

REPORT FROM HATTIESBURG

April 13-19, 1964

Come now, you who say, "Today or tomorrow we will go into such and such a town and spend a year there and trade and get gain"; whereas you do not know about tomorrow. What is your life? For you are a mist that appears for a little time and then vanishes. Instead you ought to say, "If the Lord wills, we shall live and we shall do this or that."

James 4:13-15

Background of the Hattiesburg Project

The Commission on Religion and Race (CORAR) established by the United Presbyterian General Assembly in 1963 chose Hattiesburg, Mississippi for an intensive campaign of voter registration. Hattiesburg was chosen because of the high level of Negro leadership there, and because there was a history of severe discrimination against Negro registrants in Forrest County. In 1962 there were only twelve registered Negroes. Then temporary injunctions against the Registrar of Forrest County were granted by a federal court. These required the Registrar to end certain discriminatory procedures, and added 42 Negro applicants to the rolls. Many Negroes were afraid to register lest they lose their jobs.

This project began on January 22, 1964 when 51 Presbyterian ministers came to Hattiesburg. The strategy called for these men to work cooperatively with the Council of Federated Organizations (COFO), which includes such groups as the Student Non-violent Coordinating Comm. (SNCC) and the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE). The leader of the project is the Rev. John Cramer. John is a Negro, a native of Hattiesburg. During successive weeks new teams of ministers came from all parts of the country to participate, including men from other denominations. (Two Catholic priests participated the week we were there.) The work included canvassing Negro neighborhoods, encouraging Negroes to register, and explaining the registration procedures. Also, the ministers and COFO personnel formed a picket line at the County Court House, calling attention to discrimination. Over 700 Negroes have attempted to register since the Project began.

The Minnesota Delegation

At the Minnesota Conference on Religion and Race in February the Rev. Tom Zsank of Glenwood issued a call to the Presbyterian delegates to form a team to spend a week in Hattiesburg. Several indicated interest, resulting in five men who were able to go. Besides Tom the group included Ed Freeman of Elbow Lake, Knox Sexton of Wheaton, Russ Tillotson of Wendell and Doug Sampson of Mankato. We had the strong support of our Synod Executive, Robert Caine. Knox began collecting the rest of us as soon as his service was completed on April 12, and we headed for Hattiesburg.

Arrival in Hattiesburg

Just before leaving Minnesota we learned that 44 persons had been arrested in Hattiesburg for violating a picketing law just enacted by the Mississippi State Legislature. The nearer we got to Hattiesburg the more apprehensive we became. During the last 90 miles from Jackson we were acutely aware of cars that appeared for a time to be following us. We exhibited some exceptionally careful driving! We tried to bolster our morale, feeling very much as aliens in a strange land, uncertain and uneasy about experiences the next few hours might bring.

We arrived in Hattiesburg a little after seven o'clock Monday night. We were warmly greeted at the COFO headquarters and directed across the street to the Ministers' Project headquarters. We were surprised to discover about fifteen other pastors there from New York, Ill., Ind., Penn., Kan., Oklahoma and Calif. I also found the matter of fact attitude of Robert Stone, a CORAR staff member, reassuring. However the "safety in numbers" feeling of finding so many others was in part canceled out

when we learned that all the bunks were taken in the Project headquarters, and that we would be staying with Negro families. We were warned to take care to the homes, as we would run less chance of encountering the police. At the time I would have preferred the relative security of the headquarters, but our stay with families was one of the richest experiences of the week. That night it was not decided whether or not we would be picketing the next day, so we retired that night tired after a long trip, keenly aware of being strangers to Hattiesburg, and uncertain about what the morrow would bring. The discovery of sugar in the gas tank of Knox's car the next morning confirmed that the enthusiastic joy with which our Negro friends greeted us was not shared by everyone in Hattiesburg.

A New Strategy Develops

The next morning after having been given a good breakfast by our hostess, we met with the other ministers to make plans for the day. Here we met John Cameron for the first time. John was one of the eight ministers from the Project who had been jailed; he and four others had been bailed out.

Robert Stone reported that the CORAR staff had instructed us to refrain from picketing, as a test case had been established already. Some felt a small picket line should have been maintained for the sake of morale in the Negro community, especially since a small picket line the previous day had not been arrested. However the advice of CORAR was taken.

