

ACTIVISTS WHO JOINED MISSISSIPPI SUMMER
15 YEARS LATER CALL IT A 'TURNING POINT'

By Jerry Demuth
Religious News Service Correspondent (11-5-79)

JACKSON, Miss. (RNS) -- The Mississippi freedom summer of 1964 was "a turning point in this country and in the lives of everyone who participated," Allard Lowenstein, a former special ambassador to the United Nations, and one of the planners of that project, told a four-day symposium at Tougaloo and Millsaps Colleges here.

What was done to achieve that turning point, and how far Mississippi has traveled since reaching it, were questions that received frequently conflicting answers from the more than 75 students, students, educators, government officials and office holders and ex-civil rights workers who served as panelists. Former SNCC activist and ex-Mississippian Joyce Ladner called the event a "homecoming" for those who had participated in 1964's "major assault on bigotry."

Among her fellow panelists was the Rev. Clay F. Lee, a United Methodist minister whose past churches include one in Jackson at which Ms. Ladner was arrested and one in Philadelphia where, on a Sunday afternoon, three civil rights workers were arrested by police who participated in their murder later that day.

"Many wanted to do right," Mr. Lee said, "but they didn't know what was right."

"We still," he declared, "have to come to the ultimate point, which is something more than co-existence. It is reconciliation as defined in the Bible."

But some, such as Ms. Ladner, a Hunter College sociology professor, saw the "ultimate point" as more than reconciliation. "Northern leaders say, 'I marched with Dr. King,'" she said. "But in the towns they marched through, blacks are still as poor today as they were then. People at the bottom then are still at the bottom today. But they may be less hopeful today."

Such disillusionment marked many of the comments, but it was a disillusionment that grew out of the strong hope-filled religious feelings of many of the black Mississippians, young and old, who were engaged in the struggle.

"We felt that a strong moral force prevailed in the world and that it would eventually cause us to win," Ms. Ladner declared in her presentation which opened the symposium. "We had, after all, grown up in deeply religious homes where we were taught that segregation and discrimination were morally wrong."

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But people, she noted, were far more hostile and intractable than the civil rights activists had imagined.

And when change did come about "it didn't come about because of any prior commitment to Christianity but because of outside pressures and economic losses," said John R. Salter, Jr., who was a sociology instructor at black Tougaloo College from 1961 to 1963 and a leader in the fight to integrate lunch counters then.

What happened to many, said white southerner Sue Thrasher who joined blacks in the struggle in the '60s, was "the end of our belief in the institutional church. We came," she stressed, "smack up against what the church meant."

It was hundreds of white northerners who came down to work door-to-door on voter registration, to teach in freedom schools and to challenge the legitimacy of the all-white state Democratic Party, and not the struggling black Mississippians, who attracted attention that summer 15 years ago. Today, only a faint picture of that summer, if any at all, is held by many, especially the young. The symposium was an attempt to make young blacks and whites aware of what had been attempted and achieved then and since as well as provide a historical record of those times.

"We want to acquaint students with what occurred during the struggle as well as remind all of us of the progress that did and did not occur," explained Leslie McLenore, chairman of the department of political science at predominantly black Jackson State University.

Most of the more than 200 white and black students from Tougaloo and Millsaps who attended the symposium knew little of those days of civil rights struggles -- a subject ignored by public school textbooks and often avoided by parents. "I hadn't realized all the animosity that had existed," commented one white student, "but they were all striving for the same goals."

The different ways of organizing a community, of ending discrimination, of involving northern white youths were again discussed. So were Justice Department policies that left voter registration workers unprotected and Democratic Party decisions that restricted grass roots participation.

Whatever the differences, it was clear that those were exciting times marked by deep camaraderie that still, in many instances, continues. It also was clear that although concerns for economic and political justice remain, programs and activities have fizzled.

"We no longer have support in the courts to break new ground," stated Greenville, Miss., Youth Court Judge Joseph Wroten.

Still, others pointed out how activities in Mississippi had led to benefits elsewhere -- United Farm Workers' organizers were rooted in the idea of Mississippi volunteers, the concept of free legal aid for the poor had been expanded, Head Start benefited whites as well as blacks as did special job training programs.

There were occasional traces of bitterness among '60s civil rights workers, but it was never all-consuming or self-destructive.

Even a sometimes slightly bitter William Strickland, a one-time SNCC worker who now is a professor of history at the University of Massachusetts, expressed hope when he concluded: "The significance of Mississippi for the world is that people here did what was said to be the impossible. People can do almost anything if they believe."