

John F. Mason

REPORT ON MISSISSIPPI TRIP

of Delmar Stahly and Ivan Martin
for Mennonite Disaster Service
November 22-25, 1964

ARRIVAL Due to a late plane, limited local transportation, and a misnamed motel in our Airways Guide at Menno Travel Service, it was 10:30 p.m. November 22 when the two of us checked in at the Airways Motel approximately ten miles east of Jackson, Mississippi on Route 80. Titus Bender had a telephone call waiting for me, and we called back before retiring. We arranged to meet him at 8 a.m. Monday morning to go together to keep our appointment with Dr. Davis in Jackson at 10 a.m.

MEETING TITUS Titus arrived at 8:00 Monday morning, and we spent an hour and a half with him in general introductions and getting acquainted with the work and thinking of each of us. He added bits of information on the Committee of Concern, on Dr. Davis, on Lawrence Scott, and his own growing appreciation for them and their openness to work with Mennonites. Although our misgivings of conditions in the state of Mississippi were in no manner minimized, it was very encouraging to us to find someone with the obvious intelligence, insight, and courage that Titus is bringing to the Mississippi situation.

CONFERENCE WITH DR. DAVIS Titus took us to Dr. Davis a few minutes before 10:00, and found Lawrence Scott already in conference with him and the four of us were soon joined over a cup of coffee. For over 20 years, Dr. Davis has been in charge of work with Negroes for the Mississippi Baptist Convention Board, and there is no question but that the prestige of this record and his office have been necessary to get the Committee of Concern formulated and keep it going against great odds. As an interreligious organization, it has no precedent in Mississippi. He has been beaten, although details of the incident were not given. In following the leadership of Lawrence Scott who has acted essentially as executive officer of the Committee of Concern, he is about as far out on a limb as he can possibly be with many of the other churchmen in the Committee of Concern. The analogy of "thin ice" was also used in describing the situation where the weight of Mennonites might just possibly be enough to break the whole thing down. By common agreement it became clear that our identification as Mennonites and as northerners should be completely minimized if not forgotten in our support of this church rebuilding venture that gives evidence of being effective at this point.

DR. DAVIS AND MENNONITES Dr. Davis recounted his personal experience with a Mrs. Koppenhaver in Philadelphia in 1934 as he sought an apartment to enter the Baptist Seminary. Mrs. Koppenhaver befriended him and maintained the contact and gave him considerable moral support when he needed it, and he identifies all Mennonites with her own spirit and support of him. One is not certain if he has any broader experience with or concept of Mennonites other than his contacts with Mrs. Koppenhaver and Titus Bender, but we were led to realize that he has considerable confidence in Mennonites or he would never take on the added burden of another northern group at this point in the evolvement of the church building program in Mississippi.

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DAVIS AND THE NATIONAL
COUNCIL OF CHURCHES

When Dr. Davis found out that we planned to call on Warren McKenna of the National Council of Churches at Greenville on the next day, he gave us a vivid account of his own reactions. He spoke from a position of full acceptance of National Council in general in spite of Southern Baptists rejection of it traditionally. On the other hand, he recognized that their present image in the South was such that it was impossible for them to be helpful. Identification of the National Council with COFO had put it in a position that would take another 25 years for it to reclaim its former image. He felt that any identification of Mennonites with National Council work at this point would make us utterly useless, probably setting us back another five years in our own attempts to be helpful in Mississippi. One interpreted this strong talk as being sincere, fully rational, with no bitterness or rancor of a personal nature. This strong feeling was not to be denied, however.

PLANNING THE NEXT
TWO DAYS

Lawrence Scott left Dr. Davis' office with us, and we had lunch in a colored restaurant and planned the remainder of our trip. It was agreed that we would spend the afternoon visiting the sites of three churches within commuting distance of Jackson, and this would leave us open to travel the next day to Greenville to visit Warren McKenna of the National Council of Churches. Warren had given us only a post office box number by mail, but he had given Scott his telephone number after failing to contact me by phone Sunday night. Evidently he had stayed in Jackson Sunday in hopes of seeing us on arrival. Lawrence felt that we could complete our investigation of the three local churches ready to rebuild during the remainder of Monday. All of them were in neighboring counties, and it would take approximately 60 to 70 miles to travel to check all three of them where he hoped to introduce us to some of the church leaders and Bob Swann, the Friend from New England who was undertaking supervision of the building of the three churches.

