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ROUGH DRAFT

FINDINGS OF MISSISSIPPI TRIP FEBRUARY 1966

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March 8, 1966

THE RELATIONSHIP OF THE MENNONITE CHURCH TO THE CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT IN THE SOUTH

*Preface*

In this first section I am reporting some of the situations that I found in my attempt to ~~pin down the issues in church work in the South~~ ~~to see how the church is related to the civil rights movement in the South~~. To save time it might be helpful for the reader to skip the preface and go to the next section.

1. The Situation Now

After the first round of interviews with people working in Mississippi, I was confused by the variety of approaches each was taking to the fear of change in Mississippi. Mennonites like Erwin Wedel, it is reported by other Mennonites, use ~~in~~ two approaches: ~~one~~ for the southern white community and one for people such as northerners who have less ~~far~~ fear of change. Jake Friesen is trying to avoid being ~~mis~~ classified as either a typical southerner or a civil rights worker. He is purposely ~~describing his role~~ vague about/hoping he can be accepted as a person rather than a civil rights worker. "Civil rights worker" is a term applied to fearful and immoral people. Titus Bender as a pastor, Mrs. Jane Sample as a white moderate, Mr. Smedley, a Negro teacher, Rev. Gray, white ~~exp~~ Episcopal clergyman heading up the human relations council of Mississippi, all ~~work~~ work within certain boundaries that they know cannot be crossed without cutting off communication or getting them tagged as "civil rights workers". It is not a matter of courage for them. As they explained it is a matter of staying effective and in communication with the white community. Each of them had a little different approach or drew the boundaries that he dared to cross at a little different place. ~~Their~~ <sup>Their</sup> unity is found in at least three points: 1) all want to change the present situation that

keeps the Negro in a position of subservience; 2) all of them felt rejected by the Delta Ministry staff and felt condemned by them as compromisers; 3) I think it would be fair to say that all three felt that communication and relationships were more important than getting justice immediately.

## 2. Attempted Analysis

In trying to understand all these various approaches I tried to put on a continuum the different places the boundary was drawn so I could understand where the Mennonites might place themselves. All the graphs I could draw up that would depict such things as the degree of openness in views, the degree of being able to choose sides or stay in touch with both sides, the amount of violence, the number of areas in which they could push for equality (it is ~~xxx~~ safer for example to push for equality in jobs right now than education, but it's safer to work for education in the child development group in Mississippi than it is to seek segregated schools. Political equality is very dangerous. Social equality is even more offensive.) These scales or graphs are interesting <sup>to make</sup> in trying to pin down what each approach will or will not do. Supposedly they will help one understand where each person is and what his reasons for this position are. It might throw some light on what the Mennonites position should be.

## 3. The Issue

However, the above graphs are not very helpful. The main issue for the Mennonite workers and other moderates in the state was trying to stay in communication with their neighbors. Jane Sample, former encyclopedia saleswoman, described her approach as pushing for whatever rights one could, within the boundaries of acceptable or permissible activity. Like a saleswoman who hits a touchy issue, she skirts it and talks about the weather or

something else for awhile and maybe proceeds a different way to her objective of selling her product. If a Klansman criticizes her participation in the STAR program (Systematic Training and Redevelopment Program) or her work in Headstart she says "we aren't trying to register voters. We are I just trying to get 500 people to read and write. You know 500 people won't change the political power balance here." She felt that one had to act contented about achievements, point out past progress to people who are discontented, and keep pushing as fast as the situation would allow. She of course had done this with considerable cost to her family relationships, and with some risk to her own and children's safety. She is no doubt genuine in her work and her concern.

#### The Mennonites and Two Points of View in Mississippi

The Delta Ministry has no patience with the approach just described and represented by Jane Sample. There is no love lost between the Delta Ministry and the ~~moderates~~ moderates in Mississippi. For Delta Ministry the prime value is not communication or relationships as in the salesmanship position just described. For the Delta Ministry the prime value seems to be in identifying themselves with those unjustly treated and working with them for justice and human dignity. Working ~~and~~ <sup>with</sup> what the situation allows and cooperating with the moderates who are willing to let the power structure throw out little favors and advance as they see fit of course damages the dignity of the Negro who must determine his own destiny as much as possible. The Delta Ministry cannot see this approach at all. It is the antithesis of the Delta Ministry ~~example~~ philosophy of self-determination <sup>for the Negro.</sup> The "gains" don't mean anything in the Delta Ministry view, if they are ~~won~~ <sup>won</sup> at the price of re-enforcing the idea that Negroes are powerless and have no real responsibilities.

