

DIARY OF A VISIT TO GULFPORT, MISSISSIPPI

October 9 - 12, 1965

Wilfred J. Unruh, Board of Christian Service

October 9, Saturday

Flew via Braniff-National airlines from Wichita-Houston to New Orleans on an economy club coach fare (\$17 more than rail coach). Bus at 7:45 pm to Gulfport. Bus delay 1½ hours due to tire, water pump trouble. Evidences of Hurricane Betsy to be seen. Southern accent new. Cab driver comments on new Roman Catholic Bishop Perry for New Orleans (Negro) "It's about time they get in someone to control them (Negroes) ... King, Farmer, others should have seen the rescue operations - no discrimination at all. Deaths - only five whites but some 34 Negro."

October 10, Sunday

I'm located with Sam Guhr family. Went to OM church - Crossroads Bible Church (Mennonite). Heard Gideon's presentation. Service most informal. Harold Regier led provocative Sunday school discussion for all adults. Discussed Jethro, father-in-law of Moses. This led to question of whether we can be open to "outsiders". All agreed to the theory - but issue of "northern agitators" not openly raised. Our unit members make up about one-quarter of congregation's adults. Picnic lunch at Camp Landon and continued conversation till 2:30 pm as total group. Impressions of well oriented, happy team flavor.

Discussion sought to identify power structures and inner character of the community's dynamics. Also tried to identify cutting edges of activity, as follows, but not in any conscious priority:

Priorities and Edges of New Questions

1. Should we locate some of our task forces in North Gulfport? Apparently at issue is possibility of locating "office" of our team in North Gulfport; maybe also some residence.
2. What kind of participation in community action and/or community organization? Should we have a team member assigned to community organization activity, or subsidize such a worker?
3. What shall be the character of church membership and participation?
 - a) Members still retain membership in Kansas churches. Why not change to Mississippi church (Negro or other)?
 - b) How long retain primary identity with area OM segregated churches?
4. What should be our philosophy of church relations?
 - a) Seek to develop our "own" church?
 - b) Complement those churches genuinely seeking to be obedient, by undergirding these churches with things they cannot do.
 - d) Relate to existing churches even amid their compromises, seeking to gradually create new openness and eventual change?
5. What form should an obedient, evangelical witness seek in this area?
6. How can we test whether we are too diversified (or spread too thinly) and not working in depth amid the options for our work?

7. What patterns of interaction with other agencies of social change should we follow?

Gulfport staff are talking searchingly about the need to become more deeply involved in non-church sponsored social action. Essentially we are asking here also whether the old categories of "religious" and "secular" are obsolete and untrue; whether we should therefore plan for the church to "go secular" in many more ways.

The basic stance of our Gulfport ministry might be defined in two perspectives:

- a) Seeking to offer love and healing for those who are hurt in the community of the poor afflicted by hatred and conflict.
- b) Seeking to stand by in a sympathetic helping role and to offer dignity, self respect and self discovery to the poor in an era of transition.

As new events in the community create changes in the context the specific tactics may change, but this stance still remains.

In contrast to this stance we could move to the revolutionary stance symbolized by a Saul D. Alinsky approach, characterized by fomenting and/or precipitating social conflicts in behalf of the poor.

Perhaps one current issue explores the degree of leadership we ought to take in local political struggles and local power structures while remaining within our basic stance for action.

8. Specific questions noted:

Could we equip the library with enough books so it could really help students in good tutoring of any age group.

Employment for Irvin Enns as his family settles "permanently" in North Gulfport.

Civil Rights - The COFO has died a quiet death this summer and has been replaced by Freedom Democratic Party. The FDP has concentrated on voter registration and political identity. John Else is a local FDP man.

North Gulfport - non-incorporated area outside city limits with 6-8,000 residents, mostly Negro. Shack town, one federal housing area with paved streets. No municipal water or sewer. Apparent high frequency of crime, etc.

October 11, Monday

After breakfast the unit met for devotions and discussion for two hours. There is a vigorous dialogue going on dealing with important questions, e.g. whether or not to move some of the offices into North Gulfport; what kind of relationship we should maintain with the segregated Mennonite churches of this area, how to make the community center more effective,

Jake Friesen reported to Harold Regier and I about the MCC Delta plans. Jake, Jane and little Janice will be moving into Canton, Mississippi immediately. See Jake's report of October 22 for details.