While in Dr. Davis' office we had received a list of the 36 churches that had been damaged or destroyed by fire or dynamite during 1964, with size of building and congregation, amount of insurance, and other statistics on costs, etc. Eighteen of these churches have made application to the Committee of Concern and are in various states of planning. Most of them will be self-supervised or rebuilt under local contract. Only the three churches under question have arranged to accept outside assistance and work under the direct supervision of the Committee of Concern, with Lawrence Scott and Bob Swann carrying immediate responsibility. It is hoped to get all three of these churches under roof by the time the weather breaks, which may be as early as Christmas or as late as mid-January. Any part of these buildings can be sub-contracted and it is arranged now that the foundation and floor of the first two will be started in that manner.

THE CLOSED SOCIETY

I admit I have crossed foreign boundaries often with less misgivings than that with which I moved into the state of Mississippi on this trip. One could fill this report with varying degrees of depth in attempting to interpret relationships as they seem to exist and as we experienced them. I am not sure that I would have the skill to express my feelings nor whether they would be important enough to warrant

expression, nor whether the insights developing are profound enough to be of significance at this point. One is reassured to know that four white men can walk into a ^{colored} restaurant in Mississippi and eat, with only an occasional side-long glance from other patrons. At least one and possibly several more white persons were there, obviously student or COFO workers. Although this was certainly our most intensive contact with the colored race in terms of numbers, our misgivings at this moment were not the greatest of the trip in respect to personal safety or possible violent reactions on the part of other human beings. The sense of possible cataclysmic upheaval in Mississippi's society that grows out of our reading before entering did not reach a high point while we were eating lunch.

THE THREE CHURCHES Christian Union Baptist Church, Tougaloo. The old church was 50 X 50, frame, 175 members in approximately 40 families. Insurance produced \$5,500, and they can raise an additional \$3,000, and will probably need \$5,000 more from the Committee of Concern. Tougaloo is approximately 15 miles from downtown Jackson, (All my mileage figures are going to be rough here.) and by name is associated with the old colored university that is now integrated and has received considerable Mississippi, if not national, attention on this account. A new site has been purchased, and a sub-contractor has been hired to put in the foundation, and supervisor Bob Swann was on the site waiting the caterpillar for leveling and digging for footings. His transit was set up and he was ready to go. (Later on we met Bob Swann in Jackson and found that the caterpillar never showed up. This type of uncertainty might continue to prevail with any arrangements with southern sub-contractors, although we have no evidence that this one was either irresponsible or uncooperative.) As is true in the cases of the other two churches mentioned, Lawrence Scott has been in close touch with church leaders and white leaders in the community and feels reasonably certain that construction here will not be interfered with. The hope is that we can have four or five skilled northerners here to start laying block as soon as the floor is hard enough, with brick work also involved. The roof will be supported by pillars that will first be put up, and one carpenter could start assembling the rafters as soon as the masonry work was started. He showed us the plans drawn by a local architect, and we understood that this would involve considerable masonry with a minimum of carpentry, particularly after the roof is up. The roof decking will be of two-inch lumber on rafters eight feet apart held by pillars so that the side wall as such will not be load bearing. The plan would be to keep two churches moving together if one of our men could be competent as a foreman, so that they would be shifted from building to building from day to day as progress required it, but not moved from building to building during the day. The foreman would work under Bob Swann as supervisor at all times. Local supply did not seem to be as uncertain as weather, although it usually holds up well until January.

