

FBI (1962) II Letter re Return
Ed King Methodist Church + Min. Conference

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Most Americans shifted their interest from Mississippi to Cuba and Russia in the fall of 1962. But Jeannette and I were just too emotionally exhausted from the Ole Miss crisis to become too concerned about whether the U.S. and the U.S.S.R. might blow up each other and every one else. I guess it was our parochial religious background that made us see other crises as less important. Through much helpful conversation with friends and church people, though, we were now more sure than ever of the rightness of our decision to return to Mississippi. Now we begin to realize that there might be ways to work in Mississippi outside the traditional white church community. This kind of thinking, even after our deep Movement involvement for several years, was very difficult for us to reach. On November 2 I wrote a letter to an old friend, a Methodist minister in the state. The ~~pp~~ portions about our personal decision and understanding of the racial situation in the state ~~re~~ reveal a great deal about my thinking--as a white Mississippian in the days after Ole Miss, ~~and~~ as a Christian minister, and as an American ~~white~~ white man who had been ~~part~~ a part of the Civil Rights Movement for several tumultuous years.

"I'm writing you for some advice--or perhaps just some personal reaction. I'd like to be able to see you and have a long conversation but that does not seem possible right now.

"Jeannette and I are trying to decide what kind of church work we shall begin next June. We want to return to Mississippi--but we are not sure that is possible. The thing we have always wanted to do was to come back to the Miss. Conference and be a parish minister. But that may not be possible and that may not necessarily be the best thing to do at the present time.

"When we are realistic we have to admit that the chances of being given a church are not good. In fact we were advised by one conference minister last year that the conference would

never even accept me as a minister or into full conference membership. Several well-meaning friends have advised us to just give up any idea of ever having a church in Miss. and move to some other part of the country. What we have been counting on was that if we stayed in school a few extra years the hard feelings about my being in prison in Alabama might die down. In fact one minister advised ~~////~~ to do just what we have done. I've stayed on in seminary for two years since I got my SIB working on an STM degree that I never particularly wanted. But that program will be completed this year and we will be seeking a church in June.

"You may not know the conference well enough to really say but do you think I have a chance of being admitted into the conference this June and of being given a parish?"

"The minister who suggested that I stay in school a few extra years then come back to the conference said in 1960 to me, 'Just stay away a year or so. So much hell is going to happen in Mississippi in the next few years that most of the leading ministers will have to publicly support integration. Once we have had a major crisis and so many ministers become known as pro integration, then what you've done in Alabama won't seem so shocking--at least it will be past history.'

"Well, that was the advice--and probably was pretty good advice, but I'm not so sure I'm exactly welcome yet. Besides I didn't get the impression that too many prominent ^{or} ministers and church officials really did much about Ole Miss. But Boston is so far away (in every possible kind of way) that

it is hard to know what really goes on at home. I have had letters from ministerial friends and relatives about reaction to the Miss--and have seen the Clarion-Ledger fairly regularly--and the Advocate. Perhaps a real climate is developing in the state so that I might actually be allowed to enter the conference and serve a church. But I doubt it.

And now I am not sure that the parish ministry in our conference is the only or even the best place to serve. Jeannette and I have given serious consideration to all kinds of ~~alternatives~~ alternatives. We might be able to join the North Mississippi Conference (I plan to visit a ~~DS~~ DS* there next week). Or we might join another church or denomination, such as the Episcopal Church--but I don't really want to do that although I think I could feel "at home" there, telling myself that the Meth. and Epis. will merge in another dozen years or so anyway. I might try some kind of board job or teaching full time. But I want to be related to a local church as minister if possible.

There is still one other possibility. If I want to be minister of a Christian church and if I really believe the Christian Church offers the only possibilities of any real solutions to any problems, then I must broaden my conception of the Christian Church--and even of the Methodist church. It's hard to think that there are four Methodist conferences in our state--if we count the Central Jurisdiction conferences. Perhaps Jeannette and I should serve a Negro church.

*-DS - Methodist ^{church} ~~off~~ official, "District Superintendent"

"This should not be considered as just some sort of last chance to stay in Miss. if my own conference will not have me. There may be real values in such a move and perhaps it is something I should have been considering for several years."

"Jeannette and I began really seriously considering this the week before everything blew up at Oxford--although we had really been thinking of it since end of summer. On that Sunday afternoon we were talking about what the state most needed. We knew that riots, death, and army troops were a certainty. We had always hoped to be serving a church when this kind of a crisis came to the people of Miss., but it came sooner than we anticipated. So we asked ourselves what the state would need in the years to come after the troops had enforced integration. We could sum up our ideas only in the vague yet powerful idea of Christian love. This can only be brought into a situation by the Christian church and by individual Christians. The white Christians of Mississippi, lay and ministerial, ~~we~~ have almost totally failed to be the Christian church. And guilt and confusion over past failures will probably render the white churches rather impotent to present any kind of gospel to the people of the state--to all the people. We can't have any kind of gospel that is for white or for black. We asked ourselves that afternoon, 'What do the people really need?' We decided that before one talks of love itself we must admit that neither Negro nor white are quite ready to love each other. That the white person most needs is to be forgiven, even if we are not

ready to ask it or confess our sins. And if the Negro Christian cannot do this, for fear, hatred, or whatever reason--then he is just as far separated from God as we are. Trying to look ahead a few years I can see desegregation accomplished by force (and "enlightened" reason such as business men who fear violence); then may come a time when we say that it was legally right; a few years later we may even agree that the Negro has certain rights as a US citizen; finally the church will come around and begin to say that the Negro was entitled to all he has been given, that it was right for Negroes to come to our schools, our restaurants, our theatres, etc. I am afraid we will see the "rightness" of all this only after it is something of an accomplished fact. But we will still have more to do. We may reach the stage where we say that we should bring the Negro into OUR church and into our society. When we reach this stage (who can predict time or years for Mississippi) I fear we will still have a kind of benevolent paternalism. We will speak from pride with the attitude that it is we, the whites, who have everything to give and share, and that we need nothing from the Negro. We will still be failing to accept him as a full person--much less as a fellow Christian. And yet the Negro alone can bring the real healing into the situation. To pretend that we can make any progress in Miss. without facing up to our past history, 1962 and 1862 and on back, does not make sense--from a psychological, sociological, or religious perspective. To have a really integrated

society, a truly Christian church, we whites have to ask the forgiveness that we do not really deserve. From the viewpoint of the world, there is no reason the Negro should ever forgive us."

The minister ~~///~~ to whom I had ~~///~~ written this letter encouraged ~~///~~ me to come back to the state. Because of his involvement in the integration issue he was forced to leave the state ~~///~~ before the next summer ever arrived.