

An Evaluation: The Shaw COFO Project
Aug. 17-28
Rev. M. Laurel Gray (Ministers' Project)

A ten-days stay in a project at the end of a summer is hardly a fair basis upon which to make an evaluation of that part of the "Mississippi Project" in which I participated. However, for what it is worth, here is my reaction:

Realizing that the project is new, and knowing the extenuating circumstances with which it dealt, I must say generally that a great deal of good seemed to be resulting. The Negro community seemed to put a lot of faith in the project as their only hope for a way out of the "closed society". What progress has been shown in race relations would have to be traced at least in part to the presence and work of the project. Much planning had to take place even though much of the work was of the pioneer variety and under constant threat by the power structures of the white community. It certainly goes without saying that the time, money and talent was not wasted and had its good effect.

But there were several things about the project, both locally and state-wide, which tended to undermine the gains and give cause for introspection.

1. The Number One problem seemed to me to be the lack of mature, adult leadership on the local and county levels. Too often, young teen-agers or inexperienced college students were placed in leadership roles for which they were not adequately prepared. The gravity of the life-and-death decisions and the importance of the movement to the future of the Negro in the South demanded, it seemed to me, a better trained corps at the top. There was also a great deal of confusion about leadership roles among the students, the ministers and the local COFO volunteers. At times there was an actual vacuum in really responsible decision-making which caused avoidable delays in highly important programs. I felt that this was partly the fault of the area leader who did not have the respect of the students and workers and thus could not draw things together.

It seemed that volunteers would be most effective with a longer training program and a longer term of service.

2. The Ministers Project was poorly publicized. As a result we came here quite unprepared as to what we were to do, what to bring, what to expect, etc. The only thing we were told--"You will be counselling students;" "You will be helping in voter registration." Ironically, we did very little of either, but became jacks-of-all-trades.... painting, building, writing, organizing, supervising, chauffeuring, mimeographing, typing, teaching...you name it. No doubt this would vary with every project.

3. The Freedom Schools and community centers seemed to be the heart of the project but needed more attention. The motley way in which the community centers were thrown together gave an outsider the impression that this was some fly-by-night radical group that would fade out in time. The Freedom Schools, perhaps offering the greatest opportunity of all, were least used because of the lack of trained personnel.

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4. The beatniks. Though most of us were required to live in the simple manner of the Negro neighborhood, this did not excuse the "beatnik" appearance of some. Failure to shave, to wear neat and clean clothes hurt the movement. This was the impression the white community had. So they were labeled Subversives, communists, etc. Many people we talked to mentioned this. Some of the COFO workers are said to be "free-lancing" *that is living off the donations of the community and having as little tie with the project structure as possible. Though dedicated, they seemed to undo many good things. The "beatnik" label could be also mentioned in connection with the rootlessness of some of the workers. The Negro revolt seems to gain its fire and momentum as a basically religious and moral movement. Yet, when the leaders (or workers) isolate themselves from this basic root, they lose the point of the whole thing. The leaders and workers who were least effective seemed to be those who did not recognize this religious foundation or who tried to capitalize on it by "using" it as a tool instead of a platform from which to operate

*(white)
Jim Adams*

5. Politics. I was disturbed, in connection with No. 4 above, that the foundation for many was simply a platform from which to promote the Democratic party; in other words, this movement was a political movement for them to aid the Democratic party. COFO workers were accused of being "Johnson's boys" in disguise and at times this was valid.

6. The Lawyers' Guild. Many questions were asked as to why this particular group, which has a reputation of being slightly pink, would be brought into the project. It only added fuel to the fire about this "subversive" invasion from the North.