"They can go to hell" pretty well expresses the opinion of the Delta Ministry and the moderates for each other. The Delta Ministry feels the moderates and white churches are really powerless. They point out that 65% of the southern white church goers are Baptist and 5% of the Negro church goers are Baptist. ~~But~~ But this one denomination which has so much power cannot do anything about the conditions which exist. The Delta Ministry has said that they realize the white churches ~~and~~ including the ~~Mennonites~~ Mennonites have problems and these problems are too big for Delta Ministry to understand. They cannot give the white churches any help. In their view the white churches and moderates of Mississippi are like the pope described in the play "The ~~MEM~~ Deputy". In this play the Pope could not cut off <sup>relationships with</sup> the Germans by criticizing their policies of Jewish extermination but tried to be friends to both sides. Even in the face of ~~this~~ this inhuman Nazi activity the Pope could not bring himself to protest because he felt the relationships, the influence, and communication were more important than the Jewish people.

This figure is not one that the Delta Ministry ~~un~~ used but I believe it portrays their feelings about the moderates and other church groups including the Mennonites in Mississippi. They simply feel that the church like the Pope has sold himself to some other God and they are beyond the <sup>and</sup> help ~~of~~ counsel of the Delta Ministry program people. I think you could even say that the Delta Ministry people look at the white moderates and church people in Mississippi with pity and compassion and wish <sup>these moderates</sup> ~~they~~ could somehow make up their minds as to which side they want to be on instead of enjoying their role as a go-between.

Some of the reasons for the Delta Ministry taking this view of their situation might be clarified by some assumptions that they have:

1. Politically the whites are well organized in Mississippi. They do not just think white supremacy but have organized to keep it. The Ku Klux Klan, the society for the preservation for the whites supremacy, the citizen's council and their dial-a-hate messages, the White Knights, the State Sovereignty Commission are some of the organizations outside of the political machinery and local power structure that are organized to make sure the status quo ~~xxxx~~ remains. To meet this the ~~DELTA~~ Delta Ministry feels a group such as themselves must also organize, not fighting with the same weapons, but definitely/organized<sup>be</sup> to use the power that they have. It may be the Freedom Democratic Party which they encourage will not be able to prevent white people from doing further injustice and immorality but realizing that the potential membership of the Freedom Democratic Party is over 50% of the Mississippi population, they feel called upon to be good stewards of this potential ~~make~~ political power they ~~xxx~~ already have.
2. If one wanted to phrase this same assumption in psychological terms or terms of educational theory, one might say that the Delta Ministry sees the situation calling for methods that force people to see things they do not want to see. People are not attracted to change, especially painful change. If the Delta Ministry can show people that something no longer works than individuals may be forced to rethink their situation and change might be possible. Maybe this can be summed up by saying that the Delta Ministry approach seems to assume/<sup>the</sup> conflict of theory of education. People will not change or relearn assumptions unless they are forced to realize that the past assumptions will no longer be effective. People just

don't change voluntarily or are they usually attracted to change ~~it~~ when their present assumptions still ~~xxx~~ seem to be working at least fairly well.

3. One can also say the same things <sup>in</sup> /theological terms by saying that

Delta Ministry seems to have a healthy respect for the power of sin and knows that sin gets power over people so they can no longer control themselves. Their approach, therefore, does not assume sin is something people can be talked out of by explanation but as the kind of power that makes ~~xxx~~ robots out of people. The Delta Ministry approach is one that forces people to confront the ~~x~~ results of sin and feel the conflict in which this puts them. As a result Delta Ministry ~~xxx~~ gets crucified for this approach but it seems willing to have "no form or comeliness " and to be "despised or rejected by men."

