

A CONTINUING REFORMATION

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*Bob - Thanks for your note & its information.
Quite a distraction to have a cross burned
in your yard. Did you say "In the name of
Shalom & Glory" -
today - the "morning after" - the election!
Shalom!
Ray*

During the past few weeks I have been asked many questions by friends and members of this Church. The questions went something like this: "Why in the world did you have to go to Mississippi?" "Isn't there enough to do in Connecticut?" "What were your motivations?" "How did you get involved?"

After my return to Darien, the questions generally had to do with my experiences in Mississippi and my responses to the whole experience. The questions went something like this: "Now that you have gone, did you find your experience worthwhile?" "Would you go again?" "Is there any hope for the Negro?" "Is there any progress?"

One more question might be added to all of these and it would be phrased something like this: "What does this all have to do with Reformation Sunday?"

This morning I should like to deal with these three general questions:
1. "What were my motivations?" 2. "What did I learn from my experience?" and
3. "Why did I choose Reformation Sunday to share with you my experiences?"

1. My motivations were mixed. As a matter of fact, my whole attitude toward going to Mississippi was made up of conflicting intellectual responses and emotional feelings. I asked myself whether I was going to go through with it, or whether I should find some good excuse to keep from going. I half hoped that the Board of Deacons would not allow me to have a leave of absence. Yet deep in my heart I knew that I would go and that the Board would grant me the opportunity.

At various times I continue to share with many people the feeling that integration should not be "forced". Particularly, before going, I agreed at times that a white minister from the North had no business going to the Negro community in Mississippi. Certainly, there is enough to keep one busy on the local Church level, particularly with the problems which we face in suburbia and with our own discriminatory attitudes. Certainly, I was aware of the personal dangers involved in going into a "police State" where all that I stood for was considered anathema by those in positions of power.

However, I could not honestly agree with those few rude people who would be tempted to call civil rights workers "nigger lovers". My concern was not for the Negro as such. Rather, my motivation was a deep concern for our American way of life based on Christian and Democratic principles of freedom for all citizens as equals under God. I would have gone if Eskimos or Indians or Dutchmen were being deprived their rights as citizens of our great country. I am concerned for preserving the rights of any and all men and my concern is not based on race or religion, except as it applies to my own Christian commitment and understanding of the will of God as revealed through Christ.

When a letter came from the Council of Churches asking me if I could participate in "voter registration work" in Mississippi beginning the week of September 28th, I had to, as the saying goes, "put up or shut up". There comes a

time in the life of a local clergyman when he is tired of making pronouncements from the pulpit which are not based on actual experience in his own life. It is my feeling that the Christian community has too long been content to pass resolutions and agree that "something must be done" about a particular evil in a particular area of our corporate life. If I had not responded to this specific call I would not have been able to preach effectively in the future on the subject of democratic freedom or the rights of man. I would not have been able to face God in prayer knowing that I had not done what was asked of me to prove my belief in the brotherhood of man.

As one who came into the United Church of Christ because of its progressive and realistic understanding of Christian commitment in this life, I signed the invitation to become a part of the "company of the committed" of our denomination's department for Racial Justice Now. My commitment was not to Negro welfare, not to civil rights, not to Mississippi, not to our denomination or to this Church, but to Christ. We have often sung "Where He Leads Me I Will Follow", and "O Jesus I Have Promised to Serve Thee to the End". I, for one, meant what I sang -- the latter song was my Ordination Hymn, in fact!

In our modern world we increasingly realize that we are neighbors even though we are separated by thousands of miles, by race, by creed, by ideology. And so I went.

2. Now, what did I find, and what did I do? Upon landing at Hattiesburg I was met by the Reverend Robert Beech, who is the Director of the Hattiesburg Ministers Project for the National Council of Churches, under Arthur C. Thomas who is the Deputy Director of the Delta Ministry under the Division of Home Missions. He and his predecessor had greeted 400 people since last January to work in and around Hattiesburg alone. More than two-thirds of this number were clergymen. Others were lawyers, doctors, city planners, college teachers, etc.