Spent 11:00 am to 1:30 pm with George Dicks discussing his work as associate director. Then spent next several hours in discussion with Harold Regier, acting director. Late afternoon and early evening we spent at the center and library trying to see the people at work. A fight between two teen age girls broke out while there and I intervened to break it up. Supper with volunteer Edith Adrian and a long leisurely chat together. Margaret Derksen joined us at 9:00 pm for another 1½ hour talk.

An overall impression here is that we have tried very hard to major in "spiritual" work and added social action as it could be squeezed in.

October 12, Tuesday

We spent the morning in interviews with several persons. Rev. Keith Tonkel, 2700 Kelly, Gulfport, Mississippi, one of the 28 Methodists who signed a paper of conviction early in the civil rights movement. Now only seven remain in Mississippi, Keith is a bachelor, handsome, and clearly deeply committed, spiritual guy. He characterized the spirit of the South today as follows:

- a) We were wrong in the past
- b) Something has to change
- c) We will let it happen
- d) Let us be realistic on what we can change

Keith, as a moderate southern Christian, emphasized several other motifs:
Love can't be forced, but must be created.

Basically we are dealing with persons, and in the South very deep, positive, personal relationships between white and Negro do in fact already exist, sometimes on a paternalistic basis.

Civil rights movements are making some unrealistic demands, trying to force a new form of domination.

Christ was more like the good Samaritan than a Highway Patrol officer.

I feel we should invite a man like Keith Tonkel to our colleges or inter community social action events to reflect the feelings of the genuine Christian moderate of the South. Harold Regier thinks highly of Keith.

Our second interview on Tuesday was with a Disciples of Christ civil rights worker, John Else, 4409 Mississippi Avenue, Gulfport. John and wife rented a home in North Gulfport. His work is as a community organizer. At first he was a COFO worker. When COFO quietly died this summer and was replaced by the Freedom Democratic Party (FDP) he remained as a political organizer. John has his BD degree from Yale and works largely on the community organization strategy of Saul D. Alinsky. Recently he prepared a document portraying the power structures and struggles in North Gulfport. It was intended only for his Disciples and FDP superiors, but found its way to the local leaders. As a result he was evicted from the local FDP unit and may need to leave town this fall.

John sought our financial participation in a two year salary subsidy for a local Negro community action organization leader. He would like \$600-1200 per year. Harold and I felt the best we might do would be a token amount of \$2-300 per year.

John Else also criticized our own policy of ownership of the community center. He felt we should move toward community ownership and administration of the center. We may be guilty of a kind of paternalism in retaining exclusively Mennonite ownership, operation and management. Operation of the swimming pool through the Good Deeds Association he felt was much better.

Tuesday noon (11:00 am to 2:00 pm) all of the staff met to discuss broader questions of concern and policy. We talked about:

Purpose and future of Fellowship Chapel

Our relation to existing Mennonite churches

Proposed move of Harold and Edith's offices to the new Fellowship chapel building.

The Community Center and questions of administration, staff and a board of control.

The possibilities of placing "community service volunteers", that is VSers who earn salaries for their service.

How to reach college age youth and the problem of dancing.

Tuesday afternoon Irvin Enns and I toured some of North Gulfport, the piers and checked rail and air connections. Irvin and Lillian are settled in North Gulfport, amid all the poverty, in a used trailer house. Presently he has a job as a longshoreman at the pier, unloading boats. He is the only white Mennonite now planning to live in North Gulfport.

Tuesday night I spent at the Community Center where Irvin and Edith were in charge of activity with teen agers.

October 13, Wednesday

The morning was spent in a visit to the Randolph School system at Pass Christian, a French Catholic community, 12 miles west of Gulfport. Here Mrs. Helen Dick and Mrs. Sam Guhr both teach Bible classes in the public school, which is open to white students, but has only Negro kids now. There is some lack of eagerness in the principal's mind as to this service, but we are still privileged to continue. This is the only school where we teach Bible presently.

At noon Harold and I had lunch with a white Gulfport dentist, who serves on a State human rights council and locally on a human relations council that has played a helpful role in communications.

