

Summary, 63

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Winter/Spring, 1963. "Goals: Confrontation Strategies."

Our return to Mississippi was not just a matter of salving our consciences or of wanting to be where the action was. Before we could really decide that we should return, especially to take a job at a place like Tougaloo College, we had to be sure that we really had something to contribute to the Movement, other than just our good will. We saw the obvious role of attempting to be the reconciling minister, trying to establish some contacts between Negroes and whites (especially ministers), and interpreting some Negro demands in a crisis to men like Dr. Selah or other influential ministers if it was impossible to set up any direct interracial communication. We knew that we would eventually have to become involved in some more direct way if I was honestly to be the chaplain of the college. We would face that when the time came.

We also told ourselves that we would not be in Mississippi very long, perhaps a few months or a few years. The length of time did not matter. I had seen enough of the problems of the Civil Rights Movement and the divisions of the Negro community in Montgomery to know that even at a college like Tougaloo there must be many middle class Negroes on the faculty who did not understand the Movement and resented it. Jeannette and I thought that after a few years we would have done so many things, (some right, some mistakes,) that we would have both earned many enemies, of all sorts, and would have totally exhausted ourselves. The Movement used up people very rapidly. Whatever inner resources as well as physical endurance we had would not

last forever, especially in Mississippi. So we left Boston, but not really to go "home" to Mississippi. That was no longer possible. Eventually we would have to leave Mississippi, perhaps for Montana, perhaps for something totally new. We had now joined the family of man who had no place.

We had more plans than just general good will and a typical minister's job. As we made our journey south Jeannette and I discussed these goals. Despite the desegregation of the university there was no lessening of white resistance in the state. At some future point, certainly within a few years, there would be the matter of public school integration. This would be the real battle. Meredith was resisted because he was a symbol of breaking the "never" line. But Meredith was just one man, and married at that. He was hardly seen as a typical Ole Miss student. He was no threat to the social life at the school. No one fought his entrance because they saw him as a specific threat to their daughters. Yet it took over 25,000 U.S. soldiers to keep him at the University.

The first handful of Negro students to enter the white public schools, be it first grade or highschool, would bring to the white mind every fear, every fantasy, that had ever existed. Probably Mississippi would choose to abandon public education, to close all the public schools and set up some private school scheme that would give whites a bad education and give Negroes no education at all. If the public schools were not closed, if the schools were actually integrated, then the white resistance would far exceed anything done at Ole Miss. Whites might very well

know they would eventually be defeated, but they would consider any school integration as an equivalent defeat for everything they held of value in life and for everything they feared. The response to public school integration was likely to be incredible violence towards the invading armies of the United States and even greater violence towards the Negro population. Before the Federal troops could restor order there would be massacre. Negroes would certainly not allow this to happen by offering some non-violent, loving response. They would defend themselves; they would fight back. Such a terror could hardly stay confined to Mississippi and would rapidly spread to blacks and whites in other parts of America. This was our nightmare.

The only hope we had that this nightmare might not happen was that something, anything, would happen that would keep the integration of the public schools from being an even greater shock to white Mississippi than the Ole Miss crisis. The most logical answer would be rapid desegregation of the other colleges in the state. But the leadership of Mississippi was not intelligent enough to let that happen; probably it would take more court orders for each single Negro student to enter Ole Miss. Any student who applied to some other state college might discover that Mississippi would claim that court orders about Ole Miss did not apply anywhere else. And it was not likely that many other Negroes had the determination and courage of James Meredith. After all, the Ole Miss students were the "best" in Mississippi. They came from the "best families" and the other colleges had a far higher proportion of Middle class and even

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poor white students. Already students at these colleges were deriding the Ole Miss students, boasting that if Meredith had come to their college they would have kept him out, they would have beaten the U. S. Troops. (When Ole miss faced Mississippi State in the traditional end of season football match, the State students rang their cow-bells and shouted to their heroes, "Go White Team, Go!" What Negro student was willing to apply to such a place?) It was obvious that any increase in college level desegregation could not happen rapidly enough to help the problem of public school desegregation.

Gradualism was a good answer. But now it was too late for that with the public schools. Probably school integration would be on some long, drawn-out time table. That was not the problem, but the crisis of the first day, no matter what the desegregation schedule. Gradualism could have worked, even in Mississippi, but only if it had been started no later than the September school term of 1955. If the Supreme Court and the Eisenhower administration and the Democratic Congress had demanded some action, even a grade a year deadline, then the Mississippi Citizens Councils would never have been able to build their strength and take over the state. Had the Kennedy administration pressed other forms of desegregation in the last few years, there might have been some other forms of gradualism outside the school system. If there had been gradual desegregation of al public accommodations, from buses to lunch counters to movies, and some progress in jobs and voting, then the public schools would not loom as such a crisis point.