Hattiesburg, the County Seat of Forest County, has a population of 35,000. In the County surrounding it, 85% of the farm owners are white. In Mississippi, whites comprise 63% of the population 21 years or over, though in some counties the figures are reversed. In 1954 there were a half-million voting age Negroes with only 4% registered to vote. In thirteen Mississippi counties no Negroes are registered. In Forest County, out of 7,406 Negroes of voting age, only 12 are registered voters, according to a Commission Report of February, 1964. The Federal Government has tried to force Forest County Registrar Theron C. Lynd to register qualified Negroes as voters since 1960. They were unsuccessful and turned to the Courts. Failing to get an order from District Judge William Cox, they appealed to the Fifth Circuit Court of Appeals and so the delays went. Two years later the government showed that Lynd had never registered a Negro. Prior to January, 1961 no Negro was permitted to apply and after July, 1961 obviously qualified Negroes were rejected. Lynd was later found guilty of civil contempt and was given opportunity to purge himself by registering 43 named Negroes, among other requirements. By February, 1964 Lynd had still not complied with that injunction. Negroes were still denied the right to vote. Therefore, last January (1964) a picket line was set up in front of the Court House at Hattiesburg. Negro leaders told me that this picket would have been unsuccessful were it not for 50 white Northern clergymen who joined forces with them picketing alongside them. Their presence made it "unwise" for the Hattiesburg police to turn police dogs on the picketers. The whites' identification with the Negro cause in the trying days since last January opened up the doors to the Negro community for all whites who would follow in the days to come. I found that particularly true when I myself came into the community following an absence of

white clergymen after the summer project ended. It continues to be difficult for voter registration workers to operate in Hattiesburg. Many workers from the Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) have faced continuous arrests. White workers have been special targets of Hattiesburg's police force. Many of the members of COFO, the Council of Federated Organizations, were also arrested on trumped-up charges. Police pressure is unimaginable in a police State such as Mississippi. It was frightening to see Confederate flags everywhere (along with Goldwater stickers), and to note the absence of the American flag.

My first night was spent alone in a large barracks in a Negro community. One can imagine the thoughts which raced through my head as I considered all the reasons why that barracks, rented by the Council of Churches, should be a prime target for a bombing. Thirty-five churches in Mississippi had already been bombed this summer, as well as buildings related to the work of COFO. Homes of Negroes and whites who cooperated with COFO were bombed and the people harassed. The Reverend Chet Miller, of Wilton Congregational Church, had been gone from one such home in McComb one-half hour when a bomb went off there.

Each day brought new experiences. The second evening found me attending a rally of the Freedom Democratic Party in North Gulfport in a dilapidated "jerry-built" auditorium in the Negro community. When the program began, my name was called as the first speaker of the evening. This was the first of many surprises I was to encounter that week. Following the meeting, which like every other meeting I attended, began with freedom songs and religious devotions, I found myself the subject of conversation among Negroes who were discussing where I should stay that night. I was introduced to a very dark-complexioned Negro, a Mr. Williams, in whose home I spent the night. The next morning was spent as legal counsel to a Negro mother whose COFO working son was in prison. My job was to get him released, taking the place of Lawyer John Bodner who was busy elsewhere. After an interesting morning, during which I gained insight into the discriminatory legal processes in Mississippi, the mission was completed and we returned to Hattiesburg in time for me to go with the Reverend Robert Beech to McComb. (Another story in itself!) The next evening I found myself near Gulfport again, staying in a Retreat Center attending the Mississippi Council for Human Relations retreat. This integrated meeting was made up of representatives of such organizations as local civil rights leaders, members of COFO, NAACP, the Jackson Movement, Mississippians for Public Education, National Council of Churches Minister's Project Leaders, Womens' Power Unlimited, etc. There were Negroes and whites, women and men, laymen and clergy from many denominations, Unitarians, Roman Catholic clergy, Society of Friends, native Mississippian whites, Rabbis, Unitarian Universalists, etc. Up until the present it was necessary to meet surreptitiously. However, now that there were 1,200 "moderates" or cooperative leaders on the list, the group was prepared to try out an integrated meeting in such places as Howard Johnsons. They even suggested integrating the Christian Center. It was a most encouraging meeting, as I began to realize the impact being made by those whose coordinated efforts were beginning to encourage each other. Much of this has been made possible by the influence of white clergymen and others from the North who helped ferret out moderates in the white community. This was one of my primary tasks. In this regard I had many fascinating interviews with priests, Rabbis and clergymen of many denominations. Those who are cooperative or even willing to discuss it responsibly are in the very small minority.

