

Hattiesburg Min. Project

September 12, 1964

Dear Friend,

Many more qualified than I have written recently of the civil rights situation in the South, and I shall not attempt any comprehensive evaluation on the basis of my week in Hattiesburg. However, I do feel I owe it to you who made my trip possible to give a financial accounting and to try to explain something of what is going on in Mississippi.

I was given a total of \$250 by Hastings friends such as you. Plane fare was \$160, and a week's living expenses amounted to \$25, making a total cost for the trip of \$185. Of the remaining \$65, I gave \$10 to a broke fellow-minister in Hattiesburg, \$5 to another, and \$50 to the Hattiesburg Ministers' Project.

I went to Hattiesburg primarily for one reason. First and most important, the Negro community needs northerners to be there. Whoever goes to Mississippi is seen as an intruder, but as an invited guest of the local white community. The Negro owner of the store-front church has rented greeted me with a gold-toothed smile and a "Wahdy, brother. So glad you can be with us. So glad." The white pastor of the True Light Baptist Church said, "It's mighty good of you to come down here, sir. We could never make it alone, you know." Northerners are not outsiders causing trouble in an otherwise peaceful environment; they are reinforcements for a hard group of men and women who have been fighting a losing battle against the white man's caste system for decades. The tide may be turning.

Second, I went because part of a Christian's calling is to stand beside any brother who is suffering. The Negro is suffering in the South; that fact needs no elaboration. The white man controls the vote and the economy which, until now at any rate, has left the Negro powerless. But the white man is suffering too in the South, and he is hard to stand beside. Once one sides with the Negro, he is automatically the white man's enemy. So, one must stand beside his enemy. In one conversation an ardent white segregationist (head of the educational psychology dept. at Univ. of Southern Miss.) said to me "Why don't you Communists get the hell out of here and go home." "I am home, home in the United States," I said, "and I care what happens here." "Hah!" he replied. "Nobody in the North cares a damn about Mississippi." "The Church of Christ cares; that's why I'm here." He didn't believe it; but he heard it.

Third, and this reason is much clearer to me now than it was before I went, Mississippi must have northern help to solve her problems. To

put it more harshly, pressure in the form of northern "interference" is necessary or Mississippi will revert to her "cherished" way of life. Pressure is dangerous, of course, and northerners must be wise as well as firm. But firm they must be. The Southern Mississippi professor mentioned above admitted that if it had not been for "agitators," James Meredith would never have been admitted to Ol' Miss (no other Negro has been, now that the pressure is temporarily off, although several have applied), the little Negro voter registration that has taken place recently would not have been allowed at all, the Biloxi schools on the first grade level would not have been integrated this fall, the credentials of the segregationist Mississippi Democratic party would not have been challenged at the National Convention, and so on. In the long run, of course, white Mississippi does not have the power to sustain its segregated way of life. But it gives way only step by grudging step, and gives way only in direct proportion to the pressure applied.

For instance, the population of Forrest County, where Hattiesburg is the largest city (37,000) is about 50,000, 60% white and 40% negro. Of the 13,000 whites eligible to vote, 56% are registered. Of the 7000 negroes, 22 or .3% are registered. Registrar Theron Lynd has several court judgments against him for his discriminatory practises, yet he continues to discriminate. Details of the actual judgments against him may be found in the 1963 U.S. Commission on Civil Rights report, pp. 19-20. This publication is available free from the Commission, Washington D.C.). I spent about 3 days calling from house to house in the Negro communities attempting to persuade Negroes to brave Mr. Lynd's surly attitude and the impossible registration forms. Most Negroes are loathe even to try, both because of the difficulty and the real threat of white economic reprisal. When and if Negroes in Forrest County are permitted to register, it will be because of relentless pressure on Mr. Lynd and his superiors.

My final two days I spent in the white community, attempting to enlist support for the cause of integration. The fascinating and sometimes incredible details of some of my white contacts would take too long to recount here. It is worth recording, though, that there is such support, although it is proffered by a small minority of whites.

Let me conclude with an "organizational" note. Some of you may be interested to find out who the civil rights groups are who are working in Mississippi. The best known group is the Council of Federated Organizations (COFO), a federation of the NAACP, Congress on Racial Equality (CORE), Southern Christian Leadership Conference (This is Martin Luther King, Jr.'s SCLC group), and the Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee (the SNCC group to which the three workers murdered in Neshoba County belonged). It is COFO which solicited and sponsored the approximately 1000 college students who worked this summer in Mississippi.

The National Council of Churches, through its Commission on Religion and Race (CORAR), also has a stake in these students. CORAR helped to train them in Oxford, Ohio, in June, and has supplied them with minister-counselors (ministers who have volunteered to spend anywhere from 2 weeks to the whole summer in Mississippi). One such counselor, The Rev. Arthur Jellis from Concord, Mass., met my plane in Laurel, drove me the 29 miles to Hattiesburg, and briefed me on the situation there.

The Hattiesburg Minister's project was born on January 22, 1961, when the United Presbyterian Commission on Religion and Race (UPCORAR) responded to a COFO plea for help in a demonstration against Forrest County registration procedures. When the demonstration ended, the Project did not, and from January until the present a small group of ministers, priests and rabbis has remained in Hattiesburg, primarily as a bridge between the white and negro communities. In May, the Project passed from UPCORAR to CORAR sponsorship, and co-directors Rev. Robert Beech (white) and Rev. John Sameron (Negro) were appointed to provide continuity and leadership.

CORAR is now in process of undertaking the "Delta Ministry," a new and ambitious project along Mississippi's fertile, western "black belt" where cotton is king and plantation life has as yet been little affected by the cry "Freedom Now!" Contributions for this ministry and for the Hattiesburg project may be sent to National Council of Churches Commission on Religion and Race, 475 Riverside Drive, New York City. (This is where I gave the extra \$50 you gave me.) SNCC also welcomes funds for the support of COFO; these may be sent to James Baldwin, Suite 603, 100 Fifth Avenue, New York, N. Y. 10011.

Thank you for sending me.

John P. Crossley, jr.

cc: Several interested people