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I am submitting herewith a thesis written by Stephen A. Berrey entitled "Spreading the Gospel of Equality: The Delta Ministry and the Civil Rights Struggle in Mississippi, 1964-1968." I have examined the final copy of this thesis for form and content and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, with a major in History.

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We have read this thesis and recommend its acceptance:

Accepted for the Council:

Associate Vice Chancellor and
Dean of The Graduate School

SPREADING THE GOSPEL OF EQUALITY: THE DELTA MINISTRY AND THE CIVIL RIGHTS STRUGGLE IN MISSISSIPPI, 1964-1968

A Thesis
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I have been fortunate to have parents who have always encouraged me to pursue my dreams and to do what is right, regardless of the consequences. They have always supported me in my educational endeavors. This thesis is dedicated to them.

Abstract

The National Council of Churches organized the Delta Ministry in 1964 to participate in the Civil Rights struggle in Mississippi. The Ministry leaders came south with the goals of providing direct relief for the poor, reconciling the black and white communities to one another, and developing the black community politically and economically. As the Ministry staff began working in Mississippi, local whites rejected and attacked the Delta Ministry. The second goal, bringing the black and white communities together peacefully, was nearly impossible at this stage.

The Delta Ministry served as a secondary civil rights organization that worked with other groups such as the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee and the Mississippi Freedom Democrat Party. In their first two years of existence, the Ministry staff concentrated on political objectives such as voter registration. By 1966, they were increasingly adding economic projects to their agenda. Though some of these projects like Freedom City failed, Ministry leaders continued to believe that blacks needed economic power to achieve equality.

The Delta Ministry, like the Civil Rights movement in general, experienced successes and failures. They succeeded in helping register thousands of Mississippi blacks and in helping desegregate public places. However, the organization could not bring significant economic power to the black community. In this respect, the Delta Ministry is the Civil Rights movement writ large.

All of the Delta Ministry's victories came primarily because they endeared themselves to poor blacks in Mississippi. Ministry staff identified with poor blacks, responded to their needs, helped blacks to help themselves, and stood alongside the oppressed in their troubles. The Delta Ministry serves as an example of what the 1960s Civil Rights movement accomplished and as a model for other groups to emulate in order to finish the revolution for equality.

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A cafeteria line in Chicago
The fat man in front of me
Is calling black people trash to his children
He's the only trash here I see
And I'm thinking this man wears a white hood
In the night when his children should sleep
But, they slip to their window and they see him
And they think that white hood's all they need.--
from the song "It's a Hard Life Wherever You Go,"
written by Nanci Griffith

Introduction

"It's a hard life wherever you go"

Driving south on a four lane, limited access highway and listening to Nanci Griffith croon "It's a Hard Life Wherever You Go," I could not have guessed solely from the scenery where I was. Rectangular blue signs promised McDonalds, Exxons, and sometimes Super 8s at the exits. From my vantage point, I saw few houses and fewer towns. Tall pines guarded each side of the road and hid the natives' way of life from outsiders. As the sun set behind the flat terrain and as log-carrying eighteen-wheelers rolled past, I could have easily believed I was in Ohio, California, Minnesota, Maine, or North Carolina. Instead I was approaching Hattiesburg, Mississippi, on my first trip ever into the Magnolia State.

I did not know what to expect from Mississippi although many friends and colleagues had offered their insights. One had told me to expect a completely different world where everyone was either filthy rich or dirt poor. Others told me I should keep my car doors locked at all times

and drive under the speed limit--especially with the "outsider" license plates. And someone told me to expect extreme poverty everywhere. None of this advice prepared me for my experiences in Mississippi.

Hattiesburg, a town of about forty thousand people, is the home of the University of Southern Mississippi. The local library is contained in the most majestic and one of the newest structures in the county. (There goes the notion that Mississippians cannot read.) One native bragged that the town had become "cosmopolitan" in the last few years. The cappuccino-serving coffee house downtown may support that claim.

While in Hattiesburg, I stayed with a black woman and her husband, both in their forties. They lived on Main Street in a large house built around 1910. The two story Victorian home, which was just a few blocks from the downtown area, remains several major projects away from being completely restored. Thirty years ago, the only time blacks ventured into this neighborhood was to work for white families as house servants. Today this area is integrated.

This woman, one of the first blacks to attend the University of Southern Mississippi, explained that she does not see different races, only one--the human race. In her home they never refer to anyone with the labels black or white. Thus, her then three-year-old granddaughter shocked the family when she reasoned that Santa Claus must be good because he is white. The granddaughter then learned that there is no Santa Claus. At the same time it reaffirmed for her grandmother that racism can be subtle and pervasive.

I also visited a black man in Hattiesburg who literally lived on "the

other side of the railroad tracks." The houses in his neighborhood, spaced only a few feet apart, looked as if they had been built quickly and cheaply several decades ago. Driving a five-year old Geo Prizm, I easily had the newest car on the block. While walking through the home of this former local National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) president, I noticed his kitchen counters. Aluminum foil, secured by masking tape, served as the counter top except where it had been torn off. In the living room, there was a 1970s model television along one wall and an old, well-worn, most likely out-of-tune piano rested against another wall. Then out of the corner of my eye, I noticed the ceiling. It was ply board--unpainted and mostly uncovered. In a few places sagging plastic attempted to hold back nasty weather from the rest of the room. In this house, the former civil rights activist lived out his retirement years. Several miles in the opposite direction lay the subdivision where many of Forrest County's wealthiest citizens reside in their new multi-million dollar homes on their well-groomed properties. Segregation by class, if not by race, still exists in the residential patterns of Hattiesburg.

In Jackson I drove past the state capitol building and the governor's mansion, the former home of Ross Barnett, who had fought to keep "civil disobedience" and northern civil rights workers out of Mississippi in the 1960s. I also heard a great deal in Jackson about the opening of the files of the Mississippi Sovereignty Commission, the official "spy" agency of the state in the 1950s and 60s.

Late one chilly night outside a convenience store in Jackson, a

friendly white man standing by the phone, his hands in his pockets, asked me for money for food for his family. He wore an old baseball cap and old, but not tattered clothes. He explained that usually when he asked passersby for money, they told him to get a job. He would then retort, "Give me a job." Saying nothing, they would walk away. The last thing he said to me was that he was just down on his luck. Throughout my stay in Mississippi, I saw a lot of people who were down on their luck. However, I did not see many people or government agencies offering the downtrodden any assistance.

I also experienced Mississippi in the Delta. I visited Greenville, which in the 1950s and 1960s had a reputation as a liberal oasis. Hodding Carter, Jr., a white moderate (though a liberal by Mississippi's standards), ran the local newspaper, the *Delta Democrat Times*. Since 1954, he had favored gradual integration. In 1964, the Delta Ministry established its headquarters on Main Street but it was quickly forced out of downtown to the black section of town. Today, the building hosting the Ministry's first office is a tavern and it rests about half-way between several churches and the new casinos on the riverfront, centered between the traditional defender of the Confederacy and the bastion of the town's economic and social future.

While in Greenville, I attended a service at the First Presbyterian Church. Nestled in a middle class neighborhood, I sat amongst a "lily white" congregation. As in churches across the nation, all-black and all-white congregations are the rule not the exception in this town. No wonder many consider Sunday morning worship "the most segregated

hour in America."

In spite of the disclaimers about Mississippi, I left realizing that it was not much different from the rest of America. I found that many institutions are integrated but others, such as the churches and the schools, are mostly segregated. While blacks achieved a degree of political equality in the 1960s, they still have not achieved economic equality. I found a group of Americans, black and white, who are impoverished and have almost no hope of getting out of that condition without assistance. Prejudice continues, although it is much more difficult to detect and prove in a court of law than it was thirty years ago. After this trip, I better understood that for many Americans--in Mississippi and throughout the nation--it *is* a hard life wherever you go. Even though many positive changes came in the 1960s thanks to the efforts of organizations such as the Delta Ministry, there is still much work to be done.

How do these observations in 1997 relate to the work of the Delta Ministry in the 1960s? Mississippi today reveals both the accomplishments and the shortcomings of the Civil Rights movement. The efforts of the Delta Ministry resulted in many political and social victories. I also understood first-hand that blacks are still oppressed economically. The Delta Ministry along with other civil rights organizations could not bring massive economic change. The work of the Delta Ministry demonstrates that America took a step towards reconciliation of the races but it was only one step; leaving much unfinished.

The Delta Ministry's experience in Mississippi in the 1960s is

important on two levels. It offers an example of the successes and failures of the movement as a whole. Like other civil rights organizations, the Delta Ministry made some political and social gains. It helped register many black voters and desegregated most public places. However, these groups, along with the Delta Ministry, brought little long term economic change to the blacks even though economic goals had come to dominate the organization by the mid-1960s. I argue that the work of the Delta Ministry exemplifies the overall failure of the Second Reconstruction, particularly in the economic arena. There were significant achievements but it is obvious in 1997 that the movement did not go far enough.

On a more personal level, the Delta Ministry's story is one that in its most simple terms is a tale of poor blacks struggling for freedom against a powerful, resistant white enemy. The Delta Ministry struggled alongside these poor blacks. Four characteristics of the organization shaped its role in the Civil Rights movement in Mississippi. First, the organization's leaders and staff identified with poor blacks and the radical wing of the movement. Second, they let the local situation determine their course of action as they responded to the needs of the local people. With this philosophy they often supported and worked with other organizations in the state. Third, they focused their efforts on helping poor blacks help themselves; they worked with, not for, those they assisted. Finally, when the Delta Ministry could not offer direct assistance, it stood alongside the oppressed, strengthening the resolve of local blacks in their struggle to attain freedom.

Ultimately, the Delta Ministry staff came to Mississippi hoping to

create a society of equals. Since this has not happened yet, one could easily argue that the Delta Ministry failed. In those terms, the Civil Rights movement failed; America is still a land of inequality. However, the Second Reconstruction did bring some positive changes for the human community. Many more blacks can vote and hold public office today than forty years ago. Economically, blacks have risen to positions in the work force not possible then. Socially, most public places, including schools, are legally integrated. In addition, many high school instructors teach black history and African-American Studies departments have opened up in colleges throughout the nation. There are plenty of examples of the positive changes and many others that reveal the racism and prejudice that still exists. The revolution remains unfinished, especially in the economic arena. But through the efforts of groups like the Delta Ministry, we are one step closer to a society of equals.

When we came in we were all naive. We thought change would come. We were going to be Joshua and march around the walls of the city seven times and the walls would come tumbling down and the world would get better. Wasn't that easy.-- Rims Barber[1]

Part I

Burning Bridges

On a hot, sultry day in August 1964, delegates of the Freedom Democrat Party (FDP) went to the Democratic National Convention in Atlantic City to unseat Mississippi's regular, all-white, elected delegates and "gain official recognition as the legitimate Mississippi delegation." They believed that they were the rightful delegates for the state, because, unlike the regulars, the FDP delegates had been chosen in a democratic election in which blacks and whites had an equal opportunity to vote.[2]

With President Lyndon Johnson already assured of the nomination and little else for the media to cover, the FDP's challenge gained attention. The president feared that by recognizing the FDP delegates he would alienate many Democratic Southerners who would then vote in November for Republican Barry Goldwater. As the challenging delegates continued to push for the Mississippi seats, the president tried to silence them. When Fannie Lou Hamer, FDP spokesperson, described

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[1] Interview with Rims Barber, January 30, 1997.

[2] John Dittmer, "The Politics of the Mississippi Movement," in *The Civil Rights Movement in America*, ed. Charles W. Eagles (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1986), 83.

Mississippi's unfair election practices to the Credentials Committee, the TV networks brought her testimony live into American living rooms. Johnson "hastily called a press conference just to get her off the air." As the FDP challenge gained strength, it appeared that the issue might be debated and decided by the entire convention. In an attempt to bolster his standing for the vice presidential nomination, Senator Hubert Humphrey took the initiative of trying to settle the challenge quickly and quietly. He suggested that the committee offer the FDP a compromise. Finally, the credentials committee agreed to award the FDP two seats at large on the convention floor and "honorary" seats to the others.[3]

Freedom Democratic Party delegates heatedly debated whether or not to accept the proposal. Aaron Henry, an NAACP leader, believed they should accept the two seats as a victory that would strengthen the movement. But Fannie Lou Hamer interpreted the offer as a token gesture that still recognized the all-white delegation as the official one for the state. For her and many others in the party it was the "ultimate betrayal by the liberal establishment." The delegates rejected the proposal by a solid majority. The vote split along demographic and class lines; poor rural blacks had sided with Hamer.[4]

The Atlantic City convention signaled a shift in the Civil Rights movement. As historian John Dittmer argues, many black leaders had realized that they could not always count on the support of Northern white liberals. Also, both the convention and events following it unveiled a great deal of class tension within the black community. Poor

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[3] Ibid, 83-84.