Jake Friesen in his study of Mississippi noticed the same differences and different assumptions between the white churches and the Delta Ministry. Jake respects the approaches of both and feels that both of these approaches have their role. The moderates especially find that the Delta Ministry takes the heat and persecution away from many of their efforts. They ~~x~~ can always say they are not like those Delta Ministry people and say that they are simply working on particular issues. One does not find much appreciation generally, however, for the Delta Ministry approach by the moderates even though it serves to draw persecution away from the moderates.

4. We have described the difference between the moderates and the Delta

Ministry approach in political, ~~xx~~ psychological and theological terms. I think we might also say something about some sociological differences.

In many ways the difference of approach between the white churches (including the Mennonites) and the Delta Ministry <sup>is</sup> ~~and~~ the difference between ~~xxxx~~ rural city and ~~xxxx~~ methods and assumptions. In a rural situation relationships are very important. If they are not maintained, one is a nobody and is cut off from the community. People who have known each other for a long time know that it does not make much sense to picket or demonstrate against an old acquaintance. One knows him too well and knows what he will do to well and also knows <sup>he has with</sup> ~~xxxx~~ to live/him for a long, long time. Moderates have often defended their approach again and again to me by saying "we will be here a long time after they have gone".

In the city situation <sup>one</sup> ~~I~~ can pick one's relationships. We don't know people very well and putting the squeeze on others is often a way people relate to each other. One doesn't ~~I~~ have to be bothered and tense by living with, shopping along side of, associating with foes/. One simply escapes such tense situations by <sup>selecting</sup> ~~xxxxxx~~ a different group to associate with. One doesn't maintain relationships <sup>at</sup> ~~any~~ cost.

In a rural situation people are also not as conscious of the power structure. They simply knew that certain things were taken care of. The church people who were usually in power took care of things and it was not important for him to crusade <sup>for</sup> ~~any~~ particular ~~xxxx~~ cause. In the rural situation people didn't have to argue for ~~xxx~~ their convictions. The church people were often in control and they could take care of the opposition.

In the city situation protestants have learned they <sup>have</sup> ~~had~~ to put their convictions out in the open and say them quite often. This is a different situation ~~xxxxxxx~~ than the one in which a man of virtue was one who didn't say much but ~~xxxxx~~ who has proved over the years to be as good as his word.

We were quite ~~suspicious~~ suspicious of the man who could talk easily. In the fluidity of the city situation, the man who does not talk and refute some of the lies that are being told is a man who is poor steward. The man who can talk easily is not regarded as having some kind of disability but is appreciated as a man of talent. Also in the rural situation it was hard for a person to understand his own responsibility. So much of the outcome of a man's position and his acquisitions depended on the weather and factors beyond his control. In a city situation people have learned what kind of power they <sup>have</sup> and know ~~that~~ that "man makes man". They know that the city gets the kind of police force it wants and desires.

Mississippi is unmistakably rural. A look at the map shows that the large urban centers are outside of its boundaries. Memphis, New Orleans, and Mobile along ~~the~~ <sup>the</sup> boundaries are larger than any of the ~~city~~ cities within ~~the~~ <sup>the</sup> boundaries of Mississippi. It is not difficult to see why the rural oriented white protestant church of Mississippi finds the Delta Ministry approach ~~x~~ incompatible with their ~~k~~ past experience. It is not in their culture to choose sides and to stand with those suffering injustice ~~themselves~~.

### Conclusions

Although it may not be in the tradition of the white protestants ~~in~~ Mississippi church to stand with those who are unjustly treated we cannot say it is not Mennonite tradition. It is true that rural Mennonite churches suffer the same kind of condition exactly that ~~J~~ white rural in Mississippi suffer. However, in our earlier tradition we did choose sides in staying with those who were despised. Although the Delta Ministry approach is ~~as~~ far more painful than any of us would enjoy, and is the opposite of the respect and admiration our denomination has earned as quite, stable, dependable,

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people, I feel ~~that~~<sup>it</sup> ~~that~~ that it is much more compatible with the way Christ  
~~that~~ would have us work in Mississippi. As an outsider and <sup>one</sup> who has not  
lived in Mississippi and as one who has only a passing acquaintance with  
the situation there, I will be wondering why our approach is not like  
the approach of the Delta Ministry.

Masonicists have run - Europe → Russia - ASD

Now asked to stand up for others when historically  
we didn't fight for justice - not even for our own rights

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