We came to realize a new challenge and opportunity had been presented by the arrests. This was to establish bonds for those arrested. On Tuesday the prisoners were transferred from the County Farm to the city jail where they were segregated. At this point bond was posted for the three white ministers who had remained for morale purposes. They experienced a full measure of hostility from other white prisoners in the city jail. The Negro juveniles were released into the custody of their parents, leaving 25 Negroes in jail, each needing \$1000 property bonds to be released. Mel Wulf, attorney for the American Civil Liberties Union, visited all of them, and reported that their morale was good, but that we should get them out.

This presented a major challenge, for property was worth only its tax assessed valuation for bonding. A home that might sell for \$4000 was worth \$650 for bonding. Also, the same property could not be used for more than one person. To get \$25000 meant involving large numbers of people in the Negro community who prior to this time had never taken part in the voter registration campaign. Some of us went out canvassing people in the Negro community, asking them to put up their property for bond. The rest of us stood by at the Sheriff's office. It took us two days to clarify procedure, as we got different stories from the sheriff and his deputy. We tried to fit property together to make \$1000 without going over for each person. We finally got the last piece of property five minutes before the sheriff's office closed on Saturday. We didn't want anyone to be there over the weekend, particularly someone by himself.

We believe this was a most significant undertaking. It proved to the Negro community that they could do this. It involved a whole new group of people in the movement, many of these bonding property for persons they didn't even know.

It was a thrilling experience to watch these people come out of jail. Some were 60 and 70 years old. Every person told how filthy the jail was, how terrible the food was (when there was food at all); yet with one voice they expressed their willingness to go right back into jail if it would further the struggle for civil rights. One woman was recognized by the jailer, and asked if her father had not worked at the jail. "He was a good man," the jailer said. She replied, "He is still a good man. He just wants his freedom now."

The Courtroom

On Tuesday the Federal District Court convened for a hearing in which Theron Lynd, the Registrar of Forrest County, was the defendant. The Justice Department was appealing for a permanent injunction against Lynd for discriminating against Negro applicants. This if granted, would open the way for appointment of a federal referee, to whom Negroes could appeal if they felt they were turned down unjustly.

Several of us attended the trial, and Tuesday night John Dear, the attorney for the Justice Dept., offered to talk with several of us. He pointed out that there are five ways Negro applicants may be discriminated against: (1) Office Procedures. Deputys would give registration forms to whites, but would tell Negroes they would have to come back when the registrar was there. (Since the Registrar is also Clerk of the County Court, he is out of the office a considerable amount of the time.) (2) Stricter policy on omissions on the form. Negroes were failed for failing to sign in all the designated places on the form; whites were not so rigorously treated. (3) Selection of Constitutional section. The registration form requires that a person copy and then interpret a section of the Mississippi Constitution. Whites received sections easier to interpret. During one span of time 20 out of 31 Negroes received one section (a rather difficult one.) During the same time span over 400 whites applied; not one received that section. A statistician testified that the probability of this occurring by chance (the defense's contention) was one in a billion billion billion. Later his testimony was thrown out of court by the judge because the statistical formulas used had not been developed by the statistician personally. (4) Whites were often given aid, while Negroes were told no help of any kind could be given. (5) Grading of answers could be very discriminatory.

Attorney Dear brought forty witnesses to the stand. Part of these were well educated Negroes who were turned down; the rest were poorly educated, often illiterate, whites who were registered voters.

The day the trial began Dear filed a separate appeal with the Circuit Court in New Orleans which if granted will add 350 Negro voters to the rolls of Forrest County. He was highly supportive of the Ministers' Project, and said he hoped it would continue till the governors election in 1966. He felt the presence of ministers gave many Negroes the courage to apply, and even if turned down by the Registrar, through court action those who are qualified will become voters. He felt 1000-1500 Negro voters would make a real difference in Hattiesburg.

The trial for Lynd is not yet completed. It awaits more evidence to be filed by the Justice Dept. and then the Judge's ruling. Many do not think Judge Cox will grant the injunction. (He is a former law partner of Sen. Eastland.) However a higher court likely will. John Dear earned our greatest respect for his dedication and patient perseverance. We learned something from him in being patient in frustrating circumstances.