[4] Ibid, 84.

and middle class blacks supported and used different tactics in their crusade for social change. Within this context of change, the Delta Ministry, an organization composed primarily of white Northerners, came to the Mississippi Delta in September 1964.[5]

The Delta Ministry actually began work in Mississippi on the heels of "Freedom Summer." During the summer hundreds of volunteers, mostly middle class college students and ninety percent of them white, had come south to work with groups such as SNCC and CORE in an attempt to draw national attention to racial problems in the state. Within the summer project, complex issues of race and class emerged. The northern white "students complained that black organizers were aloof, unappreciative, and disdainful" toward the students' involvement. Conversely, black veterans of the movement characterized many of the white liberals as insensitive and paternalistic. One white volunteer later reflected that 'there [was] a kind of Jesus Christ complex that many middle class whites [brought] to their relations with people whom they [considered] oppressed.' Some volunteers believed they had come to Mississippi to save blacks and teach them, not simply to help them help themselves. Tensions between middle class white volunteers and poor blacks complicated this relationship as each side often did not fully grasp the other's culture.[6]

Still, historian John Dittmer asserts that volunteers and the local blacks realized they had a common enemy. Therefore, normally these

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[5] Ibid, 84-93.

[6] John Dittmer, *Local People: The Struggle for Civil Rights in Mississippi*, (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1994), 243, 263-265.

distinct groups found ways to work together. Perhaps Ministry officials learned from the experiences of a white volunteer who later understood that these northern whites "were so intent on transforming Mississippi in a summer that [they] were unable to relate to its people as human beings.' From the beginning, the Ministry staff knew how to relate to black Mississippians as human beings.[7]

The organization would remain in the state throughout the 1960s even as many other groups left. Ministry leaders entered the battlefields impassioned by their fight for the good cause. They were creating a reconciled society based on equality. Furthermore, they believed that both blacks and whites would benefit from a reconciled society. Art Thomas and others behind the Ministry's formation believed their organization could serve as a bridge between the white and black communities. However, in the first year after many failed attempts to work with local whites, the Delta Ministry burned the bridge between the two communities. Once Thomas and others joined the battle, they were forced by the situation to identify with one group. They chose poor blacks, alienating whites and to some extent, middle class blacks.[8]

The Delta Ministry staff worked primarily in the Mississippi Delta (more accurately the Yazoo Delta). This region, which boasts some of the richest farmland on earth, stretches approximately two hundred miles from Memphis to Vicksburg, Mississippi, bulging to about seventy miles wide in the middle and covering approximately 7,110 square miles. The

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[7] Ibid, 262-263.

[8] "The Mississippi Delta Ministry," , Folder 28, Box 1, Delta Ministry Papers, Martin Luther King, Jr., Library, Atlanta.

Mississippi River borders the Delta on the west and the Coldwater-Tallahatchie-Yazoo rivers border it on the east. In some spots, the land holds thirty-five feet of fertile top soil. In the humid subtropical climate of the Delta, cotton became "king" and in the 1960s it continued to influence blacks and whites in nearly all aspects of their lives. Plantation owners had used slavery to keep blacks out of power one hundred years earlier; after emancipation, a sharecropping system developed that kept blacks under white control. Owners often cheated their laborers out of profits and kept the freedmen in a state of indebtedness. This system persisted into the 1960s. While other cotton-growing regions began to mechanize their operations and replace laborers with tractors, Delta planters could continue to delay the initial expenses of mechanization because of the availability of abundant cheap labor. Delta blacks had no economic or political power. [9]

At the same time, the Civil Rights movement began to spread to many parts of the South. It made less progress in Mississippi in spite of the presence in the state of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), the Congress on Racial Equality (CORE), and other groups. Interracial meetings in several colleges that had been allowed by the state in 1954 were forbidden by 1958. The White Citizen's Council, which conservative whites formed to maintain their position as the ruling class, pressured outspoken moderates into silence. One Millsaps College student of the late 1950s remembered witnessing "hysteria take

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[9] James C. Cobb, *The Most Southern Place on Earth: The Mississippi Delta and the Roots of Regional Identity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 3-5; Leon Howell, *Freedom City: The Substance of Things Hoped For* (Richmond: John Knox Press, 1969), 16.

over." A small handful of whites controlled the state. Prior to 1964, powerful and well-organized white resistance succeeded in keeping civil rights out of the state.[10]

The horrible living conditions of blacks in Mississippi furthered white dominance and limited civil rights activity. The average income for a black family in Mississippi in 1960 was about $500, one-third of the average income for a white family. Eighty-six percent of blacks lived below the official federal poverty line. Only seven percent of Mississippi blacks had completed high school as opposed to forty-two percent of whites. State officials perpetuated this discrepancy by spending only $21.77 per black student in 1964, versus $81.86 per white student. Whites also maintained social control by keeping blacks out of polling booths--only 6.7 percent of the blacks were registered to vote in 1962. There were five counties in the state that had a black majority yet not one black registrant. If these measures failed for whites, they turned to violence. In the eighty-two years between 1882 and 1964, whites lynched 539 blacks in Mississippi. Although Delta Ministry officials would try to improve these living conditions for blacks and protect them against violent acts, the staff faced an established, powerful, and remorseless enemy.[11]

Years before the formation of the Delta Ministry, wretched living conditions and the involvement of other civil rights groups in Mississippi drew the National Council of Churches (NCC) to the Delta. The NCC (formerly the Federated Council of Churches) had actually been working

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[10] Doug McAdam, *Freedom Summer* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 24-26; interview with Ed King, January 30, 1997.

[11] McAdam, *Freedom Summer*, 24-26.

with rural black ministers in the South since 1945. Although not active in civil rights work, NCC officials conducted annual four-to-six day institutes and developed contacts in the black community. Over time, they became more concerned with racial prejudice, which led to the creation of the Commission on Religion and Race (CORAR) on June 7, 1963.[12]

CORAR members attempted to coordinate the civil rights activities of all organized religions that supported the movement. They participated in the 1963 March on Washington, coordinating the involvement of other churches in the march. They also supported black demonstrators in Hattiesburg and Clarksdale, sent bail money to gain the release of civil rights workers, and generally assisted in the projects of other civil rights organizations. Many members of the group wanted to get more involved so they began developing ideas for a stronger commitment to the struggle in Mississippi. Robert Spike, who headed CORAR, wanted to organize a group that could focus on the root of the problem in the state, especially the Delta, by emphasizing community development. Following much discussion, on February 26, 1964, the NCC's General Board approved a proposal for the Delta Ministry.[13]

The organization did not officially begin operating in Mississippi until September 1964. In the meantime, NCC officials Spike and Jon Regier guided the planning stages along with Art Thomas, another leader who had just been selected as deputy director of the Delta Ministry. He was a thirty-two year old native of Williamsport, Pennsylvania, and an

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12 James F. Findlay, Jr., *Church People in the Struggle: The National Council of Churches and the Black Freedom Movement, 1950-1970* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 18-19, 34-35.

13 Findlay, *Church People*, 48-54, 111-114.

ordained Methodist minister with impressive credentials. He had earned a bachelor's degree in economics from Colgate University and a Bachelor of Divinity degree from Duke University. In Durham, North Carolina, he organized that city's first interracial church of the twentieth century. In October 1963 he joined the NCC's Committee on Religion and Race and became the field representative in the South. He spent a considerable amount of time in Mississippi, where he established a network of friends and supporters. Like many others who joined him in 1964, he hoped for support from the white community. Still, he never wavered in his devotion to and identification with blacks; he would fight passionately for their rights.[14]

Thomas and his staff did not come to Mississippi with specific projects in mind to meet their goals. Instead they would "'let the world set the agenda'" for their work in the civil rights struggle. This premise remained a constant throughout the decade. As NCC officials drew up plans for the Delta Ministry, they ambitiously, yet unrealistically, set out to reconcile the races in Mississippi. They wanted to create a society in which blacks and whites lived peacefully as equals. They were undaunted by the state's historical record of conflict and inequality. In fact, as Christians they were inspired by the overwhelming odds against them. Bob Beech, the director of the Delta Ministry's project in Hattiesburg, remarked that "the Christian faith is a crisis religion. The best time to make it mean something is a time of crisis." They were moved by the example of Christ to serve those in need.[15]

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[14] "Appendix A: Biographical Data--Delta Ministry Staff," DM Papers.

[15] "A Costly Ministry," Folder 5, Box 21, DM Papers.

On February 26, 1964, the NCC's General Board approved the funding and organization of the Delta Ministry and assigned it to the Division of Home Missions. Regier, Thomas, Spike, and Paul Moore, ,Jr., the Episcopalian bishop in the Washington, D.C., diocese, committed themselves to organizing a group that would "lift the impoverished Delta Region" through a three pronged attack. It would provide direct relief with food and clothing to relieve human suffering. It would reconcile the races by opening communication between the black and white communities and developing leadership within the black community. Finally, it would develop the black community economically and politically, which many NCC officials considered most important. Conservative Mississippians would of course challenge them at every juncture.[16]

Ministry leaders also discussed another key concept during the planning process. In the words of one official, "The law of Christ involves 'bearing one another's burdens.'" Ministry leaders probably did not realize it at this point, but at times the best they would have to offer Mississippi blacks would be to simply be with them in their troubles. While the situation in the state transformed the three main objectives, "bearing one another's burdens." would remain a mission of the group's field workers throughout the 1960s.[17]

CORAR also established the Commission on the Delta Ministry as an administrative, programming, and policymaking body over the Delta

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[16] Findlay, *Church People*, 82; "The Mississippi Delta Ministry," Folder 28, Box 1, DM Papers.

[17] "The Delta Ministry of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the U.S.A.," Folder 25, Box 4, DM Papers.

Ministry. This commission, which met twice a year, consisted of about two dozen diverse individuals, including many prominent civil rights leaders, black and white, from Mississippi and elsewhere. Commission members wanted workers who might "have a direct relationship to the project" through "technical competence, specialized skills, or residence in the state." Throughout the 1960s this commission included the NAACP's Aaron Henry and Amzie Moore; the FDP's Fannie Lou Hamer and Ed King; the white Greenville newspaper editor Hodding Carter III; and James Lawson. The membership of this commission, which included whites and blacks, radicals and moderates, suggests that it would try gain support from all communities. While this group technically had direct control over the Delta Ministry the local situation determined the Ministry's direction.[18]

Still trying to work out all of the details and interrupted by plans for Freedom Summer, the Delta Ministry organizers would not open an office in Mississippi for six more months. During this time, NCC officials debated the role of the organization and the type of staff to bring to Mississippi. At a General Board meeting in June, one member expressed concern that they might not be giving adequate attention to both community development and civil rights projects. The extent of the Ministry's involvement in these two areas would be a point of contention throughout the 1960s among the group's advocates and its critics. This same member also worried that Thomas and Regier had not selected staff

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[18] "The Mississippi Delta Ministry," Folder 28, Box 1, DM Papers, King Library; "Minutes, Commission on the Delta Ministry, January 22, 1965," Folder 51, Box 21, ibid.; "The Goals of the Delta Ministry," Folder 10, Box 4, ibid.

members with enough experience in rural community development, sociology, and social work. Several NCC officials feared that hiring "field staff without basic descriptions of priority and professional experience" could be disastrous. Ironically, this lack of specific priorities, which some saw as a problem, became one of the organization's strengths because it allowed the group to adjust to the changing situation in Mississippi.[19]

In the spring and summer of 1964 NCC officials also discussed the areas in which the Ministry would implement its projects: relief, education, citizenship, health, and community centers. Conspicuously absent from this list are economic projects even though the officials were aware that the Delta faced severe economic problems. Art Thomas told volunteers that "racial injustice is compounded by the vast economic gap between the affluent majority and the dispossessed minorities." While Ministry leaders were going to focus on the economically disadvantaged group in the Delta, they were not yet considering economic solutions. There were probably several reasons for this. Economic projects would have required much more thought and planning than direct relief efforts and voter registration drives. Direct relief involved a simple process of using money for supplies. Voter registration had the backing of the Constitution and many other civil rights workers had already committed to this goal. Trying to redistribute wealth would have less support from the federal government and it would face even more resistance from many whites. Also, it would be easier to understand how to solve economic problems after being in the Delta. Thomas and McKenna would

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[19] "The Mississippi Delta Ministry," Folder 28, Box 1, ibid.

concentrate more and more on the economic problem as they came to realize that blacks would never be free without economic power, but for now they were simply ready to get started. In the words of Bishop Moore:

> The work is urgent because the Negro revolution is urgent, and we have all waited far, far too long to take a real part in it. . . . It is urgent because every day that goes by is one more day of degradation, one more day of fear and violence thrust upon the Negro, and one more day of anxiety, anger, hatred and fear for the white.[20]

Thomas, who also knew that the Ministry's work was urgent, understood that its mission was to poor blacks primarily and to whites only secondarily. Therefore, when he organized the staff he chose people who were committed to this mission, even if they were unacceptable to local whites. Warren McKenna became the first assistant director. McKenna and Thomas had first met in a jail cell in 1963 in Williamston, North Carolina, where police had arrested them for participating in civil rights activities. The forty-five-year-old McKenna was originally from Providence, Rhode Island, and had received his education at Connecticut Wesleyan Episcopal Theological School. In the 1950s he visited Communist China. His liberal political views drew much criticism from right-wing supporters of the NCC. McKenna, who believed that the American government did nothing for the poor, would be the organizing force behind the Freedom Corps, a militant branch of the Delta Ministry.[21]

Freedom Summer provided an opportunity for Thomas and

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[20] Ibid; "National Council of Churches Delta Ministry," Folder 33, Box 3, DM Papers.

