is an excellent example of Negro cooperation. The noon meal hour represents a clearing house and sharing occasion for the workers.

After the noon meal each of the four ministers in our group was paired with a COFO worker. We walked up and down country roads to talk to people about registering to vote, registering for the freedom party, attending a precinct meeting on Saturday, and related matters. Voter registration was at the heart of the process. I did this on Tuesday afternoon, Wednesday morning and afternoon. I was with a different COFO worker each half day: a girl from Ann Arbor, a boy from California and another fellow from Pennsylvania.

The insights into Negro living, habits, thought patterns, intelligence were most interesting to me. The insides of their homes were much nicer than the external appearance indicated. They were well versed on the Republican convention, thanks to TV, and this was sometimes a take off point for our discussions. The reactions to our visits were as varied as the receptions a pastor and guest evangelist receive as they go from place to place. The processes of visitation were much the same, but the content was different. In this calling the objective was to go to the court house and register, and also to attend the Saturday precinct meeting of the Freedom Democratic party. People talked freely of their joys and problems, as well as gave reasons for registering or not registering. Here are some of the typical responses and situation:

- "My husband has been sick for ten years and I'm afraid to register would cut off his check." (It seemed to be a VA check and probably would not be affected; if local welfare it probably would be cut off.)
- "I drove school bus for 10 years, but when I registered in 1962 I lost this job. If I were young and had a family I couldn't afford this."
- "Yes, I've been down to the court house 5 times and each time they told me I failed on the constitution. But I'm going back." (6 or 7 trips to the court house is a minimum it seems, in order to register finally.)
- "I'm in business (combination of building trades, trucking, real estate, etc.) and will donate food and money, but will not register now." (Fear of business loss seemed the reason.) "My wife will register."
- "I just moved back from Milwaukee where I voted, but can't vote here for a year."
- "Yes, I'll let you pick me up on Thursday and take me to the court house."
- One fellow gave all sorts of excuses for not registering but never the reason, which seemed to be fear of losing a good job in town.
- It seemed that old people were more willing to register than young ones, probably because they had less to lose; life was full of frustrations and one more risk would not matter. Young parents didn't want to lose their jobs.
- The number of people who had recently signed up for registration was a tribute to previous workers in the field.
- The low wages reported by many Negroes was according to our expectations; some told of threats to their employers if the latter tried to raise wages,

The workers reported that 20 Negroes went "down to the court house" on Thursday morning in cars supplied by the workers. This was regarded as an excellent response.

Minister-Student Relationships

The three students I worked with were extremely capable and well informed. All had lost interest in the church. They regarded ministers as not interested in such matters as "racial strife." They thought ministers were "stuffed shirts." They each expressed deep appreciation for my interest in their work and our relaxed relationship in canvassing. (We had quick refreshments of iced tea, coffee, cake at a number of places.)

This type of relationship to students was reported by a number of ministers and is one of the inherent values in the process, it seems. In fact it is implied in the objectives of the "Ministers Project."

Freedom Schools and Block Meetings

At night we attended as visitors three "Freedom Schools" taught by both youth and adult COFO workers, and held in negro churches. Negro history, voting procedures, the meaning of the constitution, the meaning of the 14th amendment, citizenship, etc. were content of the schools. One class was a simulated precinct meeting presided over by the one negro shoe salesman in Hattiesburg. The curriculum was quite informal yet pointed. Classes for children were held in daytime; youth and adults met at night.

We looked in on one "block" meeting held in preparation for the precinct meeting on Saturday afternoon. There were a number of these, "teas," and other get togethers--all Negro, of course.

My COFO colleague and I had the job one day of "comforting" a woman who had planned a tea, but was disappointed when the leaders did not appear for it, due to a scheduling mixup.

Community Center

Just prior to my coming to a Community Center near Palmer's Crossing had been opened and the girls, one from Oregon particularly, were conducting sewing classes for negroes, other home activities, crafts, child care, and the like were on the new program.