Dr. Powers emphasized that the South was changing. More had happened in the last year than in previous generations. He looks to legislation and government for the most effective changes, in morals as well as all other areas. He said the Gulf coastal area is more constructive and liberal than the Delta.

At 3:00 pm we had a final unit-staff discussion in which I shared by observations and offered some suggestions. At 4:45 I left, this my first visit to our Gulfport work.

VISITOR'S REPORT TO GULFPORT TEAM

October 13, 1964

Wilfred J. Unruh

I. IDEAS TO EXPLORE

1. Tutoring High School Students - I did not try to document the problems of local students. I am suggesting that in addition to Bible classes with junior and senior high students, we explore the need (if any) and the possibility of tutoring services for students, using the Good Deeds Association Library as a base of operation.
2. Public Health-Nursing Clinic - There are many children in North Gulfport. I am guessing a public health nurse or a pediatric nurse or even a midwife would serve a real need. This could include child care classes and be related to homemaking classes. Perhaps such service should include assistance in family planning (birth control information and aids),
3. Classes in Homemaking and Domestic Arts - It would seem possible to immediately begin some meetings in homes with mothers. Here Linda Guhr and Lillian Enns might work on a simple sequence of training in cooking, sewing, child care, social etiquette, etc.
4. Adult Literacy - I am guessing the adult literacy rate in North Gulfport is relatively low. Using a Frank Laubach approach (How to Teach One and Win One for Christ) we might in fact combine evangelism and education.
5. Visual Aides - My impression is that generally free education films are readily available from state agencies, industries and public agencies. Offering a weekly film on basically non religious concerns, would in my opinion, render a potentially important service without a high overhead.
6. Voter Registration Drives - I would like to see at least one person participate directly in some political action. There is good opportunity for Irvin Enns, as a North Gulfport resident, or perhaps for George Dick to engage in such community action.
7. Literature Distribution - The Negro poor are in a transition era, as slowly they begin to move towards the middle class, integrated society. Offering good literature (free, subscriptions(?)) to Negroes on the move up economically, and into the white society might be a good service. I would think selling subscriptions to better-to-do homes might be worth trying.
8. Negro History - As a part of our total teaching program, I would like to see consideration of teaching Negro history. Most texts in our schools do not treat this fairly, and in the South this aversion to Negro history is even more blatant. Delton Franz is perhaps our best resource for bibliography and curriculum.
9. Periodicals of Negro Interest - It would seem a good use of money to subscribe to two or three Negro periodicals for news and pictures. I noted the need for pictures as teaching aides at Pass Christian that would have Negro persons, rather than white.

10. News of the South - Should you subscribe to the Southern Courier, published in Montgomery, Alabama by former COFO workers? See Time magazine October 15, 1965, pp 111-112, "Fifty fifty in the South".

11. A Consultation of Leaders - Our church has a number of persons directing projects relating to "communities of the poor" in various cultural settings (Gulfport, Woodlawn, Mexico, Kansas City, North Battleford, YOU-Winnipeg, Lame Deer-Busby, Peoria, Philadelphia, Manigotogan, Matheson Island, Loon Straits, Bloodvein, Pauingassi, Cross Lake, Oraibi, Oklahoma City). Perhaps we should plan and convene these workers to discuss problems and gain insights into ministry in such settings. We all face similar problems related to service that seeks freedom, responsibility and spiritual breakthroughs while avoiding prejudice, paternalism, dependency, and apathy.

II. REPORTING UNIT DISCUSSIONS

On three occasions the unit met to discuss together areas of policy, strategy and program. In the following section the general conclusions are reported.

1. Relation to Area Churches

I suggested the principles of variety and mobility in church affiliation. These are not necessarily new ideas, I would feel there is no need for all unit members to relate to the same church. A preferable pattern would be to have various places of identity, e.g. the local Mennonite churches, local Negro churches, area white (moderate) congregations (like Keith Tonkel's) and our Fellowship Chapel. There should also be some basic worship and dialogue which all staff members share together. We cannot be prophetic to all people at all times. Thus if Irvin Enns is prophetic in a parable of action when he moves into North Gulfport perhaps he should not expect to also be prophetic in equal degree at Crossroads Church.

We did not answer question about formal church membership for continuing workers.