[21] "Appendix A: Biographical Data--Delta Ministry Staff," Folder 39, Box 2, DM Papers; Findlay, *Church People*, 91, 117, 148; interview with Bob Beech, October 29, 1996.

McKenna to observe potential staff members in action. They selected staff members who shared many of their leader's characteristics. Most were college-educated white men in their thirties from north of the Mason-Dixon line. The denominations represented by the staff included Methodist, Episcopalian, Presbyterian, Baptist, and the United Church of Christ. During the 1960s the staff would total as many as twenty people, but usually stayed closer to ten or fifteen who were full time. In selecting the initial staff, Thomas seemed to weigh potential staff members' devotion to the cause more heavily than their technical competence in economic, political, or social areas.[22]

Thomas and McKenna also purposely made the staff a "northern" one. They chose leaders from Massachusetts, New York, New Jersey, and Minnesota.[23] Thomas and McKenna believed they could change Mississippi society more easily with "outsiders." Thomas told volunteers that "the moderate position, alone, is too weak to effect change in this 'closed society.'" He accurately predicted that Mississippi moderates would not push for rapid change nor would they be as willing as outsiders to work with poor blacks. At the same time, Thomas hoped that this group of northern Christians could appeal to the religious conscience of local moderates. This was how Thomas hoped "to effect change" and this was how the Delta Ministry would build a bridge between the two sides--or so

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22 "Appendix A: Biographical Data--Delta Ministry Staff," DM Papers.

23 They did choose one member from the South, a Baptist minister from Georgia, Larry Walker, whom some Delta Ministry staffers considered the most "revolutionary and militant" member of the group.

he thought.[24]

This staff of about fifteen became the backbone of the organization. To aid them in their mission, Thomas called on volunteers from across the nation to carry out the organization's projects. During the first year the states of California, New York, and Massachusetts sent the most volunteers. No volunteers came from Mississippi. The denominations represented by these volunteers reflected the diversity of the NCC and included Methodists, Episcopalians, and Presbyterians as well as non-NCC members such as Mennonites, Catholics, and Jews. Of the several hundred volunteers who came during the first year, roughly one-third were ordained clergy. Most of these "outsiders" stayed for one or two weeks and then returned home. One civil rights worker later commented that this continual turnover of volunteers weakened the Delta Ministry. He believed that two weeks was not long enough to "establish a rapport" with locals, who were naturally distrustful of strangers. Unfortunately, it was usually difficult to get volunteers to make long-term commitments without a financial stipend. Many of these volunteers used their vacation time to come to Mississippi.[25]

The first few months in Mississippi were pivotal ones for Thomas and his staff. They believed that as in the biblical story of Jericho, if they just came in and marched "around the walls of the city seven times . . . the walls would come tumbling down and the world would get better."

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[24] Wilmina Rowland, "How It Is In Mississippi," *Christian Century*, LXXXII (March 17, 1965), 341; "Proposal for a Ministry among the Residents of the Delta Area of the State of Mississippi," Folder 14, Box 12, DM Papers.

[25] "Registered Volunteers from September 1964 - September 1965," Folder 6, Box 2, DM Papers; interview with Ira Grupper, January 27, 1997.

Instead they learned that Mississippi was no Jericho. It "wasn't that easy." They began their work with ideas of reconciling the races, creating a new community of equals. The Delta Ministry would be the bridge. Thomas would eventually learn that this bridge could not go through the wall to the white community. However, as the sun came up on September 1, 1964, Thomas and the others did not know this yet. So, the Delta Ministry opened its door on Main Street, in the heart of white Greenville.[26]

Local whites took notice. They saw shades drawn over the huge front window and wondered what Thomas and his staff did behind it. Many white businessmen disliked not knowing and they suspected the worst. They approached Thomas about the blinds. Thomas explained that it kept the warm sunlight out of the office but at their request, he opened them. The businessmen's worst fears were immediately confirmed--a black woman sat at the front desk by the window. Because this was a violation of the town's social mores, the white men insisted that Thomas move her to a back room where they could not see her. Shortly after Thomas refused, he received an eviction notice. Thomas and McKenna then moved the Ministry's headquarters to the black section of town.[27]

This episode is symbolic of the Delta Ministry's entire stay in Mississippi. First, Thomas set up in the white community so the organization could serve as a ministry and a bridge between whites and blacks. Then, whites reacted by asking the Ministry to remove the black woman. In essence whites were asking Thomas to play by their rules. Instead Thomas and the Delta Ministry refused to compromise their

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[26] Interview with Rims Barber, January 30, 1997.

[27] Interview with Thelma Barnes, February 2, 1997; Hilton, *Delta Ministry*, 39-40.

mission to blacks. They then built their fort in the black community. Symbolically, they moved from Main Street, U.S.A., to Harlem.

To the casual observer, it may have seemed irrational to put a civil rights office in the center of a Mississippi town. But Greenville was different from other area cities and that is why Thomas and other NCC leaders chose it as the Ministry's headquarters. In other Delta towns, the eviction notice might have come in the form of a cross burning or a bomb, but not in Greenville, which many considered an "oasis of liberalism" in arch-conservative Mississippi. In the town of 47,000 people about 40 percent were black and a small percentage were of Chinese or Syrian descent. The major industries of the city included river shipping, textiles and gypsum. During the 1950s and 1960s the city also benefited from strong and mostly impartial law enforcement that reduced social tensions. Greenville was also home to the white newspaper editor Hodding Carter, III, who received a Pulitzer Prize in 1946 for his editorials urging racial tolerance. When other whites asked the Delta Ministry to move out of their downtown office, Carter called on the owner of the building to "find the courage and the decency to rent to the Delta Ministry." That the owner refused suggests that the moderate Carter was an exception even in Greenville.[28]

Still, Thomas hoped the Ministry could win support from moderates in Greenville and he believed that it could be a ministry to both the black and the white community. He expressed this hope in a letter sent to volunteers:

The alienation of the white community from itself--as well as from

[28] Rowland, "How It Is," 340; "Hodding Carter, III," Folder 45, Box 21, DM Papers.

the black community--cannot be ignored if we are serious about a ministry of reconciliation. We must challenge the twisted ideas and values of the white community--in love--if we are concerned about the well-being of all of God's people.[29]

Even though the white community had rebuked the Delta Ministry by forcing it off Main Street, Thomas and his staff were not discouraged. In the first few months they placed a high priority on establishing contacts in the black and, especially, white communities. Wilmina Rowland, a white Presbyterian from Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, was responsible for this function of the organization. In her four months in the Delta, she officially met with more than seventy citizens, mostly whites, and kept detailed notes on all her meetings. Very little resulted from most of these encounters. For example, she visited a Baptist minister who was "courteous in manner, but hostile in attitude." He then read her "an interminable sermon" against the NCC. This was a typical response from Greenville whites, who associated the NCC and consequently the Delta Ministry with communism.[30]

Occasionally Rowland found someone who expressed interest in bringing the races together. One of those was a United Church of Christ member who thought her church could initiate an interracial Bible study and prayer group composed of women. Two weeks later, after mentioning the idea to other church women, the woman backed out. Another promising bridge could not span the divide.[31]

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[29] "Relationship of Short-Term Volunteers to Delta Ministry," Folder 13, Box 12, DM Papers.

[30] "Delta Ministry Staff Meeting Notes, October-December 1964," Folder 32, Box 2, Delta Ministry Papers.

[31] Ibid.

In January 1965, Rowland summarized her attempts to gain white support. She found that in the white church the "real religion is white supremacy, *not* Christianity." Many ministers asked Rowland not to speak to lay people about the Delta Ministry. Rowland and other Ministry leaders had hoped for better results. She wondered, "Has there ever been a case in history where the group which is dominant economically, socially, and politically has voluntarily yielded its dominance?" The answer appeared to be no.[32]

The Delta Ministry also opened an office in Hattiesburg, one hundred sixty miles southeast of Greenville in September of 1964. In this town of about thirty thousand whites and fifteen thousand blacks, NCC officials believed it was important to keep a civil rights presence there after Freedom Summer. Hattiesburg, which was supported by a lumber industry and two colleges, did not foster the "moderate" political climate of Greenville. When the Ministry came to town, only about four hundred of the nine thousand eligible black voters in Forrest County were registered and very few public accommodations were desegregated. However, the Ministry's hopes for reconciliation extended to this southern Mississippi town as well.[33]

Thomas and McKenna sent Robert Beech, a Presbyterian minister originally from Minnesota, to direct the office in Hattiesburg. Beech, a stocky young man with a crew cut, followed the lead of the officials in Greenville by focusing many of his initial efforts on establishing contacts

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[32] "Report- White Community, Mississippi Delta, Sept. 1964, Jan. 1965," Folder 19, Box 7, DM Papers; "Delta Ministry Commission Staff Reports, 1965," Folder 6, Box 2, ibid.

[33] "Freedom Corps, Curtis Hayes, July-Sept. 1965," Folder 26, Box 8, ibid.

in the white community. At times, this seemed more critical to him than gaining support in the black community. In a packet to volunteers he gave instructions for contacting blacks and whites. Concerning the black community, he asked the volunteers to "find out from past reports what has already been done" so they would not "see the same people too often" and "appear to be pestering or badgering." His instructions for communicating with whites were more stringent. He wanted them

> to remember that we have come here to bring about reconciliation . . . not division. This means that any contact we have in the white community is extremely valuable and important. For this reason, we insist that you not pursue activities in the white community without letting local leaders know what you are planning to do.[34]

Beech's results were no better than Rowland's in Greenville. However, Beech did have one positive experience with Hattiesburg whites. On a cold, January day in 1965, three poor white women from Purvis, just west of Hattiesburg, came to the Delta Ministry office in search of food and clothing. Beech approved the request for food and had them come back the next day to get clothing.

> They came back again and again, each time bringing a few new faces with them, over the next few months. They became less reserved and finally very cordial and open. We began to talk about the similarity between their troubles and those of the Negroes, and about segregation and prejudice itself. It turned out that they felt almost no hostility toward Negroes and that they explained their attitude with Bible teachings, quite simply, but very accurately. 'God made us all of one blood . . .' 'There's just one heaven--and one hell . . .' 'A Negro's prayer is as good to God as a white man's . . .' Finally the invitation came to visit their church and worship with them. We did . . . . I have never before shared in a holiness service and that in itself was quite an experience. But to do so with men who

[34] "Ministers Project, 1964-65," Folder 2, Box 21, ibid.

had been pointed out to me previously as members of the Klan added yet another mixed feeling! I was asked to preach first. . . . Each one who preached subsequently made allusion to what I had said and indicated that Negroes were people too--and equal in the sight of God. We were warmly received after the service by all but a few . . . and we were invited back.[35]

In this case, the Delta Ministry had helped bridge the gap between the white and black communities and had taken a small step towards reconciliation. But this was an exception. While Beech and his wife Alice occasionally held interracial meetings in their home, they never moved beyond this initial stage. Beech and his family experienced many more acts of harassment from whites than acts of reconciliation. A local hardware store owner recognized him as a civil rights worker and proceeded to beat him in the face before physically throwing him out of the store. Beech remarked that his son was "dismissed from the church-sponsored kindergarten" because his father's occupation was 'too controversial.' A local Presbyterian minister asked him to stop attending Sunday services there because his presence hampered fund-raising projects. Beech and his family were "treated just as if [they] were released convicts trying to return to the community." After a few months in town, Beech concluded that "the white clergy and elected leaders of the community are still solidly united against us." For all of the Ministry officials' attempts to establish communications with local whites, they received either hostility or no response, neither of which brought the Delta Ministry closer to reconciling the races. To the organization's leaders

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[35] "Delta Ministry Commission Staff Reports of Hattiesburg," Folder 6, Box 2, DM Papers.

and Mississippi blacks, it appeared that Wilmina Rowland was right--whites would never voluntarily give up their power.[36]

In addition to trying to open communications between the white and black communities, Thomas and others concentrated on helping blacks gain political power. This became a priority for two reasons. First, the Delta Ministry could involve itself in the process quickly and easily because many other civil rights groups such as the Freedom Democrat Party and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee were already devoting most of their resources to these ends. Second, with the ultimate goal of creating a racially reconciled society, Thomas understood that in this new society blacks would need the same voting freedom that whites enjoyed. Hence, the organization's staff focused on voter registration and voter education.