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Jeannette and I talked about all of this. What we wanted to see happen now in Mississippi was so much turmoil that Negroes would attack and breach every segregation barrier in the state, if only in a token, symbolic fashion. Next to education the major point of white resistance would be the vote for Blacks. There should even be some major victory by Blacks in this field before the final battle of the schools was faced. If there could be such an intensive period of conflict in other areas, if the Black community could mount it and survive, then the white community might have had to accept many psychological defeats more powerful than the actual defeats of opening a lunch counter, or seeing a Negro in a movie theater. Every such move would be strongly resisted. There would be violence. The federal government would give little help and that little probably too late in many cases. But each new victory would not only strengthen the determination of the Black community but would also weaken the white resistance.

Hopefully the white community would become exhausted, in every possible way, from the tension, the turmoil, and the terrible fact of Black progress. Perhaps even the white community could be divided before the final school crisis. Perhaps the moderates, the good people, the church people, might have to take a stand against the Citizens Councils and others who would be more violent than the Councils. Perhaps the price of continued defiance would be seen as so great that some decent people would reject it. But we remembered Borinski's analysis of the "demoralization" of the white community and realized that it

was not likely that many of the "good" people would be able to do anything.

There was still the possibility of dividing the white resistance on more practical grounds. Some businessmen and political leaders just might be enough in tune with the rest of America that they would move to support token desegregation of some public accommodations as the necessary price for community stability--and good business. Motives hardly mattered if such a response were to divide the white resistance.

Jeannette and I knew that one of our special abilities, our special tasks, should be to find the weak spots in the white resistance. That could be defined as seeking out the good Christian moderates and/or as promoting crises that might cause people to change out of their own self-interest. In an ideal situation it should be a combination of both. Our conversations and thoughts made us sound like the dirtiest kind of traitor. But we still loved something about Mississippi (but could not define such thoughts) although we certainly hated everything that Mississippi generally meant. We sort of hoped that some day some one might realize that the Southerners who joined the Civil Rights Movement were not monsters.

We had some rather specific targets to bring about some of this turmoil and some positive change. We wanted to see some token desegregation in the state that was done "voluntarily" by the white community. By "voluntarily" we meant something produced by the right combination of white moderate good will, common sense, self-interest, division, pressure, and exhaustion.

The Black students and SNCC workers were certain to press on some fronts that would produce federal court action (which always meant the ultimate pressure of the possible use of troops to back up the court order as at Ole Miss.) After each victory, no matter what the target, the whites would resent the Blacks even more, and the Blacks would despise the whites. If whites could only give in, give up something "voluntarily," some whites might feel a little more self respect and some Blacks might, in the future, remember the unexpected decency; the distant reconciliation might be a little more of a possibility.

Another point that needed to be demonstrated to both whites and Blacks in Mississippi was that some change, no matter how small, was possible without massive white violence. Especially after Ole Miss both sides assumed that white violence was the price of any change. Moderate whites thought that any change automatically meant violence. Thus they were immobilized and not even able to function as moderates. If any white institution, such as the segregated churches, could "voluntarily" open the doors to Negroes, most people could imagine only two results, violence and/or withdrawal.

The first and most likely response was white violence. (In Mississippi the white moderate was quite capable of both affirming and denying the existence of the violence. When told of police brutality or some other form of white violence towards Blacks and civil rights workers, the moderate would say that the alleged incident was an exaggeration; thus they did not have any responsibility in the matter. On the other hand, when the

moderate wanted a rationale for not acting, they would say that even the smallest change would provoke a violent response from the lower class white element. In either case the correct moderate response was to say and do nothing.)

The second response expected was that of white withdrawal. Any desegregation would not be tolerated by whites. If violence did not stop the desegregation then whites would always withdraw rather than stay in an integrated situation (white kitchens and Black cooks excepted). Thus school desegregation meant private white schools; desegregation of movie theaters would only mean the theaters would closed and reopened as private white clubs. The moderates were convinced that moderate change was impossible. But they still wanted the Civil Rights Movement and the nation to leave Mississippi alone while the moderates of both races worked things out.

It was these moderates that Jeannette and I wanted to reach, to afflict, as it were. We saw several places where this might be possible. The first was the white church. If the white church could begin to open its worship services to Black Christians, this would be a beautiful beginning of change and offer the grounds for hope in the future. If white churches were faced with Blacks knocking on their doors, whatever the response of the church, it would mean that the church people, the moderates, would have to examine their racism at the point where it was weakest, where there existed the greatest potential conflict with their ideal image of themselves as the People of God.



Church segregation would be the hardest form to defend. Of course some moderates might say that the churches ought to be integrated but that if the doors were opened and any Blacks came inside the sanctuary on Sunday morning, then some of those "other whites," some emotional whites, would throw hymnals at the Blacks and some extremist white would pick up the heavy pulpit Bible and bash in a Black head, not to mention the candle sticks and cross on the altar, which could be lethal weapons. No, better to do nothing, and continue to criticize those who stir up trouble. Of all institutions in the state the white church should have been the first to desegregate because to do so was right. But, for whatever reasons, for us the white only churches were an appropriate opportunity and/or target.