Negro Leadership

We were impressed with the leaders in the Negro community in Hattiesburg. One effect of placing property bonds for those jailed was to enlist the middle class leadership in a tangible way. Early in the week a group of prominent Negroes (professional and business people) met and decided to openly support the freedom movement in Hattiesburg. Friday night John Cassron arranged for us to meet with them, and we had a thoroughly delightful evening. This group is important, because they can add maturity and wisdom (and equal commitment, I believe) to the zeal of younger Negroes. If the time comes when communication is restored between the white and Negro communities it will likely be this group of men who will be involved.

Freedom Meetings

Every evening a freedom meeting was held in one of the half dozen Negro churches which actively support the movement. The meetings began with the singing of freedom songs. Then one of the COFO leaders would call on various people to speak. Usually one or all of us were asked to speak. Testimonies of faith and courage were given by those who had been in jail. At one meeting a plan of political action was given for setting up political machinery parallel to the Democratic party, to call attention to the fact that the Democratic party does not represent the Negroes of Mississippi. COFO leaders from other places came in to report on other activities in the state. An economic boycott of segregated stores was urged. As yet this has not been organized sufficiently to be effective, but it has been an effective weapon in other Mississippi communities. Many times it was repeated, "The white man understands only two things: the ballot and the dollar."

I was impressed with the spirit of these freedom meetings. There was real zeal and determination to change unjust patterns, and yet no bitterness or hatred. Again and again it was emphasized that they were working to free whites as well as Negroes from the fear and intimidation which grips the south. Every meeting was closed with the singing of "We shall Overcome." It was a moving experience to look around the circle and see ministers and priests from all over the country, Negroes young and old, some only a few hours out of jail, joining together in this tangible way which symbolized a much deeper unity. After singing four verses either a minister or priest would be asked to pray while the rest hummed, and then one final verse would be sung.

Church Patterns

Only a few of the Negro Churches and ministers in Hattiesburg have actively supported the freedom movement. Sunday April 19 there were seven ministers at the Project, the rest having gone home earlier in the week. We were all assigned by John Cameron to be in Negro Churches. Some of us went to Churches which have fully supported the movement, a couple of us went to Churches which have not. I was invited by a woman to go to her Church, which had never had a minister from the Project. I was made to feel most welcome at this Church. (I doubt if I'd been very welcome in any of the white Churches of Hattiesburg.)

The pastor of this Church talked to us before the service, and emphasized that while this Church had not opened its doors to freedom meetings, he had taught and preached for years that people should be active in the freedom movement. He talked at length about the debts on the Church and on his own personal property, and it was clear he was afraid of economic pressure if the Church openly supported the movement. He invited me to preach, which I did, emphasizing the need for people to involve themselves in the freedom movement out of a Christian context. After my sermon the pastor recapitulated my sermon very accurately, and then added, "Of course he hasn't told you anything I haven't told you already." The woman who had invited me told me on the way home that this was not true. The pastor had never before said anything about involvement in the struggle for human rights. My sermon, she said, was the first occasion in that Church when people had been urged to register to vote. She added that only one person beside herself had attempted to register.

This pattern, in which a pastor or Church is afraid to become involved, is one reason why the church in its traditional form is losing its hold on some of the younger people. I think another part of this is that the kind of religion expressed is no longer relevant to the situation in which they find themselves. For generations when there appeared no hope of changing anything in this world, a theology which emphasized the rewards of heaven had meaning for people. But a theology which says, "Be patient and you will be rewarded in heaven," is not meaningful to people who are wearing buttons that say, "Freedom Now!"

I do not deny the work of the Spirit in any place, but the community of persons gathered together in Freedom meetings in the evening seemed to me more authentically the Church than did the community to whom I preached Sunday morning. I think a tremendous theological responsibility is placed on men like John Cameron, who must maintain a Christian context for the movement and communicate a relevant theology. I think it would undercut both the Church and the freedom movement if people feel they must choose between them.