Since the nineteenth century, white Southerners had kept blacks from voting through poll taxes, citizenship tests, and other techniques. This continued into the 1960s. In Hattiesburg, blacks had to pass a citizenship test administered by the registrar, Theron Lynd, who one local citizen remembered as a "huge man with a little peanut head up on top of his huge body." Lynd questioned blacks on the most difficult sections of the Constitution. If the potential voter answered correctly he would ask more subjective (and trivial) questions like "how many bubbles . . . were in a bar of Ivory soap?" or "how many dots [could] a pencil point make?" He did all he could to keep blacks from voting.[37]

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[36] Interview with Carolyn Subart, December 8, 1996; "A Costly Ministry," Folder 5, Box 21, DM Papers; "Newsletter, Jan. 1965," Folder 8, Box 3, ibid.

[37] Interview with Ira Grupper, January 27, 1997; interview with Raylawni Branch, January 29, 1997.

For the Delta Ministry staff, registering blacks became a multi-step process. First, the staff had to go door to door to persuade blacks to try to register. This could be difficult because for blacks registering to vote meant risking their lives, their homes, and the safety of their children. It took an incredible amount of courage. Then, once the Ministry staff had blacks willing to try to register, they had to educate them on citizenship. Ministry people and others met with local blacks to teach them about the government and the Constitution. This still did not guarantee that they would be able to register. Finally, Ministry staff organized transportation to take the potential voters to and from the court house to register. Throughout all of these steps, the Delta Ministry worked with many organizations. And once blacks were registered, it did not always mean that they were allowed to vote. Whites had developed many layers of resistance. Still, during the first year the Delta Ministry made some progress helping to register nearly ten thousand new voters.[38]

Ministry officials gradually turned to other projects that would identify them with poor blacks and eliminate the possibility of any local white support. In late 1964 Warren McKenna began drawing up plans for the Freedom Corps in an effort to cultivate leadership within the black community. The Corps was a group consisting primarily of young black males. McKenna intended it to function as "an arm of the church militant . . . [and as] an expression of the freedom movement." The corps would provide the ground troops to carry out some of the Ministry's projects, such as a plantation strike. Unlike other efforts of the Delta Ministry, the

[38] "Criticism of the Delta Ministry-- Fair and Foul," Folder 9, Box 4, DM Papers.

Freedom Corps did not seek white participation. Primarily, McKenna wanted to involve Mississippi blacks aged sixteen or older. Others who reviewed the proposal agreed that "[i]t's leadership should definitely (as stated) be Negro and Mississippi." The Corps also sought out high school dropouts.[39]

In April 1965 the first group of trainees, most of them black Mississippians between the ages of seventeen and twenty-three, began the four-week training session at Mount Beulah, the Delta Ministry's conference center in Edwards, which was ten miles west of Jackson. Their curriculum included courses on the general condition of the Mississippi Negro, the history of the Negro people, Christianity and race, the practice of nonviolence, principles of community organization, the meaning of leadership, and voter registration and citizenship training. All of these courses focused on the black community; there were no courses on racial reconciliation. At the end of the session, they served in the field for three months followed by at least one year in the Freedom Corps.[40]

In June 1965, Freedom Corps volunteers had an opportunity to help several disgruntled black tractor drivers. Led by Delta Ministry staff members Isaac Foster and Larry Walker, the Freedom Corps helped black plantation workers organize the Mississippi Freedom Labor Union. On June 12, a few miles east of Greenville, twelve black tractor drivers went on strike demanding higher wages and better working conditions. The planters evicted the strikers. The Delta Ministry helped the strikers move

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[39] "The Delta Ministry Newsletter, Feb. 1965," Folder 8, Box 3,ibid; "Freedom Corps," Folder 24, Box 8, ibid.

[40] "The Delta Ministry Newsletter, Feb. 1965," Folder 8, Box 3, ibid.

onto five acres near Leland and the new residents christened the town "Strike City." Foster directed the project until the former tractor drivers could build homes and find employment. The Delta Ministry, through the efforts of the Freedom Corps volunteers, had helped blacks bring social change to their community.[41]

A few months later Curtis Hayes, who directed the Freedom Corps, explained how valuable the project had been for local blacks:

> [T]hese young black Mississippians who for a year or more thought they were involved in the movement had to face the hard cold fact that the movement had left them out in the cold. As many times as they had 'gone to jail for the movement,' the movement had neglected to tell them why.

The Delta Ministry wanted them to know why they were fighting for the movement and in the process utilize this group of "young, energetic, radical, unexposed, and uninformed rebels" as a militant wing of the organization. Through the Freedom Corps, the Ministry identified with poor blacks and trained them to take control of the movement, to help themselves. This time, the Ministry had sided with poor black high school dropouts.[42]

With the Freedom Corps, Ministry leaders had developed their own program. In most instances, though, they latched on to the projects of local people or other organizations. In this way, they let the situations that arose set their agenda. One of these situations was a mill strike, which pitted Greenville black women against a major corporation and city

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[41] Gail P. Noble, "The Delta Ministry: Black Power, Poverty, and Politics in the Mississippi Delta" (MS thesis, Cornell University, 1969), 8.

[42] "Freedom Corps, June 1965," Folder 24, Box 8, DM Papers.

officials. Once again, Thomas and his staff found that they could not take the middle ground and remain loyal to their mission. They sided with the black women.

In the early 1950s Mohasco Industries, a New York City-based carpet firm, wanted to put a plant in Greenville. To finance it, Greenville voters had to pass a bond issue. In order to gain black support city officials promised equal hiring opportunities for the black community. The bond issue passed and the mill opened in 1953. The company, which produced carpets for Sears, Roebuck and the federal government, then hired about a thousand people. Roughly 220 black men were hired for the lowest positions but no black women were hired. On the other hand, the mill offered jobs to over three hundred white women. Ten years later little had changed in the hiring practices except now many local blacks were ready to take action. At this point, the Washington County Employment Committee, which included some Delta Ministry staff members, investigated the situation and decided to work within the system to end the discrimination.[43]

The committee had black women fill out applications, organized a committee of whites to meet with plant officials, sent affidavits to the federal government showing the discrimination, and attempted to contact the parent company. In early January 1965, mill officials hired six black women as a token measure of compliance. On January 6, the Greenville Chamber of Commerce added insult to injury by announcing that the mill

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[43] "The Delta Ministry Newsletter, Feb. 1965," Folder 8, Box 3, ibid; "Appendix C," Folder 26, Box 8, ibid; Bruce Hilton, *The Delta Ministry*, (London: The Macmillan Company, 1969), 48-58.

would receive the "Best Plant of the Year" award.[44]

Since working within the system had failed, the committee turned to more aggressive measures. It decided to picket the factory. Although Ministry staff did not lead the picket, they did join the protest. The demonstration of forty to fifty local blacks and Ministry staff lasted for several weeks and their persistence paid off. Three months later, plant officials agreed to put black women in half of the higher-paying positions. The Delta Ministry had accomplished its goal of helping poor blacks gain jobs by assisting the strikers. It had stood with the Greenville blacks and had helped them help themselves.[45]

Thomas and other Ministry leaders also saw education as a critical area for blacks to gain equality with whites. Throughout the 1960s Thomas, Rims Barber, and others worked for the desegregation of Mississippi schools. In January 1965, the Delta Ministry sponsored a church rally in the black community to petition the school board to open the schools to blacks. More than a hundred signed the petition.[46]

One week later the school board, which had been threatened with the loss of about $250,000 in federal funds, announced that it would desegregate the schools. It was the first school district in the state to desegregate without a federal order. Although it is difficult to assess the role of the petition in the school board's decision, the action does reveal once again that the Delta Ministry staff members were involving

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[44] Officials in the federal government (General Services Administration) had already investigated the mill and found discrimination. Yet they awarded the plant a new million dollar contract on the promise that the mill would improve. Hilton, 48-58.

[45] Ibid.

[46] "Appendix C," Folder 26, Box 8, DM Papers.

themselves in the crisis at hand and they were working with and through the black community.[47]

In Canton, Rims Barber, the Delta Ministry project director for Madison County, worked with other civil rights groups to help desegregate public schools. They talked to about 250 black parents who were willing to send their children to the "white" school. Eventually though, only twelve children did it, and just two went to the high school. Each day Barber and others provided transportation for these students to and from school. In the afternoons, they ran tutoring sessions to keep the black students from falling behind.[48]

Often Barber did more than this for the students. One night a parent of one of the students called Barber and said, "They're burning a cross in front of my house." The only thing Barber and another volunteer worker knew to do was to go to the house. They jumped in the car, drove down to the house, and "ran through the gauntlet of white Klansmen." Once they were in the house, they laid on the floor with the family all night "just to be with them." For Barber and many other Delta Ministry staff members it was important to show the locals "that somebody from the outside world cared." If Ministry people could not help them they could "at least be there in their trouble with them."[49]

A popular song of civil rights workers throughout the South was "Which Side Are You On?" The song had originally been sung during the labor movement in the 1930s and the lyrics suggested that there was no

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[47] Ibid.

[48] Interview with Rims Barber, January 30, 1997.

[49] Ibid.

middle ground, that the situation forced people to claim their allegiance to one side or the other. Thirty years later civil rights workers changed the words to fit their movement. Thomas and his staff began to understand what this meant from the first day of their involvement in Mississippi. They had to pick sides. Though they hoped to bridge the white and black communities in a reconciled society, their higher allegiance was to blacks. Through the actions of Thomas and others, the Delta Ministry identified with the poor and with the radical wing of the movement. Its allies were the Freedom Democrat Party and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, not the more moderate NAACP. While the NAACP sought change primarily through the legal system, the Ministry tried to create social change within the black community.[50]

Thomas did not ignore moderate whites and middle class blacks. On the contrary, the Ministry staff strove to garner support from these groups. Moderate whites would not support the organization because it was too radical, its leaders were calling for too much change, too fast. Middle class blacks, on the other hand, had other reasons for not supporting the Delta Ministry.

In September 1964 Thomas and McKenna hoped they could work with middle class blacks. They went to black churches to gain support in the community but few church leaders would associate with the Ministry. Segregationist whites were burning churches all over the state and many blacks did not want to jeopardize their own church. In Hattiesburg only a few black churches even allowed the Delta Ministry to use their building

[50] Interview with Ira Grupper, January 27, 1997; interview with Ed King, January 31, 1997.

for meetings. Ministry leaders also looked to black business leaders for assistance, but this group could not afford to participate in the movement because they might lose their business. One black man who ran a small grocery store participated until "the wholesale warehouse cut his credit," forcing him "to pay for his goods by the week now instead of by the month."[51]

At other times, wealthy white planters in the Delta used a different type of coercion. One staff member found that "There [were] some blacks that [were] part of the white establishment. Deals [were] made between whites and some blacks." Plantation owners sometimes paid off black workers to remain quiet and keep other blacks quiet. Clearly, the white ruling class used many methods to keep blacks in a subordinate role.[52]

Still, the Ministry staff did not devote nearly as much time and resources to middle class blacks as they did to the poor. Referring to the work of a recent volunteer in Hattiesburg, Beech commented that "she spent the highest percentage of her time with a group that we have not bothered with much--namely, the middle class Negro. . . . We are still concerned primarily with the dispossessed and disenfranchised." The Delta Ministry's neglect of middle class blacks and the concern for the dispossessed and disenfranchised continued throughout the decade. They simply could not be a ministry to all people.[53]

Thomas and others chose to be a ministry to poor blacks and this

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[51] Tom Dent Interview with Owen Brooks, August 18, 1978, Tougaloo College Archives; interview with Raylawni Branch, January 29, 1997; letter from B. Noel Phelan to Mr. Charles Sheline, n.d., Folder 6, Box 21, DM Papers.

[52] Tom Dent Interview with Owen Brooks, August 18, 1978.

[53] Letter from Bob Beech to Mrs. E. Harris Harbinson, July 15, 1965, Folder 6, Box 21, DM Papers.

group embraced the Delta Ministry. One reason the poor could support the Ministry was that they had much less to lose financially. Conservative whites could try to intimidate the poor with threats of violence but not with economic threats. In the Ministry's relationship with the community, officials usually made decisions with local help. Ed King, one of the members of the Commission on the Delta Ministry, recalled that they "never brought community action without first meeting with the people in the community so they understood in laymen's terms what it meant." And the Delta Ministry received a positive and active response from poor blacks. In Canton, a ten-year-old black girl told Rims Barber that "my momma said I can go to jail with you today." Many in the black community went to jail with the Delta Ministry and, conversely, the Delta Ministry staff went to jail with many poor blacks.[54]

By the end of 1964 Ministry and NCC officials understood that the Delta Ministry could be a ministry to poor blacks only. John Regier was "persuaded that the Delta Ministry can only function insofar as its major 'point of entry' is the community which it hopes to serve, particularly the impoverished people in the Delta area and more specifically the Negroes in the area." Regier and others in the organization came to realize that before they could reconcile the races in Mississippi, the black community needed more power. Harry Bowie, the project director in McComb, argued that their "task [was] to help build the Negro Community to the point where we can begin to talk about reconciliation among 'relative equals.'"[55]

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[54] Interview with Ed King, January 31, 1997; interview with Rims Barber, January 30, 1997.

[55] "Report from Jon Regier to Paul O. Madsen," Folder 28, Box 1, DM Papers; letter from Harry Bowie to Jon Regier, Folder 12, Box 21, ibid.