Similarity to Work Camps

In Southeastern Regional Secretary days I helped committees to plan, set up, and give overall supervision to a series of work camps. In very many ways the Palmer's Crossing, and other, activities of COFO youth took on the characteristics of a successful work camp--home visitation, classes for children and adults, work projects (in this case canvassing), and the like.

One wonders if the church in general is challenging its youth with anything comparable to the challenge presented to COFO youth.

Identification With the Negro Community

One felt a close kinship with the Negro community and--incidentally--much more safe and secure. We felt safe in Palmer's Crossing and on Mobile Street, the Negro section of Hattiesburg in which we stayed. Uptown it was different.

Personally I didn't experience any harrassment, arrests, or unpleasant experiences. One day I waved to a group of men at a filling station, as one would anywhere when walking by. The Negro portion waved heartily but the white portion not at all. One day the car in which I was riding (Iowa license) slowed slightly at an intersection, and a fellow honked vigorously as he passed us--this may have been normal annoyance, but it seemed to be a very much exaggerated reaction.

To support the Negro community a number of ministers attended sessions of an area Negro Baptist training school of one of the denominations. The sessions were held in a school house. Some harassment was expected but none occurred that I heard of. Negro churchmanship is a topic for possible study.

Court Cases and Harrassment Much in Evidence

Much discussion was heard about pending court cases. In fact on Thursday some of the ministers were present at the court hearing of a white worker and a local white resident both charged with assault and battery. The white boy was entering a store for Freedom School supplies with a white girl and Negro boy when the white boy was hit by a local citizen; the latter said he was earlier elbowed by the white worker on the post office steps. The court, apparently fairly enough in this case, dismissed charges against the Freedom School worker but fined the local citizen \$40, suspending half the fine.

Other pending cases in the discussions were: increase of traffic fines against workers; some cars of workers were stopped at least half a dozen times in a week (fortunately the driver I was with most, obeyed all traffic laws meticulously to avoid harrassment; one permanent worker with whom I rode took many back streets to get out of town and seemed to take a different route each time.) Threatening phone calls were reported by some, while the FBI had several complaints filed with them.

One worker inadvertently overdraw his checking account and this was being taken seriously by the courts, even though he immediately paid up his deficiency. There is some evidence the case will be dropped.

Several charges in harrassment cases where perjury, rape, and other violations were used as excuses to arrest people were apparently dropped about this time.

Lawyers of the various committees noted above seemed to be available in abundance; and some observers felt that they had established favorable contact with the Mississippi bar association.

Unfortunately, there was not time nor occasion to analyze carefully the forces at work in the legal and political fields--namely, the influence of lawyers some of whom wanted due process; the influence of hack political workers such as registrars who were elected on the premise of white supremacy; the influence of police who were dedicated to vigorous harrassment as well as law enforcement; the influence of the mayor and others who believed in white supremacy but also may have wanted to create a good image of the city; the influence of the White Citizens Council who tried to keep other whites "in line." (Their latest recommendation seemed to be the boycotting of 5 & 10¢ stores, and others, who served negroes at lunch counters.)

Liaison With the White Community

After several days spent on voter registration, there were several other tasks which needed to be done: (1) cataloging of COFO books for Freedom School use; (2) liaison with white pastors; (3) liaison with leading white individual citizens; (4) liaison with Southern Mississippi University personnel; and (5) liaison with William Carey College personnel. I chose the latter, as little contact was previously made there.

Carey College has 90 to 95% of its 600-700 students as members of the Southern Baptist Church; the Mississippi convention of this church supports the college. Many students are pre-ministerial. A large portion of the administrative personnel have theological degrees. They have a large department of religious education. The Baptist area executive is a member of the Christian education staff. I had appointments and conversations with the president, dean of instruction, the dean of women, the Head of the Division of Languages and Literature. The head of the Division of Natural Sciences, the area executive--CE professor (had to be postponed), and several students. While most of the appointments were made for individual conversations, a campus worker and minister from Iowa accompanied me on several interviews.