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Cedar Grove Baptist Church, Canton. This church was originally 48 X 28 feet with 120 members. Insurance has \$3,000 available and the church can raise \$2,000 more. The probable need is for \$5,000 additional and this can also be built with volunteers. This church is not ready to move, however, since the title on the land is not clear. We met a deacon of the church here, and he assures us that they will rebuild on another plot if they cannot get assurance that the title is clear where the old church burned. On the same lot, the Quakers have built a temporary building of composition siding for temporary worship, and this building would stay as an auxiliary to the main building. It is on skids so that it could be moved if a new site must be procured. The question in the title arises out of a failure to locate an original deed which may or may not exist. In the meantime, a supplementary quit claim deed was secured from the estate, which quit claim deed requires that the title reverts to the estate when it fails to be used for religious purposes. The present owner of the estate is physically very weak, wants the church to be rebuilt, but not to be used for anything but religious services, assurance of which the congregation will not give. This church will be No. 3 on the rebuilding schedule with the present timing unset.

We are too inexperienced to evaluate well the one personal contact made with a colored member of one of the destroyed churches. I even forget the deacon's name. His sense of determination to rebuild, in spite of title difficulties on the property stood out well. Scott had spoken of possibly moving to town if the title could not be cleared, but the deacon had already purchased a nearby home, and indicated that this could conceivably become the site of the church.

Pleasant Grove Baptist Church, Brandon. Here a temporary tent had been erected by the Friends to serve as a temporary meeting place. Otherwise, the site had been leveled in preparation for the new building. The old building was 48 X 48, with 200 members, insurance of \$4,000 and an additional \$1,000 potential within the congregation. The Committee of Concern feels \$6,000 will be required.

After this stop, we returned to Scott's apartment for coffee and came to the general conclusion that we would try to send down a carload of men in about two weeks. This involved keeping in close touch with both Titus and Lawrence keeping Titus in a key position.

FURTHER CONSULTATION
WITH TITUS

In our motel room with Titus before a delayed supper, we planned the next two days. We had a 1:00 p.m. appointment with Warren McKenna of the National Council of Churches the next day (just Ivan and I). Titus would return now to Meridian and would rejoin us in Preston, Mississippi on Tuesday evening or Wednesday morning, at his father's home (Nevin Bender). Titus would have phoned David Weaver, Ivan's brother-in-law, at Macon to

was because their lease was shaky. He felt that their main threat in a downtown office was with the colored secretary, highly skilled though she was. While we were there, gas men were roaming over the place trying to get the gas turned on, and we were shivering, but not badly.

McKenna emphasized the "closed society" and the lack of any effective white moderation within the state. He spoke encouragingly about Amzie Moore, emphasizing Amzie's lack of success at getting any white support. He felt that when Jake Friesen gets down there with food and clothing and puts them in Amzie's hands, that he will be through working with white people, churchmen or not. He seemed impatient at our naive attempt to work with white churchmen while Jake was working with colored.

The specific purpose of discussing McKenna was to follow up a conversation Wayne Clemens and I had had earlier with his immediate superior, Arthur Thomas, concerning the building of community centers in Mississippi. In late September, Thomas had written us indicating that Greenville was about ready to move on building a new community center and that possibly some of our church groups could be a real help in this process. Before leaving for Mississippi, I had talked with Arthur Thomas in his New York office and he indicated that Warren McKenna was up to date on all community center building projects in Mississippi. McKenna soon informed us that the Greenville Community Center is less a prospect now than when Thomas wrote to us in September, since the organization and enthusiasm engendered by the Philadelphia Quaker architect has subsided, and it would be difficult to get the situation organized and steamed up again. A closer prospect is that of Amzie Moore in Cleveland, where Amzie has personally purchased a site and is in the process of destroying the dwelling on this site preparatory toward organizing a community center development program. One of the facets of the NCC program is that of developing community center programs, but Warren had nothing very specific to offer in terms of actual building plans. I will not go here into detail concerning the NCC program in Mississippi since that is pretty well documented elsewhere and particularly in the new publication, The Delta Ministry.