It also became clear that the Delta Ministry's orders did not come from "God's Box," NCC's headquarters on Riverside Drive in New York. Instead, the Ministry staff made decisions at the grass-roots level on a daily basis. This gave the organization the flexibility to adjust to the constantly changing situation. According to Barber, it also allowed the organization to work with the local people and to create "an atmosphere where each Negro citizen knows his rights and begins to figure a way to determine his own goals and to work toward the solution of his own problems."[56]

When Thomas and McKenna opened their office in September 1964, they had a list of goals that included direct relief, reconciliation, and community development. By the spring of 1965, they had alienated the white community and to some extent middle class blacks. They were forced into an alliance with poor blacks. For the time being, the Delta Ministry officially abandoned reconciliation and increasingly turned to a grass-roots approach to bring economic and political power to poor blacks.[57]

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[56] Interview with Ed King, January 31, 1997; interview with Rims Barber, January 30, 1997.

[57] Obviously, the presence of the Delta Ministry threatened local whites but there is little evidence that middle class blacks were threatened. Instead many middle class blacks did not get involved with the Delta Ministry or other civil rights groups because they had something to lose, whites could hurt them economically.

> The Delta Ministry staff--and most modern theologians-- would argue that true reconciliation is possible only between men who regard each other as equals. As long as the servant-master or planter-tenant mentality exists between white men and black in Mississippi, reconciliation is an impossible dream. . . . This is why many of us believe that "black power"-- despite some abuses-- is the real force toward reconciliation of the races . . . only when [blacks] use their power do whites accord them the respect which is a prerequisite of true reconciliation.-- Bruce Hilton[58]

Part II

The Radicalizing of an Organization

One of the blacks in Hattiesburg whom the Delta Ministry helped was Raylawni Branch. Robert Beech had encouraged Branch to enroll at Mississippi Southern College (now Southern Mississippi University). She and another black woman became the second and third blacks to attend the largest college in the state. That year she had little money and almost no food for her and her three children. As the family struggled to survive, Beech provided canned goods from the Ministry's collection and the family lived on green beans, corn, and pork and beans. When Branch needed a divorce, the Ministry loaned her the money to pay for it.[59]

This episode is a typical example of how the Delta Ministry touched the lives of Mississippians. It was often not dramatic work, nonetheless it was necessary to feed and clothe thousands of blacks. While Beech,

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[58] Hilton, *The Delta Ministry*, 174.

[59] Interview with Raylawni Branch, January 29, 1997.

Thomas, and others met these everyday needs, they focused on a longer term solution: building up the black community to meet its own needs. Developing leadership through the Freedom Corps, getting jobs through the Mill strike, and gaining political power through increased black voter registration were all means toward this end.[60]

Beginning in the spring of 1965, Delta Ministry officials shifted many of their efforts to developing economic power in the black community. This increased economic focus is evident in the organization's support of the Child Development Group of Mississippi (CDGM) that controlled the state's Head Start programs. It is also reflected in some of the Ministry's own projects such as the Delta Opportunities Commission and Freedom City. The increased emphasis on economic initiatives also signified a continuing shift away from reconciliation by Thomas and his staff. One Ministry official Bruce Hilton noted that they were apprised of the prejudice and violence that had dominated Mississippi's closed society for more than a hundred years and they began to realize "that true reconciliation is possible only between men who regard each other as equals." Whites did not regard powerless blacks as equals. While Ministry officials realized they could not easily or quickly change white attitudes, Hilton believed that blacks could force whites to acknowledge blacks as equals. For "only when [blacks] use their power do whites accord them the respect which is a prerequisite of true reconciliation." First, the Ministry would have to empower blacks before

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60 Polly Greenberg, *The Devil Has Slippery Shoes: A Biased Biography of the Child Development Group of Mississippi*. (London: The Macmillan Company, Collier-Macmillan Limited, 1969), 11, 12, 14, 17.

they could eliminate racist attitudes. The CDGM represented one way the Delta Ministry could help blacks acquire power.[61]

During the spring of 1965 many blacks in Mississippi were concerned about the education of preschool children. Virtually no black children attended preschool or kindergarten. By the time they began first grade (those who did) they were already well behind white children and later fell father behind in the separate and inferior black schools. Hence, blacks began their lives at a disadvantage and, for most, this slow start predetermined their subordinate existence.[62]

At the same time that local blacks began considering starting preschools, the federal government wanted to begin Head Start programs. As Art Thomas became involved, he weighed the advantages to gaining much-needed federal money against the disadvantages of the "intolerable tangles of federal caution and bureaucratic nonsense." Thomas also hesitated to abandon voter registration as a primary concern. He finally decided to support the program but many of those involved worried that "the political limitations of a federal program" would severely hamper the CDGM's work. They feared that they might "be selling the desperate poor to the discouraging government."[63]

The CDGM, supported by radical groups like the Freedom Democrat Party, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, and the Delta Ministry received a grant of $1.2 million for an eight-week summer program. The Ministry immediately began working with locals in the

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[61] Hilton, 174.

[62] Greenberg, *Slippery Shoes*, 11,12,14, 17.

[63] Ibid.

Delta to organize the program. There was little resistance from conservative whites. Though they did not want anything to do with this program for poor blacks, they did not see it as a threat to their power so they ignored it--for a while. [64]

Head Start did more than educate young black children; it gave jobs and leadership positions to the entire black community. Seventy-five centers opened that first summer, and in each community local people established a board to oversee the program. Each of these boards, consisting primarily of poor, uneducated blacks, typically were given $200,000 for the program. Through Head Start adults gained an opportunity to help themselves by learning to manage large sums of money.[65]

Mount Beulah became CDGM's headquarters. Located twenty-six miles west of Jackson, Mount Beulah became a safe haven for civil rights workers. For most of the decade it was the only place in the state that civil rights workers could hold interracial meetings. Besides CDGM the Delta Ministry also used the facility for Freedom Corps training, food and clothing storage, and other activities. Mount Beulah's importance was symbolic as well. One sharecropper referred to it as "that justice place."[66]

On April 3, 1965, Mount Beulah hosted the first Head Start planning meeting. While the Delta Ministry was not officially part of CDGM, many of the Ministry staff assisted the program throughout its existence. None

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[64] Interview with Ed King, January 29, 1997; "Commission on the Delta Ministry Outline of Director's Report," Folder 1, Box 19, DM Papers.

[65] Interview with Ed King, January 31, 1997.

[66] Greenberg, *Slippery Shoes*, 28; "Report of Commission on the Delta Ministry," Folder 34, Box 12, DM Papers.

played a bigger role than Art Thomas. Polly Greenberg, who helped in the planning stages, remembered that Thomas was "the cornerstone of CDGM." Tom Levin, who was also instrumental in CDGM, later referred to Art Thomas as a saint:

> Thieves have St. Dismas, workers St. Joseph and mothers St. Monica; the poor people of Mississippi had St. Art Thomas and St. Bob Moses. But Art was a missionary saint. He brought dedication, warmth, creativity, and a superb tactical acumen gained from sophistication in a world larger than Mississippi. . . . Most certainly there would have been no CDGM without Art Thomas.[67]

Once again Thomas and the Ministry staff accepted their role as an assisting organization that supported the projects of other groups. In this sense they were a servant ministry. Thomas understood that the Delta Ministry and CDGM were working towards the same goal of empowering blacks. Levin's praise of Thomas also hints at an important trait of the Delta Ministry. Levin mentions four groups in his analogy that are often marginalized by society-- thieves, workers, women, and poor people. Thomas and his staff increasingly saw their role as working on the margins of society with people who had no hope, people whom no one, including the government, would help.[68]

Thomas sent many Ministry volunteers out to the communities to tell the locals about Head Start and get them interested. Thomas and other Delta Ministry staffers then helped with the orientation at Mount Beulah for more than seven hundred teachers and teacher aides trained for the summer day-care program. One aide who came to the training remembered an environment where everyone was respectful and open.

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[67] Greenberg, *Slippery Shoes*, 654-655.

[68] Ibid, 27, 654-655.

She arrived expecting to learn how and what to teach. While there she experienced the "real free feel of Freedom" and she left wanting to create that feeling in every community. In fact, she hoped that they would 'never settle for anything less than the real free feeling of freedom everywhere.'[69]

On July 12, this feeling of freedom began spreading through seventy-five centers across the state that served more than five thousand students. The largest grant went to the Mary Holmes Junior College, which directed the CDGM in the Delta. Overall, CDGM hired more than 1,100 poor blacks for the summer program.[70]

During the days, CDGM teachers and their aides, most of them local people, worked with young black students. At night, the black community used the building for adults, who would learn about good parenting and voter registration. Thus, the Head Start Program benefited the entire black community.[71]

CDGM aided the black community in several ways. Many blacks served on the local boards and made decisions about the program. Many more obtained jobs as teachers and teacher aides. In the process parents often learned as much as the students. Young black students benefited by not falling so far behind in school. In all of these ways CDGM empowered the poor blacks. However, the most important result of the program is that it involved local blacks in their own struggle for freedom. Their hope and their courage increased as they learned to help themselves. The Delta

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[69] Ibid, 58-59.

[70] "Commission on the Delta Ministry Outline of Director's Report, July 19, 1965," Folder 1, Box 19, DM Papers.

[71] Interview with Ed King, January 30, 1997.

Ministry once again identified with the radical elements of the movement and with poor blacks.[72]

The summer program was a huge success. Sargent Shriver, who headed the federal agency that gave out the grant money, praised it. He "liked what was happening to the self-image that the children had of themselves, as worthwhile youngsters, for whom some people, lots of people, cared." In fact, it was so effective that it attracted opposition from conservatives who had ignored it initially.[73]

As Head Start educated blacks, gave them jobs, and put money in their pockets, many Mississippi whites viewed CDGM as a threat to the white power structure. Senator John Stennis pressured President Johnson and the Office of Economic Opportunity (OEO) to give the grant money to a new rival group of CDGM, the Mississippi Action Program (MAP). This organization included white moderates such as Hodding Carter and NAACP leaders such as Aaron Henry. It was a group that wanted social change in Mississippi but which, unlike SNCC and the Delta Ministry, believed that it should come gradually.[74]

During the summer of 1965 conservative whites tried various tactics to disrupt CDGM's program. During the first week of CDGM training at Mount Beulah, local police wrote more than a thousand dollars in traffic fines to the vehicles of civil rights workers. Elsewhere local whites burned one of the Head Start centers to the ground. These acts did not intimidate the black community--indeed, they stiffened its

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[72] Ibid.

[73] Larold K. Schulz, "The CDGM Story," *Christianity and Crisis*, XXVI (January 23, 1967), 318.

[74] Ibid, 315-320.

determination. Local leaders canceled the school for just one day and then reopened with one hundred percent attendance. In another county, police arrested several CDGM workers for leading a civil rights demonstration. The director of the center then went to the jail and used federal Head Start money to bail them out. This money came from the workers' salaries and was repaid the following Friday. It angered conservative whites that these civil rights workers had been freed with federal funds.[75]

In August 1965 Sargent Shriver caved in to conservative pressure and awarded the Head Start funding to MAP. Shriver decided to do this even though he had recently lauded CDGM's efforts. A New Orleans attorney who was sent in to investigate CDGM's Head Start program found that it was "a model of poverty programs throughout the U.S." Another official from Washington, D.C., believed that it was "the most efficient and best-run program in the country." Still, Shriver canceled the CDGM's funds because powerful men like Mississippi Congressman John Stennis and President Johnson wanted the money in less radical hands.[76]

But the authority of the president himself did not defeat CDGM and its poor constituents. They understood how valuable the Head Start program was to their communities. While MAP used the three million dollar grant to open five centers for two hundred children, CDGM used volunteers to continue its program. With no federal money it still operated sixty centers for four thousand children. Poor blacks did all they could to keep it going.[77]

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[75] "Report of Commission on the Delta Ministry," Folder 34, Box 12, DM Papers; Findlay, *Church People*, 125; interview with Ed King, January 30, 1997.

[76] Schulz, "The CDGM Story," 315-320.

[77] Ibid.

In the spring of 1966 Shriver agreed to give some funding to both programs. He offered CDGM a grant of $5.6 million and the organization used it in 121 centers serving 9,135 students. It also continued to rely on local residents as employees; they now made up 98.9 percent of the program's workers. By the end of the year, Vice-president Hubert Humphrey, who had supported CDGM, talked with the president, who then persuaded Shriver to make eight million dollar available to CDGM.[78]

Delta Ministry officials and staff continued to support CDGM. Both groups identified with poor blacks and committed their efforts to training blacks to help themselves. Many Delta Ministry staffers, including Art Thomas, served on local boards. Thomas and others in the organization understood the importance of CDGM to the local black community. As one NCC official commented, "the fight to preserve CDGM was not merely to maintain a preschool educational program for children, but rather to sustain the beginnings of self-determination for both parents and children in Mississippi." Despite the resistance of local whites and later of the federal government, CDGM and the Delta Ministry succeeded in involving blacks in their own fight for freedom.[79]

The Delta Ministry officials also turned to other projects that would bring economic power to the black community. When the staff first arrived in Mississippi they had to become acclimated to the situation and provide direct relief. After getting settled in the Delta, they focused more on economic projects. Harry Bowie, the project director at McComb understood this:

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[78] Ibid.