Some Roman Catholic and Episcopalian churches in the state would admit Blacks. But the major churches of Mississippi, the Methodist and the Southern Baptist, were segregated. The Baptists were more numerous and more conservative than the Methodist; but the Methodists were usually a little better educated, with a little more wealth and influence. If either of these two religious groups made a change in their segregation policies it would have immense impact on white Mississippi. The Baptists were certainly not going to move before the Methodists; therefore pressure should first come to the Methodist Church. The Methodists of Mississippi had their own liberal arts school in Jackson, Millsaps College. The Baptists and Presbyterians also their own schools in the vicinity. Before anything could happen tin the local churches of any of these denominations,

there should first be some movement towards desegregation at the colleges, where the most liberal leadership of the churches was concentrated. In this perspective the Methodist school, Millsaps, was the foremost target.

As well as being the subject of our political analysis Millsaps College happened to be our "alma mater." We knew most of the faculty and administration. There were some very conservative people there, but most of the people, including the students, were moderates. Some were even liberals. Many teachers and some administrators had supported integration for years, and had been waiting for the "ideal time" to integrate the student body. That ideal time had been postponed now for over ten years. Perhaps Millsaps needed some friendly persuasion and pressure.

If Millsaps College did make any moves it would be easier later to get movements towards change started in the Mississippi Methodists Church. In the state the school had an importance even beyond its relationships to the church. If Millsaps College could just begin desegregation at some point prior to the public school desegregation crisis, the college could set an example of something else that was "impossible" in "never-never land." Jeannette and I were convinced that desegregation could be accomplished at this particular school in the near future without either of those two great fears of the moderates being realized. There would not be massive white violence at Millsaps College nor would there be massive withdrawal. This applied to the Millsaps faculty and students; they would not stage a riot to keep out the

first Black student and they would not all go rushing to transfer to some all-white school. Of course, some would want to do both, but not the mass of people at Millsaps. And these people were almost all native Mississippians.

A separate problem that worried the moderate administration of Millsaps College was the possibility of violence being brought to the campus by the rest of white Mississippi, such violence directed not just against a Black student, but against everyone at the college. There was also the matter of white withdrawal of funds and donations to support the college. Jeannette and I knew these fears were quite legitimate, but we were sure money would come to Millsaps from other parts of America and from the national Methodist Church. Any violence the college faced from white Mississippi was a risk that this Christian institution would have to accept or deny its own teachings and principles.

Jeannette and I knew that we should try to start some kind of moves against (or in support of, according to interpretation) Millsaps College soon after we reached Jackson. We did not reject this, although we knew that many people would not understand us. We had enjoyed our years at Millsaps; the college was very responsible for taking us down the road that had inevitably brought us to our present position. We appreciated the education given us; we loved the school. We were proud of the liberal traditions of Millsaps College and ashamed of its present frozen status. But we had great respect in the leaders of the school and were sure that the school could make a positive response. We were glad to be in a position to help Millsaps

College help the Methodist Church and to help Mississippi.

Jeannette and I were not quite sure what tactical approach should be made with Millsaps College. We thought about logical, gradual steps for the campus such as resuming interracial meetings, something that had been possible for many years but was canceled during our senior year in 1958. After this the school might experiment with allowing Black students to attend concerts, lectures, or plays. If such events went fairly smoothly then conversation could be about eventual desegregation of the student body. Any point of possible change at the present was a proper starting point. In a way this struggle against, with, for Millsaps would be an honor, a kind of act of appreciation and loyalty to our old school, to help Millsaps be a light of learning, faithfulness, and good religion in the confusion of Mississippi.

There was one other point of pressure against the immobile white moderates that Jeannette and I discussed. We thought there would be some value if some of the pleasure and normality might be taken away from white Mississippi life for some people. We thought that the Civil Rights Movement had now become such a recognized feature of American life that it might be possible to get some northern based musicians and entertainers to refuse to play before white-only audiences in Mississippi. Especially after all the publicity directed at Mississippi during the Battle of Ole Miss, this was worth attempting. Until places like Millsaps College and the white churches made a beginning there was little likelihood that desegregation would happen. But if

the white moderates who attended concerts in Jackson had some of the nice think of their life taken away, they would be forced to constantly think about the race problem. Some might even begin to change their thinking. In any case, the tension would be helpful.

These kind of things were hardly very significant in the face of all the problems of Mississippi in the winter of 1963. But Jeannette and I knew that the Black leaders of the local civil right Movement would initiate and direct the major campaigns against the racism of Mississippi. They would choose the major battlefields and our role at Tougaloo would be to respond and to support those struggles, especially the ones the students joined. If we were able to do any of the things we thought of with the white moderates it might be helpful. But, whatever happened on this score, the SNCC workers and other Negro leaders like Medgar Evers would guarantee long years of struggle for everyone in Mississippi.