ACROSS THE DELTA

Most of the 160 miles across the Delta and the remainder of Mississippi was traveled in the rain, so our view of the rich farm land and the subsequent hills, forests, and swamps is somewhat distorted. The Delta will match all of the prairies and other low lying sea coast for flatness, but it is mostly corporation owned, often by absentee investors. When we finally crossed into Neshoba County, we were within five or six miles of Nevin Bender's house. Nevin and Ivan had met before, but it was my first experience with the Bender family. Nevin had followed both Titus Bender and David Weaver to this part of Mississippi, the former working for the Conservative Mennonite Mission Board in Meridian and David being involved with an Indian mission program under the Ohio and Eastern Mennonite Mission Committee. Bender had set up his Indian mission at the other end of the reservation from David, but had come under the same Ohio Conference Mission Board for effective coordinated administration. David had other plans for the evening, and there had been a death in Titus'

congregation, so the visit ^{was alone} with the Benders from soon after 7 p.m. Tuesday until we parted in Philadelphia about 9:30 a.m. Wednesday.

THE BENDER WITNESS Nevin shared many intimate details of his experiences with Mississippians and at the Indian mission under his direction. He reiterated the story of the importance of putting up the church quickly after it had been bombed, and its effect on the Indians. His daughter, Mildred, teaches nearby and helps in the mission work, and a son-in-law teaches in Philadelphia and also assists on Sundays. His married daughter from Philadelphia teaches in the Indian mission school. Ann Zimmerly, a nurse from Sterling, Ohio, came in with two Indian girls while we were there, preparing to drive to Ohio for Thanksgiving Day. She works in a hospital at Macon and associates with the mission project, also.

We recognized a picture of a rather closely knit family operation, with the close support of Titus from Meridian with a close sensitiveness to their impact on white southerners in the area. Since the Benders are not working directly with Negroes, they are spared many of the tensions that would be involved otherwise with northerners not committed to a southerner's attitude toward race. From their conversations with whites, it is clear that they are in sort of a class by themselves, not openly defying tradition, yet clearly not aligning with the white supremacy concept to the extent that possibly David Weaver is in his farming operation on the other side of Macon.

Nevin spoke of having visited Sheriff Rainey in Philadelphia on the previous day and having been invited in rather cordially and asked to sit down (although the sheriff remained standing). He felt that Sheriff Rainey had an apologetic manner, as if perhaps he had been responsible for a boner in the bombing of the church. He spoke of working with the Indians in their economic problems. They had not established a clear rationale for their church being bombed, but saw several possibilities, none of which were pre-eminent.

We examined the church in daylight and learned details of the services, the Sunday School, and the place of the building in the community life of the Indians. An extension of the building for two additional Sunday School rooms is planned for later in the winter, and we discussed the possibilities of MDS help. It is clear that expansion of the building does not come directly under the Mennonite Disaster Service type of concern. On the other hand, we felt reasonably sure that there would be Voluntary Service help available, and we committed ourselves to consult with VS-MCC first on our return. If VS does not pick it up, we will consult with Board of Missions and Charities at Elkhart, possibly injecting the interest of the Hartville, Ohio Old Mennonite Church into the situation.

En route to Philadelphia in the morning we stopped at the site where the burnt station wagon of the three murdered civil rights workers had been found (about three miles from the Bender residence). We then proceeded to the Philadelphia office of the Department of the Interior, Bureau of Indian Affairs, and visited the showroom in which handicrafts of the Indians are displayed for sale. The agent in charge was not present or we would have met him and briefly

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discussed the situation of the Indians in Mississippi. We felt that we missed a more objective evaluation of the work of the Benders because Nevin gave us the feeling that the agent would have had some pertinent information for us.

The return to Jackson, turning in the rented car, and claiming our passage was eventful only in terms of personal experience with delayed and cancelled planes in a pre-holiday period. I believe we both experienced some relief in leaving Mississippi even as we each reconfirmed our feeling that the Mennonites belonged there in this time of strife and tension.