[79] Ibid.

> What is needed is not another federal program that gentles, but nevertheless continues the economic dependence of Black Mississippians upon the whims and good-will of their oppressors, but a program controlled by the Black community which enables it to fortify and entrench their expanding sense of political and social freedom with the stability of economic independence. What is needed is the means whereby the Black community can avail itself of the necessary capital and economic expertise to establish businesses to service its own needs.

Significantly, Bowie did not want federal handouts because that would allow the whites in power to distribute aid based on the cooperation of the poor blacks needing the support. Blacks outspoken in the movement would get no aid then. Bowie and others in the Delta Ministry called for economic independence so that the black community could free itself from the ruling white class. In many respects, they were calling for a revolution.[80]

In September, 1965, Ministry leaders created the Delta Opportunities Corporation (DOC) in an attempt to give blacks economic control over their situation. Consisting entirely of black Mississippians, the corporation sought federal and private funds for the black community for job training, economic development, low-cost housing, and small business opportunities. Initially, several federal agencies in Washington, D.C., encouraged the DOC to apply for funding. However, no agency would give the all-black board funding without the endorsement of a "prominent" individual from the area. And just as the case had been with other projects, whites in Mississippi and the rest of the South frustrated the Ministry's efforts. Finally, in the spring of 1967, eighteen months after first applying, the DOC began to receive federal funding. Combined with

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[80] "Preface," Folder 16, Box 6, DM Papers.

private funds, the DOC received a total of $360,000 in 1967 and used the money for basic education, housing, and vocational training for displaced rural blacks.[81]

Most of the time that the Delta Ministry operated in Mississippi the staff was at odds with the NAACP, mainly because NAACP leaders identified with white moderates and middle class blacks. There were, however, a few occasions when the two groups worked together just as there were incidents that forced them to realize that in the long-run they had the same general goals and that they were both fighting the same ruthless, violent, and segregationist enemy. In Hattiesburg, Bob Beech understood this as did Vernon Dahmer, the local NAACP president.

One fall day in 1965 Dahmer called Beech and asked him to come out to his house. Dahmer had gone on the radio to encourage blacks to register to vote. The Ku Klux Klan expressed its disapproval by placing a sign in Dahmer's yard. The sign had a picture of an Uncle Sam-type of figure in a hooded white robe. The caption above and below the pointing figure read, "I want you in the white knights of the Mississippi KKK." It was the death notice that the Klansmen posted to let someone know they were going to murder him. So Beech and Ira Grupper, a SNCC worker, went to visit Dahmer. The NAACP leader showed them the sign and he told them he was not afraid. Beech later called several people in the community hoping that publicizing this incident would stop the KKK.[82]

In January 1966 local Klansmen fulfilled their promise. Several Klan members stationed themselves outside the house and one of the

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[81] Noble, "Delta Ministry," 14.

[82] Interview with Ira Grupper, January 27, 1997.

hooded figures threw a crude, homemade bomb into Dahmer's home. As Dahmer's wife and children attempted to escape the flames, other Klansmen fired buckshot into the house trying to trap Dahmer and his family inside. Greatly outnumbered, Dahmer grabbed his gun and returned the fire, an act that saved his family. While he fired at the Klan, his wife and three children escaped. But Dahmer could not save himself. Klansmen continued to fire mercilessly into the burning home. By the time Dahmer escaped, eighty percent of his body was burned. He died in a local hospital two days later. Like so many others who were not content with the status quo and who tried to change the system, Dahmer died at the hands of his oppressors.[83]

After Dahmer's death, the Delta Ministry rebuilt his home and continued to help his family financially. Through painful experiences such as these, the moderate and radical wings of the Civil Rights movement understood that they had a common, inhumane enemy and that their martyrs died for a common cause.[84]

In that same month, the Ministry staff began to focus their attention on the plight of black plantation workers in the Delta. This shift eventually led to the development of Freedom City, the Delta Ministry's most direct and most extensive effort to bring economic power to the black community.

On some of the richest land in the world, the hands that actually farmed it received abysmal wages. Wealthy planters paid their black help approximately three dollars per day to work twelve to fourteen hours a

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[83] Ibid.

[84] Ibid.

day chopping weeds and picking cotton. Tractor drivers made six to eight dollars per day. During the six months of the year that this labor was not required, planters did not pay their help. In many ways, the labor system was more cost efficient than the slave system of the antebellum South. Under slavery, owners had to feed and clothe their help year round. Then, under sharecropping planters were no longer responsible for feeding and clothing their workers as each received a portion of the crop (though planters often cheated blacks out of any profit). Finally, under the wage system planters still were not responsible for the daily needs of the workers. They simply paid each laborer a small amount. Then by giving the workers credit to purchase food and other supplies, an owner could force his laborer into debt for life. The wage system, which put cash in the hands of blacks was better than slavery and the sharecropping system. Still, as historian James Cobb maintains, Delta planters profited handsomely from all of these systems.[85]

In 1965, the federal government paid many planters subsidies to limit their crops. Before this time, planters were just beginning to turn to mechanization. Planters needed fewer laborers. It seemed that the federal government, technology, and white planter together made it more difficult for blacks just to subsist. In fact, not all of them survived the especially brutal winter of 1965-1966 that included substantial snowfall. Poorly constructed houses offered almost no protection from harsh conditions. At least two Delta blacks froze to death that winter, one of

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[85] "Commission the Delta Ministry, Agenda," Folder 36, Box 23, DM Papers; Cobb, *Most Southern Place*, 99-100.

them in her tenant shack on her employer's plantation.[86]

Poorly constructed housing was better than no housing. Planters forced many farmers out into the cold. Between August and January planters evicted 2,200 Delta laborers from their homes. These dispossessed farmers could get no food or funding from the federal government. The previous November, two federal agencies had enacted Operation Help, which was designed to send surplus food to Mississippi and employ five hundred poor people to help distribute it. But it never came. Two months later, disenchanted by the federal government and desperately in need of food and shelter to survive, Delta blacks took matters into their own hands. They organized the Poor People's Conference on January 29, 1966. A group of seven hundred met at the Delta Ministry's Mount Beulah conference center. Still hoping that the federal government might take cognizance of their plight, the group sent a telegram to President Johnson explaining that they had no food, no homes, and no jobs. The telegram was signed by Art Thomas, Lawrence Guyot of the MFDP, and Isaac Foster with the Delta Ministry and the Mississippi Freedom Labor Union. The poor people received no reply. Their next step attracted national attention: they decided to conduct a "live-in" at the abandoned Air Force base in Greenville.[87]

Early in the morning on January 31, forty-one of those who had attended the Poor People's Conference came to the air base where three hundred empty buildings sat on two thousand acres. They drove past a

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[86] Hilton, *The Delta Ministry*, 82-88.

[87] Greenberg, *Slippery Shoes*, 577; Leon Howell, "Freedom City: Mississippi's New Community," *Christianity and Crisis*, XXVI (October 17, 1966), 226-28; Noble, "Delta Ministry," 9.

surprised soldier standing guard and broke into the first building they came to, the officer's club. They began setting up mattresses and stoves. During the day, many others who had been more apprehensive joined them. As the day went on, the "live-in" attracted more attention. First it was just Air Force officers on the scene but soon reporters began arriving from all over the region.[88]

That night 150 federal troops, some from as far away as Denver, flew into Greenville to put down the disturbance. Finally the federal government had responded to the desperate people--but not to help them. Still, the "live-in" did not die. The demonstrators released a statement the previous day which was now published by the *Washington Post*. The people made their objectives clear:

> We are at the Greenville Air Force Base because it is federal property and there are hundreds of empty houses and buildings. We need those houses and the land. We could be trained for jobs in the buildings.

They also understood perfectly how the liberal establishment, represented by the Democrats, had abandoned them. They asked President Johnson, "Whose side are you on, the poor people or the millionaires?" To the demonstrators and to the Delta Ministry staff the civil rights movement was as simple as choosing sides. And it seemed that all of white Mississippi and the federal government with its armed forces were on the other side.[89]

A large crowd assembled once again just outside the barracks, including camera operators from the major networks. Among the

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[88] Hilton, 89-99.

[89] Ibid, 99-103.

onlookers was the Air Force officer in charge, who had been given orders to remove the protesters from the building while attracting as little attention as possible. He met with Isaac Foster, a Delta Ministry staffer who was the leader of the live-in group. The officer explained to Foster that the protesters needed to leave the base because they were endangering their own lives. He then pointed out that the base had no running water or sanitation facilities and it was a fire and health hazard. This must have seemed almost humorous to Foster, who retorted that "ninety percent of the Negro houses in Mississippi don't have running water or indoor plumbing" and that the protesters felt "right at home here--and a whole lot warmer." Federal officials claimed to want the demonstrators off the base because it endangered their lives, yet these same officials did not seem to care that this unemployed, homeless group was already endangered by the conditions in which they lived.[90]

Another official who flew to Greenville was Orville Freeman, the secretary of agriculture. The protesters explained to Freeman and his staff that the food stamp program was not working and that they were not getting food. One of Freeman's staff members offered a protester money to pay the co-payment on the food stamps. This official did not understand that the poor people did not want a handout, that this "wasn't the point at all." They wanted a new system, a fair system. The federal government did not understand the problem.[91]

Around noon an airman shattered one of the windows of the officers' club, reached in, and unlocked the door. Troops, four at a time,

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[90] Hilton, *The Delta Ministry*, 101.

[91] Interview with Rims Barber, January 30, 1997.

poured through the entrance and began carrying the protesters out. Previously wealthy planters had evicted them, now federal troops did it. Instead of providing these people with the basics to survive, the federal government treated them as vagrants.[92]

Up to this point, the Delta Ministry had played a behind-the-scenes role. It supported the demonstration and many Ministry officials, such as Foster and Art Thomas, joined the sit-in. Once again, the Delta Ministry worked for and with poor blacks. Ed King, who was active in the movement at the time, later recalled that the Delta Ministry had become far more radical by 1966. It was "helping invade federal property blaming the U.S. government for not taking care of its citizens." Thomas and his staff had grown weary of working within the system and trying to meet their goals through legal measures. The situation radicalized them.[93]

Upon leaving the air base, the demonstrators had no place to go. The following day the refugees held a news conference at the Delta Ministry office in Greenville. One said that she felt the "federal government [has] proven that it don't care about poor people." Art Thomas criticized Mississippi Congressmen Jamie Whitten and John Stennis, who were "supposed to represent the poor people."[94]

Many of the evicted farmers went to Strike City, a project supported by the Delta Ministry. But as the population swelled to over 250, the residents ran out of room. From here about 180 of them went to what came to be known as Mud City. A black farmer let them set up tents on

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[92] Hilton, *The Delta Ministry*,103.

[93] Interview with Ed King, January 30, 1997.

[94] Hilton, *The Delta Ministry*,104-105.

his land in Issaquena County. It rained for two weeks and turned the soil into "bottomless, gooey sludge," hence the name. To make matters worse, Klansmen threatened to kill the landowner, who then asked the Mud City residents to leave. In late February, 125 of the residents traveled seventy-five miles south to Mount Beulah, responding to an invitation from the Delta Ministry.[95]

At Mount Beulah, these poor blacks began working together as a community. They made their own decisions and discussed plans for a new city, agreeing that they wanted to own their own land. This became a reality when a wealthy supporter of the Delta Ministry from New York lent the Poor People's Conference $71,000 to buy a four-hundred-acre plot of land eight miles south of Greenwood.[96]

Next this group had to decide what to plant. It most definitely would not be cotton. After consulting with Delta Ministry staff member and farmer Clarence Hall, they chose soybeans. Warren McKenna and Art Thomas wanted to involve the Ministry directly in the project. McKenna had dreamt of a cooperative farming village in which the people owned the land, like the Israeli moshavs. Paul Moore of the Commission on the Delta Ministry envisioned many communities like Freedom City in which a textile mill, an agriculture cooperative, and a pickle factory would be the foundation of the local economy. But many people in the NCC and the Delta Ministry hesitated to involve the organization in the project because the new community required a great deal of money, which the Ministry did not have. The Delta Ministry also was currently under evaluation by

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[95] Ibid, 107.

[96] Ibid, 112.

the NCC, whose officials were responding to numerous critics of the organization and trying to decide whether or not to continue the program. Many in the Ministry believed that it was not the best time to venture into a controversial, high-risk project. The new community might fail and bankrupt the Delta Ministry.[97]

In spite of the pitfalls, McKenna and Thomas drew up plans for a new community. They worked from the premise that the residents would be in control:

> We are not proposing some perfect city but a community of men, women, and children engaged in the process of becoming free--socially, educationally, economically, politically, spiritually.

