

COFO

Mississippi Summer Program

About five months ago, the Council of Federated Organizations (COFO) in Mississippi, which coordinates the work of the leading civil rights groups in that state, announced plans to recruit over 1,000 volunteers from all over the country to spend the summer working in Mississippi. At the time many observers of the civil rights movement did not take COFO too seriously. Some acknowledged that COFO was intent on carrying forward its recruitment drive, but expressed grave doubts about the ability of the young and rather inexperienced civil rights organization to attract large numbers of people. Others, while recognizing that an appeal for summer workers might be successful, questioned the competence of the group to develop a program which could effectively use the volunteers.

Now, five months later, as June ushers in a second "long, hot summer" for the nation, there remain those observers of the civil rights movement who still do not take COFO too seriously, who question its capacity to organize and carry out programs in what is generally regarded as the most recalcitrant state in the nation on the issue of civil rights for all citizens.

But now, in early June, one fact is clear which for us, as churchmen, outweighs all considerations about the strength and operating effectiveness of COFO; namely, COFO has recruited 1,000 students and teachers to work in Mississippi this summer and, furthermore, they have developed some programs which expect to use the volunteers, mainly in voter registration, summer school, and community center work.

This background note on COFO becomes important as we now see that the Commission's expanding work in relation to Mississippi started from the demonstrable fact that an undetermined number of students were going to work in that state, and the implications of that fact.

What, precisely, are the ways in which we are related to COFO's summer program plans?

First, in the case of the summer schools, or "freedom schools," we sponsored a meeting in New York of educators, Southern and Northern, white and Negro, whom COFO brought together to help develop a curriculum for such schools. Among those present were historians, sociologists, psychologists, educational consultants, and professional people experimenting with literacy training programs. Some of the curriculum is still in the process of development. Obviously, we are not in a position to dictate the curriculum, or even to shape the philosophy on which the curriculum and schools are based. And while we realize that the press of events leading up to and during the summer may considerably alter the conception of the schools, we will continue to do what little we can to see that expert and responsible parties are involved in curricular matters. We do so in the belief that the more developed the curriculum, the better the volunteer teachers can prepare for their jobs, the better the possibility for children and youth to learn about themselves and the world, and the better the chance the schools will hold together through the summer. We earnestly hope that this kind of summer school educational experiment might benefit both Mississippi's young people and the state.



The second way we are related to plans for the summer is at the point of providing orientation and training for summer volunteers. The site will be Western College for Women, Oxford, Ohio, the last two weeks in June, and a secondary site in the state itself. The Commission took a daring step in agreeing to undertake such a program. The problems inherent in channelling volunteers through an orientation program are immense. We do not know how many students and teachers it will be possible to train, but we are increasingly convinced that to turn our backs on such a glaring need would be indefensible and utterly irresponsible. Orientation will include specific training in the task the individual has been recruited to do, voter education-registration work, teaching, running recreational-crafts programs in community centers, etc. All people will have sessions dealing with the history of the South, demographic considerations, interpersonal relations, personal discipline, and legal procedures. In addition, everyone will discuss thoroughly the non-violent disciplines.

Thirdly, we are securing the services of men and women to give of their vacations to be on hand as counselling, mediating, and reconciling agents during the summer.

Fourthly, we have arranged through the Lawyer's Committee on Civil Rights under the Law and the NAACP Legal Defense Fund, for 60-80 lawyers with experience as assistant prosecutors, assistant attorneys general, etc., to be in the state.

Lastly, we will continue the work of the past months, as in Hattiesburg, and Canton to assist in voter education-registration drives.

The implications of this involvement must be clearly understood. We are called "sponsors" of the COFO program, which is not true. We are cast in the role of recruiting students, which is not true. We are villified in the public press in Mississippi. In some sections of the state we are hated. When, in Canton, Mississippi, on Friday, May 29, one of the men who paid his own way to serve under Commission direction as a "moral presence" at a voter registration drive was asked to identify himself, he said, "I'm here with the National Council of Churches." The police officer replied, with an obscenity, and roughed up the minister with a rifle butt. And it might well get worse.

Yet, we feel strongly that we must proceed with our involvement through the summer. There are human lives at stake, there is the urgent question of equal justice for all, and finally, for all citizens in Mississippi, as elsewhere, there is the ultimate question of our accountability before the Lord of creation for the ways in which we seek "to make human life more human."

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