Our information about the Church in the white community is mostly second hand. The only white clergyman with whom we had direct contact was the Rabbi, who invited some of us to his home one evening.. He has been in Hattiesburg since August, and spent most of his life in Germany. He sees some dangerous parallels in Mississippi to Germany during the rise of Nazism. His predecessor was active in civil rights activities, so much so that most of the Jewish community boycotted the Synagogue the last three years he was there. The Rabbi testified to the great fear that grips the white community. One Jewish businessman was driven out of business because of an untrue rumor that he had contributed to the NAACP.

The Rabbi felt the best hope for establishing communication between white and Negro was "through the Churches. He reported that there was a growing concern among some of the white pastors. The white community didn't expect the Ministers' Project to continue. The fact that it had forced some to re-evaluate the situation. The Rabbi was hoping to meet with them, and thought that if the pastors of the influential churches could move very carefully and together, gradually the lines of communication might be opened up.

Some Personalities

A White college teacher. This man is a friend of a faculty member at Mankato State College. He teaches at a college in Mississippi which is segregated. He told us he has been a liberal since he was eleven, when a white man beat him for calling a respected Negro "Sir." He is trying to influence the minds of the young people he teaches. He has complete academic freedom; he has taught the Civil War, not the War Between the States. He believes some of these students have an openness which their parents do not have. He is not afraid to lose his job, because he can get another; but he feels his most significant contribution is through teaching, rather than in making a public statement which might jeopardize his position. He did say he would walk out of his Church if it ever turns away any Negroes who come there to worship. He told us many of his friends are deeply concerned about the "police state" laws being enacted by the Mississippi legislature.

A Negro man, 65. This man came to me with two papers. One was a letter naming him as a beneficiary to an estate worth more than \$100,000. The other was a copy of a letter from a white accountant to the insurance company, saying that this man had agreed for him to act with the power of attorney. The accountant said his fee would be 25% of the gross estate and 10% of the investments. He had already made plans for investing the money, and was coming over that evening to have the Negro sign the papers giving him power of attorney. This Negro man was illiterate (one of the few illiterate Negroes I met) and was not sure he should sign. I took the man to some of the business leaders in the Negro community, and they advised him to sign nothing until he had talked with an attorney he could trust. They made plans to take him to Jackson, where he could see one of the three Negro attorneys in Mississippi. Perhaps the accountant had the complete best interests of this man at heart, but with so few lawyers available who can be trusted by Negroes, it illustrates how easy it is to exploit people.

A Negro Girl. This teenage girl was released from jail and immediately walked over to observe the Lynd trial. At recess she told us, "I'm free. Even in jail I was free. That man (pointing to Lynd) is not."

A Middle-aged Negro Woman. This woman delivered a sermon to the jailor when he told the group in jail they couldn't sing. In essence she said, "I don't serve you. I serve God. If He wants me to sing and pray and read my Bible, I will. You can't tell me how far my religion goes." When they were warned that they wouldn't receive dinner if they persisted in singing, they decided they would rather sing than eat.

A Negro Student. This girl is a junior in high school, who had been one of the 44 jailed for picketing. She told me, "I believe in three things. I believe in God, in non-violence, and in this movement. I am not a Christian. I asked my pastor to support the freedom movement. He threw me out. He opened two doors so I could leave. I think if this movement fails it is the end of democracy. If we do not get our rights, some that have rights now will lose them. White people are afraid that if we get our rights we will treat them the way they have treated us. I do not believe this is true."

The Sheriff's Deputy. "I'm going to get me one of these white niggers before they get out of town."

A Negro Man. "I've lived here all my life. Sometimes it's hard to keep from hating. The first time I sat in court and heard those three judges speak for me the tears ran down my cheeks. That is the way I feel about you men coming to Hattiesburg. It gives me hope to know that there are white folks who care about my rights."

The Future in Hattiesburg

We returned to Minnesota convinced that God is at work in Hattiesburg. We believe that the presence of ministers has done a great deal for the morale of the Negro community, recognizing at the same time the initiative for this movement has been and will continue to be with the Negro Community. However the struggle for justice is only well begun, and the struggle for reconciliation between Negro and white is even further from completion. We hope other pastors and laymen will go to Hattiesburg. We feel the Presbyterian Church has a continuing commitment in Hattiesburg, and that we need to see this struggle through.

W. Douglas Sampson
Campus Pastor
Mankato State College
Mankato, Minnesota