Going into more detail, they explained that this would be a project in which

> the Negro seeks his own solution to his problems through independent, cooperative planning and actions. . . . This is not proposed for self-sufficiency, but for self-determination as the Negro community looks to *itself first* for its 'salvation.'

When Thomas and McKenna came to Mississippi, they had hoped for support from moderates and the federal government. It became more and more clear that President Johnson would not offer much support for the Civil Rights movement. It is no surprise then, that Thomas and McKenna believed by 1966 that the black community would have to find its "salvation" in itself. They did not want this new community to be dependent on anti-poverty funds from federal agencies. Still, they needed all the financial support they could get. They applied for federal funds but their requests for grant money were blocked for months by Stennis and

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[97] Hilton, *The Delta Ministry*,112; "Commission the Delta Ministry, Agenda," Folder 36, Box 23, DM Papers.

Whitten, among others.[98]

McKenna searched for funds from other sources. He sent letters out requesting help from private donors and eventually received enough money to purchase twenty-four "houses" at five hundred dollars apiece. These houses were actually prefabricated tent-like structures that were built upon wooden platforms. Once these were up, Freedom City was ready for residents in July 1966.[99]

The Freedom City residents, about fifteen families, began with three buildings, three trucks, five tractors, one combine, and one store. Delta Ministry staffer Isaac Foster became the project director. Other Ministry staff members helped build the houses and install sanitation equipment and plumbing, including a shower converted from a short silo. The residents made the day-to-day decisions.[100]

Each day the adults were expected, though not forced, to work on the cooperative farm. People were paid in scrip which could only be used for commodities in the company store.[101]

Education became an important part of the Freedom City project. Rims Barber, a Ministry official who worked at Freedom City, tutored the children every afternoon when they returned from school. Barber tried to keep them from falling behind in school. He also taught many of the children to read. In addition, these "Freedom Schools" taught black students about their culture and heritage in classes on African-American

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[98] Hilton, *The Delta Ministry*, 114-115; "New Community," Folder 25, Box 6, DM Papers.

[99] Hilton, *The Delta Ministry*, 121.

[100] Interview with Rims Barber; Howell, "Freedom City: Mississippi's New Community," 227.

[101] Interview with Rims Barber.

history and culture. At night many adults participated in classes as well.[102]

Of all the Delta Ministry's projects, Freedom City was the least successful. The residents never could establish an economically independent community. Former Delta Ministry officials offered various reasons for this. Some believed that the project was a lower priority among the organization's leadership, which shifted from Thomas and McKenna to Owen Brooks near the end of the summer of 1966. Some felt that Brooks became more interested in activities at Mound Bayou than at Freedom City. Another former official believed that the project was destined to fail because of the people who joined it. Instead of using the strongest, most qualified citizens of the black community, Freedom City involved those individuals least capable of succeeding. There were many examples of residents refusing to work because they did not want to that particular day. Finally, it may have failed because the NCC did not pump enough financial resources into it. In spite of the setback, however, Freedom City did not ruin the Delta Ministry; the organization would continue to work toward helping the impoverished black community. In fact, the project's failure had little impact on the direction of the Delta Ministry. Most officials, particularly those in control by the time of Freedom City's collapse, believed that the project was doomed to fail from the beginning. So when it fulfilled these expectations, the Delta Ministry simply turned its attention and funding to other current projects.[103]

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[102] Ibid; "The Freedom School in the New Community," Folder 26, Box 6, DM Papers.

[103] Findlay, *Church People*, 131; anonymous interview; interview with Thelma Barnes, February 2, 1997.

The Delta Ministry faced another major challenge in 1966. Conservatives in the North and the South had condemned the project since its start. Because the organization had drawn so much criticism from several denominational leaders, the press, and others, NCC officials were compelled to appoint a committee in December 1965 to investigate the Delta Ministry.

During the first eighteen months no one had criticized the Ministry more harshly than the Methodist bishop from Mississippi, Edward J. Pendergrass. In a six page "analysis" of the organization's activities and goals, the bishop concluded that there had "been no effort toward reconciliation," that the staff regarded "the civil rights movement as a war," that the program was "not ecumenical in nature," that the program was "perpetuating segregation," that the group's "theory of self-determination [was] an illusion," that the program was "contrary to the modern concept of Christian Mission," and finally, that the program was "primarily one of political action."[104]

To the bishop's credit, he was half-right on a couple of these points. The Delta Ministry made little progress toward reconciliation (though it tried). Also, many in the Ministry did see the Civil Rights movement as war, particularly when they witnessed the murders of workers such as Vernon Dahmer. And though the Ministry did not try to perpetuate segregation, the staff did work almost exclusively with the black community (but of course Thomas and his staff had no choice because no one in the white community wanted to work with the Delta Ministry on

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104 "Analysis of Program of Delta Ministry Commission," Folder 15, Box 2, DM Papers.

its terms). In short, the moderate white bishop believed that the Delta Ministry was too radical.

Following the conclusion of the investigation in May, NCC officials gave the Delta Ministry a full endorsement to continue its work. The report of the evaluation committee stated,

> The Delta Ministry has become the number one civil rights organization in Mississippi. It has been the best financed; has produced results far beyond the gross activity of other civil rights groups. It has brought hope to the poor Negro in Mississippi for whom the NAACP, the church, the Federal Government and the local governments had offered no hope . . . it has kept pressure on the Federal and State power establishments in such a way that they have had to act responsibly in the arena of civil rights, relief, and to a degree, in education. . . .They have developed models of hope-producing organization for the poor which will be copied in many parts of the country, if not the world.

The committee understood the value of the Delta Ministry's role in the movement when "the NAACP, the church, the federal government and the local government had offered no hope" to poor blacks. Thomas and his staff offered hope and it was their greatest contribution to the movement.[105]

On the negative side, the committee also remarked that staff members "had shown poor financial judgment," flirted "with programs of racial separatism," and "both intensified the cleavage between middle-class and poor Negroes and failed to elicit the participation of interested white Mississippi churchmen." But overall the committee approved of the organization's work and by doing so gave the Delta Ministry the NCC's approval to continue setting policies and organizing activities at the

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[105] Howell, *Freedom City*, 123-124.

local level.[106]

The program continued but the Delta Ministry would have to deal with several looming problems in the near future. In 1965 and 1966 they had been substantially over budget. Compounding this problem, church people outside the South made fewer donations. Also, many leaders in the organization realized that outsiders, particularly white outsiders, would soon need to step aside so local blacks could take over the program. All along this idea that blacks should be helping themselves had been a significant part of the Delta Ministry philosophy. Still, by mid-1966, it had many exciting programs in operation that promised to bring economic and political power to poor blacks, such as Head Start and the DOC.

When Thomas came to Mississippi in 1964, he and his staff did not know who would help them. By 1966, they realized that almost no one would. Often it seemed that the whole world was against them and poor blacks in the struggle. This situation radicalized them. As most other civil rights groups left the state, the Delta Ministry had successfully moved into an expanded role in the movement.

Following the NCC's evaluation of the Delta Ministry, a goals committee of NCC officials including Paul Moore adjusted the previous objectives of the Delta Ministry. The committee called for the Ministry to "work with the dispossessed" through direct relief, economic development, public responsibility (such as voter registration and leadership training) and education. The committee also wanted the Delta Ministry to work towards reconciliation of all segments of the country.

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[106] Howell, "The Delta Ministry," 191.

"Although secondary to work with the dispossessed, Delta Ministry [has] a responsibility to the white and the middle-class Negro communities." Finally, Moore and others on the committee wanted the ministry to keep the Mount Beulah Center open for inter-racial conferences and other movement activities. In broad terms the committee endorsed the Delta Ministry's identification with poor blacks. Owen Brooks, who would soon become the acting director of the Delta Ministry, developed much more specific objectives for the organization. Building on previous projects, the Ministry staff would work aggressively to bring political and economic power to the black community.[107]

Art Thomas, who had worked in the state without interruption and without a vacation since 1963, was worn down. In the summer of 1966 Thomas and Moore, the chairperson of the Commission on the Delta Ministry, resigned. In early August, NCC officials asked Warren McKenna to leave.[108] With his resignation NCC officials saw an opportunity to redirect the course of the Delta Ministry through their leadership choice. They made a concerted effort to involve more blacks in the group. The two front runners for the top position in the Ministry, Owen Brooks and Thelma Barnes, were both black.[109]

Brooks had been involved with the Delta Ministry since 1965. Like most of the original staff he was a northerner. As the son of Jamaican-born parents, he grew up in Boston in the 1930s and 1940s. His first experience in the South came in the 1950s in the army. It opened his eyes

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[107] "The Goals of the Delta Ministry," Folder 10, Box 4, DM Papers.

[108] It is unclear why he was asked to leave, but it was probably related to his left-leaning political views.

[109] Findlay, *Church People*,147.

to racial injustice. After a few years as an electronics engineer he wanted to get involved in the movement. His former pastor, Warren McKenna, contacted the NCC's Robert Spike. After meeting with Spike, Brooks committed to the Delta Ministry. The outspoken and confident Brooks brought a dominant personality to Bolivar County.[110]

As the project director of Bolivar County, Brooks concentrated on political and economic activities. He organized voter registration which increased black registration in the county from five hundred to seven thousand. He also helped organize the Mississippi Freedom Labor Union which eventually led to the creation of Strike City. In an effort at community development, he tried to create "educational and economic institutions under the control of the black community and a unified political organization which [would] be responsive to the needs of the community."[111]

NCC officials also considered a local black woman, Thelma Barnes, for the leadership position. She grew up in the Delta but left to attend Alcorn College in Lorman, Mississippi, and then Henderson Business College in Memphis. Two years later, she returned to the Delta and became a secretary at the Greenville Air Force Base. In 1964 she became the black secretary for the Delta Ministry who sparked so much controversy for working in the front window, causing "all hell to break loose" in the white community.[112]

Thomas recognized leadership skills in Barnes and made her the

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[110] Interview with Owen Brooks, February 1, 1997.
[111] Noble, "Delta Ministry," 112-113, 122.
[112] Interview with Thelma Barnes, February 2, 1997.

Washington County Project Director in 1965. In 1966 she was placed in charge of the Freedom City project. One of Barnes's greatest assets was her diplomacy and tact when talking with white political leaders and black moderates.[113]

Brooks represented the economic, political, and educational empowerment of the black community. Barnes, a female, strongly supported Freedom City and would be a possible connection to the white and middle class black power structure. Also, Barnes, unlike Brooks, was a native Mississippian. In September 1966, NCC officials chose Brooks. It is impossible to know what factors most influenced the officials' decision for Brooks. They wanted to continue to build up the black community economically and politically. At least for the moment they wrote off working with the white community as futile. These officials may also have hesitated to put a woman in the highest position on the staff. Since NCC officials were turning to local blacks to control the organization, it is difficult to understand why Brooks was chosen over Barnes who also had more administrative experience. According to Barnes, the black males in the group thought they needed a black male in the top position.[114]

After the leadership change, other changes in the staff soon followed. The NCC cut the full time staff from twenty-two to nine. Most of the staff who left were white non-Mississippians and any additions were usually Mississippi blacks. In addition, the Delta Ministry disbanded the Freedom Corps.[115]

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113 Noble, "Delta Ministry," 22; interview with Thelma Barnes, February 2, 1997.
114 Interview with Thelma Barnes, February 2, 1997.
115 Ibid, 10-11.

Ministry and NCC officials did not come to Mississippi simply to relieve the suffering. In 1966 and 1967, they made a conscious effort to bring local blacks into the organization. They came to build a base in the black community that could continue the struggle once the Ministry left. Putting blacks in charge of the organization was the next logical step. In fact, Owen Brooks wanted the governing board of the Delta Ministry to know that local blacks dominated the group. In a report to the board, several times Brooks emphasized the local makeup of the group. These three statements appeared within a page of each other:

> The Delta Ministry is governed by a 30-member commission, the majority of which are *native Mississippians*. . . .
>
> More than half the 28-member Delta Ministry staff are Negroes--nearly all *native Mississippians*. . . .
>
> Mr. Clarence Hall, who is Freedom City farm director, like the majority of Delta Ministry staff members, a *native Mississippian*. . ."

From the beginning Ministry officials knew they would leave Mississippi someday--but they wanted to leave it in capable hands.[116]

The Delta Ministry's remarkably peaceful transition of power was aided by white leaders in the organization who understood the importance of putting blacks in charge of their own situation. Bob Beech, who left Mississippi in 1967, came to believe "that to be a white leader amongst black leaders was to be in the way."[117]

But the need to put control in black hands was not the only reason for the departures. One Ministry official explained to a concerned churchgoer in Indiana that the

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[116] "Report of the Delta Ministry," File 16, Box 13, DM Papers. Emphasis added.
[117] Interview with Robert Beech, October 29, 1996.

so-called dismissal of the Rev. Fred Lowry along with the Rev. Robert Beech is actually based on a change of priorities in which, at the same time, we added to our staff a Negro by the name of Mr. Dan Smith, who is from Indianola and who is a specialist in economic development, and the Rev. Ed King, who will specialize in the field of education. Mr. Lowry and Mr. Beech were a part of the original stage of the program which, of necessity, had to be quite general. They are aware, as we are aware, that we are in a stage where it will take personnel with specific skills to get at some of the long range problems of the Delta.