2. Location of Offices in North Gulfport

There was general agreement in the staff that we should move our offices into North Gulfport as soon as possible. The mechanics of the problem were considered. Questions which must be resolved prior to moving include:

- a) Who all should move? The unit felt Harold and Edith should move, but that Orlo should be consulted about Edith's move, and of course his own wishes.
- b) Can we use the small rooms in the Fellowship Chapel building? These are the most logical rooms to use; we already own the property, and the building is nearly ready to use. However, it was decided to discuss this with the Fellowship Chapel group, asking their candid advise and asking them to participate fully in the decision.

3. Future of Fellowship Chapel

From all I learned in listening, Fellowship Chapel is broadly understood to exist as a bona fide church, albeit in its own unique form. I concur with this purpose and expectation. I would be concerned that the shape or structure, as well as the life style of this church, be allowed to emerge within its culture, without our imposing middle class, white style and structure. Fellowship Chapel should be given a high priority. It is our strongest work among adults.

4. The Community Center

This has been our chief arena of action in North Gulfport. It has been recreation and youth centered. At present various persons spend brief blocks of time in leadership there. The following directions seemed to emerge as new decisions.

- a) Director - We need a full time person to dream, plan, implement and coordinate activities at the center. We are not sure if we can get such a person on VS or if we need a staff person.
- b) More than Recreation - There is a high probability that additional projects that might be implemented in the future will also focus on adults. We might anticipate that future activity at the center would include action other than recreation, and involve adults.
- c) Community Involvement - We feel we need to involve the community in the operation of the center. It is not clear whether this will also mean community ownership. Who, how, and why should we move to a structure of operation?

5. Community Service Volunteers

There was agreement that now would be a good time to attempt to place some VSers in salaries positions. Concretely, the possible use of Peter Wiebe, trained electrician, was discussed and encouraged. Teachers, nurses, nurse aides, carpenters, and other skilled persons can be used. Salaries are low in the area. Unemployment is not high.

6. Priorities in Service

In discussions, agreement seemed evident that we should begin to think more about adult oriented projects. Concern was also expressed that in some way all of the work of our unit be evaluated to see whether our priorities are properly fixed, and to ask whether we work in depth as well as in a diversity of ways.

III. OBSERVATIONS AND SUGGESTIONS

1. The staff at Gulfport reflects somewhat a feeling of restrictions on freedom in creative planning and implementation. My preference as an administrator is to grant units maximum freedom and responsibility. Gulfport seems to be reluctant to decide and move in planning and action. Perhaps this is particularly true because of Orlo's furlough currently. I would prefer a pattern of broadly defined policy and strategy, and then "cut loose" the unit for free responsible action.

2. There seems to be a need to further clarify who is responsible for what. I would suggest each project be designated with one person clearly in charge as the leader. Such persons should also carry primary responsibility to shape policy and operational tactics. Examples of such designations:

Radio program	- Harold Regier
Fellowship Chapel	- George Dick
Community Center	- Edith Adrian
Library	- Margaret Derksen
Community Clean-up Project	- Sam Guhr
Homemakers Classes	- Linda Guhr
Bible Classes	- ?
Pass Christian Classes	- ?

3. Team Ministry

Gulfport appears to have moved from an era of administration directed by one person, to an era of shared administration, in the same way that the Oklahoma City workers are seeking to define more clearly the character and operation of team ministry. I think it might be well for discussion at Gulfport.

4. Community Participation in Decision and Control

As a tentative concern, I would like to see Gulfport explore further how the local community could be authentically involved in our circles of decision and control. Perhaps we need to continue the pattern exhibited as in the swimming pool. What about Fellowship Chapel, the clean up project, the Community Center? Can we explore shared ownership, shared operation, shared decision making in which local community and Camp Landon both participate? I feel we too are guilty as white power structures in dictating to our Negro friends the how, where, and when of some of our projects.

5. Priority of Time

A basic principle I would identify and offer for consideration is "Spend more time in North Gulfport, spend less time in Camp Landon". This idea the unit itself has expressed in many ways. I would urge its implementation. One specific implication would seem to be an increase in the area of visitation work. This would seem imperative for the leader of the Fellowship Chapel and those involved in youth leadership at the Community Center.