Danger continued to threaten us. While I was there the Director of Hattiesburg COFO was in jail in Gulfport. The Gulfport Director of COFO was in jail in Hattiesburg. The Reverend Robert Beech was struck in the face by a business man

from whom he was trying to purchase a ladder. His name on the check gave him away as a person who was trying to upset the status quo. We had training in defensive protection and were told many precautions we should take. We were afraid to walk alone in the white community, and would not even go out together after dusk. When in danger we headed for the Negro community. The white policemen were considered enemies. As you know, there were many Ku Klux Klan members on the State Highway Patrol.

What did I find? I found the vast majority of the white community best represented by a billboard outside of McComb which contained a picture of a large ostrich with his head in the sand. I found the courage and Christian commitment of large numbers of Northern Christians making its strong influence felt in Mississippi. Even a Deputy Sheriff indicated to me that the white community might as well face it - integration was coming. I found the leaders of the Negro community to be remarkably capable and intelligent. Their objectivity and sense of humor, in spite of difficulty and frustration, endeared them to me. Theological discussions with largely uneducated men indicated to me their sense of perspective and willingness to learn - something not shared by many of the learned white community with their prejudices and fundamentalistic concept of religion. All indications pointed to the worthwhileness of the involvement of white Northerners in the affairs of Mississippi. I was told time and again that the life guaranteed by our Constitution would never come to the Negroes in that area without outside interference. They blessed us for it. I also found that progress was being made, and that there is real hope that registration will be made less difficult and increasingly Negroes will be given the opportunity to vote. It will come only after continued struggle. Perhaps my greatest personal contribution was just being there at a time when the white community thought the summer project was over and the whites would go back home.

And finally, what does this have to do with Reformation Sunday? Reformation comes about when people seriously begin to question the status quo. Such people usually are unpopular at first. However, reformation continues to go on. People are constantly questioning, probing, thinking. Luther was willing to continually reform his ideas, and look what happened! Today greater reformations are taking place within the Roman Catholic Church than were taking place in his day. Reformation is also taking place in our churches. I am confident that reformation will also take place in many of the churches in the South. Although the churches of the South are often too close to the culture in which they live, there is assurance that once those churches face up to the necessity of sociological reformation, they will be the very leaders of an acceptable and integrating response in the life of the Southland. It is our hope that our churches in the North, already a step further along the line of reformation, can continue to serve responsibly so that Christian conclusions may be reached and practiced in deed as well as in thought.

In "Project Mississippi" reformation is constantly taking place. Some have stood up and said "here I stand". By doing so they have made news if for no other reason than because some died for their beliefs. This again has caused people in the North to think, to re-examine their motivations, and to reform their personal ideas. Certainly the Negro in the South had to re-think his position. Should he continue to be subservient, "licking the boots" of the white supremacists so that his life might be easier, and so that his children might not know the trouble which goes along with asserting oneself as a human being? Thank God the Negro in the South finally realized the importance of taking a stand and being willing to suffer hardships throughout lifetime with the hope and assurance that children will be able to walk with heads held high as free citizens of our republic. For these people the vote and education are the two ideals toward which they are striving. Of course, not all Negroes are willing to pay this price, and their leaders do all in their power to implore and

encourage a greater degree of participation in the whole rights movement. So many of them have been fooled too often and are tired of playing sucker again. But for those who are thinking, response becomes mandatory. And so the reformation continues.

Perhaps the greatest reformation taking place in our country today is in the minds of the Southern white community. For example, the conversation with a white Deputy Sheriff, and other native Mississippians, indicated their awareness that transition is taking place, and that integration is inevitable. In their hearts they know that God has created man equal and that one cannot forever utilize human beings for personal gains. It is my firm conviction that this ongoing revolution began in the hearts of men because of the witness of the Christian Gospel. We are told "you shall know the truth and the truth shall make you free". When the truth is made known, reformation must take place. As Christians, it is our task to make Christ's truth known wherever and however we are called upon to do so.