The Ministry staff had been in Mississippi long enough to realize that there were severe social problems that required specialists.[118]

By the end of 1967, with an emphasis on political and economic objectives, twenty-seven of thirty-two staff members were black and all but two were either native Mississippians or established residents. In 1968, Andrew Young, a top official of Southern Christian Leadership Conference, became the first black chair of the Commission on the Delta Ministry. Historian James Findlay asserts that Young almost personified the organization at the time: "African-American, ordained minister of a mainline Protestant denomination, former staff member of the National Council of Churches, and chairperson of the ministry's governing board."[119]

For the political aspirations of the black community, 1967 was a critical year. The first few years of the movement had brought positive political changes. For the first time in over seventy-five years, thousands of blacks were registering and voting. They had taken the first step. In 1967, the Delta Ministry and other civil rights organizations wanted to

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[118] Letter from Henry McCanna to Estel I. Odle, October 26, 1967, File 13, Box 19, DM Papers.

[119] Noble, "Delta Ministry," 65; Findlay, *Church People*, 160.

help blacks take the next step: getting black candidates elected to public office. For this reason, some considered it "perhaps the most important and potentially revolutionary period in darkest America since 1890 when Mississippi closed its doors." Even with qualifying adverbs like "perhaps" and "potentially" it was obvious that blacks had the chance to make real gains. The white power structure could no longer keep blacks from registering and voting.[120]

Other changes offered hope for the black community in the elections. In Sunflower County the Delta Ministry's Joe Harris, a local black, was selected as an election official. He could help voters who had questions or needed assistance. Ostensibly, this would seem to help black voters who had previously been intimidated at the polling station. However, only John S. Parker, the white election official, was permitted to assist black voters. His brother was a candidate for alderman. Thus, amid political and social change, those in power found new ways to hold on to their power. They also relied on old ways. Black candidates for office faced harassment and threats on their lives.[121]

For the elections in the fall of 1967, Delta Ministry officials adopted a three-pronged attack. First, they needed to register as many of the more than 150,000 black voters as possible. Second, they needed to educate these voters about how to vote. Third, they wanted to organize black voters into a voting bloc to get all of the black community behind particular candidates.

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[120] Victor Ullman, "In Darkest America," *The Nation*, 205, September 4, 1967, p. 177.

[121] Ibid, 177-180.

Getting blacks registered usually involved door-to-door efforts to encourage potential voters to register. This could be dangerous: staff members did not have to be reminded that Vernon Dahmer was murdered in 1965 for encouraging blacks to vote. Also blacks could still be threatened economically and physically for attempting to register. Beech expressed concern that of Mississippi's eighty-two counties more than one-fourth had been completely untouched by voter registration efforts. In particular Brooks concentrated most of the Delta Ministry assistance to registration on Bolivar, Issaquena, Tallahatchie, Sunflower, and Washington counties. He considered these counties with black majorities as keys to gaining black political power.[122]

Delta Ministry officials also knew from experience that simply getting blacks registered was not enough. In the past many black sharecroppers had voted but all of the voting choices were made by the plantation owners. Therefore, the Delta Ministry staff set up classes and workshops to educate black voters on "the structures of government and society" and "the processes of government," and also provided information about specific candidates. They often used comic books to explain the voting process to a group that included many illiterate blacks who had never voted. Ministry officials believed that without educating the voters, the black community "could become the unknowing pawns of whomever [sic] proves most effective in the use of propaganda." Simply

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122 "Report of the Delta Ministry," File 16, Box 13, DM Papers; "Memo," File 14, Box 21, ibid.

voting did not insure black political power.[123] The workshops also functioned as a means to train potential officeholders. The Ministry staff and others involved in the program trained blacks in "public affairs, legislative, and political processes and public problems." They wanted to help black candidates get elected but they also wanted them to be knowledgeable and effective leaders once they were elected.[124]

Considering past elections, Bowie and another Delta Ministry staff member tried to understand how blacks could constitute a majority of the population in certain areas and still lose the elections. One reason was that blacks did not always vote for the black candidate. Bowie found that in order for most blacks to vote for a black candidate, the candidate had to have a college degree. But the voters usually did not demand this of white candidates. A frustrated Bowie tried to explain it: "The people know what it is to be oppressed and unrepresented. Now that they have the power to turn the tables on whites, they refuse to do it." Another one of the factors was fewer eligible blacks of voting age. A higher proportion of the black population than the white population was under the voting age. From the study Ministry leaders concluded that they needed about 65 percent of the black vote to win an office.[125]

The Ministry staff also attempted to organize the black voters to vote as a bloc. Harry Bowie, a black minister from New Jersey, headed the

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[123] Interview with Rims Barber, January 30, 1997; interview with Harry Bowie, January 31, 1997; letter from Owen Brooks to Rev. S.E. Weissman, September 29, 1967, File 13, Box 19, DM Papers; "Memo," File 14, Box 21, ibid.

[124] "Report of the Delta Ministry," File 16, Box 13, DM Papers; interview with Harry Bowie, January 31, 1997.

[125] "New Community," File 4, Box 5, DM Papers; interview with Harry Bowie, January 31, 1997.

organization's voter education program. He understood that some black citizens were more electable than others. Therefore, Delta Ministry staff and others civil rights leaders often pushed particular local blacks to run for office. Then Bowie and others could work to unite the black voters behind that candidate. Bowie knew that only by voting together could blacks elect their candidates.[126]

It had also been difficult in the past to unite the moderate and radical wings of the movement behind the same candidates. In May 1967, during a conflict between demonstrators and local officials in Sunflower County, local police killed an innocent bystander, Ben Brown, a former Freedom Corps worker. Although the police claimed that Brown had been caught in the crossfire, this was a very doubtful explanation. To leaders of various civil rights groups it was obvious that he had become a murdered victim of white resistance to change. After this incident, leaders in these groups better understood that they could not afford to fight against each other. The MFDP and the Delta Ministry then announced that they would endorse every black candidate in the upcoming elections, including the NAACP candidates. Ministry leaders and NAACP leaders recognized that in order to meet their goal of empowering blacks politically, they would need to work together.[127]

One-hundred and ten blacks ran for office in 1967 in Mississippi. On Tuesday, November 7, Mississippi voters elected twenty-one blacks to state and local offices. Robert Clark was elected to the state legislature. Ministry officials had hoped for better results. The election demonstrated

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[126] Interview with Harry Bowie, January 31, 1997.

[127] Dittmer, *Local People*, 389, 413-415; and Noble, "The Delta Ministry," 96.

that progress could be excruciatingly slow and that it would take decades of successful elections to dethrone the powers of oppression.[128]

Even after the election of Clark, the white power structure did not give up. The only black legislator became the only legislator not to share a desk with another legislator on the floor of the House Chamber. He was also the only legislator who did not receive a secretary. So Clark brought his own secretary. It was Rims Barber of the Delta Ministry, who came to help however he could.[129]

The Delta Ministry staff also became involved in more economic measures. As more planters continued to mechanize cotton growing, more blacks lost jobs and, therefore, had no money for food. These blacks (and some whites) depended on the distribution of surplus government food. To make matters more difficult for starving blacks, in the mid-1960s many Mississippi counties changed from distributing food to distributing food stamps. Instead of just going to pick up food, recipients first had to *purchase* stamps. For example, a family of six with an income under thirty dollars would have to spend twelve dollars a month to get stamps. Families bringing in more than ninety-five dollars per month, regardless of the family size, were ineligible for stamps. Beginning in 1966, the Delta Ministry tried to get the purchase requirement eliminated.[130]

Over the next three years, the Delta Ministry and other groups involved did not get the purchase requirement eliminated but they did get the food stamp program improved. In 1967 the federal government

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128 Interview with Harry Bowie, January 31, 1997.

129 Interview with Rims Barber, January 30, 1997.

130 "Report of the Delta Ministry," File 16, Box 13, DM Papers.

lowered the purchase requirement. In 1969 it offered free food stamps to families with an income under $360, regardless of family size. A committee that included several members of the Delta Ministry and the NAACP sent a telegram to President Richard Nixon asking him to make food stamps available for free to anyone who needed them. But it would not be until 1978--with the Delta Ministry still fighting-- that the purchase requirement for food stamps was eliminated. The Ministry staff learned in this battle, like many others, that some things take a long time to change.[131]

At a meeting in February 1967 Brooks expressed a strong desire for economic development within the black community. In particular he hoped to attract industry to areas of high unemployment and to offer blacks a means to develop commercial ventures and small businesses. During the next several years the Delta Ministry continued to search for answers to economic problems.[132]

With cuts in federal poverty programs and fewer donations from NCC churches the golden days of the Delta Ministry's efforts at social change faded. The organization led by Owen Brooks has maintained an office in Greenville to the present and their efforts to help poor blacks continue on a smaller scale.

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131 "Memorandum," File 217, Box 6, Tougaloo College Archives, Tougaloo, Mississippi; "Report of the Delta Ministry," File 16, Box 13, DM Papers.

132 "Report of the Delta Ministry," File 16, Box 13, DM Papers.

You have to change that mind-set to get the mind of the oppressor our of the mind of the oppressed. . . . Maybe we were part of that starting point.-- Rims Barber[133]

Conclusion

The Legacy of the Delta Ministry

During the 1960s, the Delta Ministry and its staff fought many battles in Mississippi. They won some and they lost some. On the positive side, the Ministry helped poor blacks gain jobs through the Head Start program and the Mill strike. The staff also worked to get many public facilities desegregated. Furthermore, thousands of blacks registered to vote and learned how to vote through the efforts of the Ministry staff. A few blacks even won political office. The Head Start program had an incalculable effect on a generation of black children who received a solid educational jump start. Moreover, Thomas and Brooks and their staffs found various ways to funnel much federal money into Mississippi to aid the black community.

These tangible gains made a difference to blacks in their struggle for freedom. However, the most important function of the Delta Ministry was as a "hope-producing" organization. Rims Barber later discussed this vital role of the organization:

We have helped a lot of communities get some development, some hope. The biggest thing we did was gave people hope.

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[133] Interview with Rims Barber, January 30, 1997.

> That's the most important thing in helping people change their view of life from something that happens to them to something they can do themselves . . . and it took that outside impetus to help make that happen. Some feeling that [they] are not alone.[134]

By being with the people in need, Delta Ministry staffers such as Barber were bringing social change to an oppressed group. They were altering the thought processes in this group. Barber explained how this happened:

> Sitting down in community meetings and talking about how we would like the world to be or wishing it to be then acting it to be. You have to change that mind-set to get the mind of the oppressor out of the mind of the oppressed. . . . in order to get anything done. That's the starting point. Maybe we were part of that starting point. Of people getting hope, some ability to look at life a little differently and being free to act. If that's all I did in my life, that's enough.

The people that the Delta Ministry helped loved and respected the staff who knew how to relate to the local blacks as human beings. Raylawni Branch who benefited from the Ministry recalled the nature of the group's actions: "They didn't give fish, they taught us to fish." A SNCC volunteer understood that the Delta Ministry maintained excellent relations with black Mississippians because the staff first established trust with the black community. Because blacks trusted the staff, both groups could work side by side as equals toward a common goal. On a personal level, then, the Delta Ministry's story is one of success. They made a difference in the lives of many Mississippi blacks.[135]

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[134] Ibid.

[135] Interview with Rims Barber, January 30, 1997; interview with Raylawni Branch, January 29, 1997; interview with Ira Grupper, January 27, 1997.

On the larger level, however, the Delta Ministry never fulfilled its goals. Thomas and McKenna set out to reconcile the races but soon realized that true reconciliation would never come until blacks had real economic bargaining power. They therefore adjusted their goal determining to first empower the black community. They did bring some jobs, funding, and political gains to blacks. However, the Delta Ministry staff failed to create a substantial economic base in the black community. The Ministry staff made every effort to put economic power in the hands of blacks but the organization's enemies were too many and too powerful. At times this group of about a dozen and their volunteers had to fight the local planter class, local moderates, the state government, the federal government, and even the black middle class.

In many ways, the Delta Ministry is a microcosm of the Civil Rights movement. In the early stages of the movement blacks made political and social gains like those the Delta Ministry initiated. But as the movement's direction shifted toward economic ends, it fell apart. Economic gains for blacks threatened the white power structure. With no opposition from an apathetic middle class, the ruling class fought off economic changes for the oppressed.

The struggle of the Delta Ministry parallels the struggle for justice against oppression in late twentieth century America. The Ministry staff did all they could to uplift impoverished Americans but they were defeated by a powerful and entrenched ruling class.

Thirty years later much has changed to bring equality closer to all Americans but there is still no racial reconciliation. Fortunately, the work

of the Delta Ministry uncovered the path to reconciliation. The Delta Ministry's message of getting in the trenches with the people in need must be heard now in time when many Americans believe that the Civil Rights movement is over. But the revolution is unfinished. It is still a hard life wherever you go.

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