The conversations were highly rewarding and we hope accomplished the purpose of interpreting the work of COFO workers and of establishing good will. The interviews are written up in detail elsewhere but here are some salient points:

- The Carey College doors would be closed in a month from lack of support if the school were actively integrationist, or if Negroes were admitted. Southern Baptist support would be cut off. All the persons interviewed were clear on this point.
- One leader declared the school believes ultimately in integration but now is not the time.
- One administrator pointed out that both trustee board committees and faculty committees have a wide divergence of viewpoint, and vigorous internal discussions result.
- The problem of racial unrest varies from area to area.
- There is a parallel between their students who go to Montana to work with Indians and COFO students who come to work with Negroes. This parallel led to a very significant discussion.
- There was a definite attempt to create a favorable image of the way whites treat Negroes in Mississippi.
- There is a definite fear of Negro unrest. "Did you ever see them when ^{they} come to town Saturday night?"
- They had no clear answer when the poor community library facilities for Negroes, in contrast to white libraries, came into the discussion.
- There are integrated faculties at negro theological schools, but not integrated student bodies. (One wondered if white faculty members were not supplied somewhat condescendingly.)
- When voter registration came into the discussion, it was obviously a "sore point." One otherwise quite objective person said, "Why don't the 17 Negro college presidents of the state vote? They should sacrifice in order to vote." (Apparently the element of fear enters the picture when even a Negro college president wants to vote.)
- They are very very sensitive to the press coverage given Mississippi.
- One member of their staff felt there would not be recriminations against Negroes when the summer was over.
- One administrator's wife had "maid trouble" this summer. The maid probably was involved with COFO workers and fearful to come to work, he thought.
- We had the impression one "strong" office secretary prevented scheduling an interview with a top administrator, but we met him on his way to coffee break in the Student Center and had a fine discussion with him.
- Much of our conversation time was filled with:
 - exchange of data re work of our respective denominations;
 - exchange of data on mutual acquaintances;
 - expression of admiration for the obviously religious and church centered character of Carey college;
 - discussion of the rapid rate of Southern Baptist growth;
 - discussion of the problems of church related colleges.
- At the same time, we did not at any time lose sight of our mission; they were well aware of this to begin with.
- One repeated that "we take a passive role."
- Our teacher was quite vocal on stating and restating "we want nothing to do with the black race." (This was perhaps the least church minded of all we spoke to.)
- I believe we built a reservoir of good will, insofar as this is possible now.

General Observations

1. The extent to which fear dominates the situation is very great.
 - Negroes fear loss of jobs if they register.
 - Whites fear Negro uprising, taking over the government, intermarriage (this seems to be the ultimate fear).
 - Sympathetic whites fear non-sympathetic whites.
 - Whites and Negroes both fear the KKK and White Citizens Councils.
 - College officials fear loss of support if they are suspected of integrationist activities.
 - Visitors fear harrassment, arrest and physical danger.
 - White local ministers feared their white denominational colleagues from "out-of-state."
 - All feared a bad "image" of their native state in the press.

2. The depth to which the segregationist and white supremacy philosophy has permeated is almost incredible.
 - This seemed apparent as we spoke to religious leaders; often they had no answer or rationale for their segregationist views--except to be "practical."
 - The complete defensiveness of the whole state, with enlarged police forces, official policies of harrassment, etc.,etc., substantiates this observation.
 - The briefing sessions on "negro history" gave new insights into this situation.

3. To be on the scene is to begin to get the "feel" of the situation.
 - Just as a trip to Europe after the war helped to give the "feel" of post-war developments, this trip yielded insights, facts, understandings, feelings, etc., not available through the press.

4. It is important to help these civil rights activities in a non-violent context.
 - One purpose of the presence of ministers is to do just this.
 - Mississippi may come out ahead of Harlem, Brooklyn, Rochester in this respect.
 - Maybe more "ministers projects" are needed throughout the whole country in order to preserve non-violence.

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