

Healing in the Delta

Racist attitudes have gripped Mississippi for decades. But Dolphus WEaery is changing hearts in the state's churches.

For many people, Mississippi is synonymous with racism. But the image is changing—thanks in part to an organization known as Mission Mississippi.

“We’re not talking about fly-by-night racial reconciliation. We’re talking about an intentional racial reconciliation in your community,” says Executive Director Dolphus Weary of Jackson, Mississippi. “In the body of Jesus Christ we are one, and if we are one ... we need to change.”

The organization—which has eight chapters, five affiliates and 75 support churches of various denominations—is dedicated to overcoming racial and denominational barriers.

Mission Mississippi was organized formally in 1993 after plans for a citywide crusade in Jackson evolved into a racial-reconciliation rally. Crusade organizer Pat Morley of Florida, who is white, and his evangelist friend Tom Skinner (since deceased), who was African-American, had discussed the proposed event at a gathering of businessmen and pastors. Weary says that as they explained their own friendship to the group “a black pastor raised his hand and said, ‘We don’t need a crusade; we need to learn how to love each other like you do.’”

Instead of a crusade, the group held the rally, which drew 25,000 people and led to an ongoing movement to improve race relations across the state. This is achieved through Thursday morning prayer meetings held alternately at black and white

churches; monthly pastors gatherings; and annual rallies, governor's luncheons and picnics, among other events. The idea is simply for blacks and whites to make friends with each other.

"Everything we did was an opportunity to bring blacks and whites together in relationship," says Weary, 58, who has a doctor of ministry degree from Reformed Theological Seminary in Jackson. He came on board as executive director in 1998 after many years at the helm of Mendenhall Ministries in Mendenhall, Mississippi. His mission has been to make Mission Mississippi statewide.

"I go in and out of all the churches and denominations," Weary says. "Always I have to prepare myself to work between the 'frozen chosen,' who will not move, and charismatics, who are free and move all over the place.

"Mission Mississippi has to walk that wonderful line in knowing that the body of Christ is made up of those who are charismatic and those who are non-charismatic. The charismatic is one of the most open churches for race relations that I have discovered."

Taking It to the People

One of the main ways Weary gets the message out is by speaking—everywhere and often. In January, for example, he was the featured speaker at a Martin Luther King Jr. Day prayer breakfast in McComb sponsored by the local branch of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), Mission Pike County (the local chapter of Mission Mississippi) and the City of McComb.

A record crowd of some 250 people attended the event—due to the joint sponsorship, an intense publicity campaign and Weary's presence. "This is the prettiest bouquet that I have been a part of since I've been in the NAACP," said NAACP Membership Chairman Vernell Simmons when he looked out at the mixed-race audience.

Weary stressed his usual themes of racial and denominational reconciliation. "One of the dangers of today is, we can focus too much on the past and not look too much on the new and the future," he said.

He recalled weeping when his daughter got a medical degree from the University of Tennessee, saying: "When I grew up I could not even think about being a doctor, a lawyer, an engineer or a businessman." Weary grew up in the rural community of D'Lo, Mississippi. "The good news today is that [African-Americans] can dream. ... Not only dream but chase our dreams."

He quoted Philippians 3:13: "Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead" (NIV).

"We cannot keep pointing the finger that it's somebody else's fault," he said of social and racial problems. "We need to take responsibility.

"We can put our energy into bitterness, anger, hurt and retaliation, or else we can put our energy into positive things that will make a difference," he concluded, after which he received a standing ovation.

African-American audience member Celess McEwen, 77, recalled

Weary's efforts at Mendenhall Ministries. "It really developed a better relationship between the races," she said. "They met together, and they began to meet and understand each other."

U.S. District Judge Keith Starrett, who is white, has known Weary for years through their joint participation in Mission Pike County. "It's made us aware that it's going to take people being proactive to bring about racial reconciliation," Starrett said.

"We can't just believe it and want it to happen. It's all about getting to know people," he added. "I don't believe there's near the hate there was years ago. In Mississippi, blacks and whites have generally good relations."

Lee Clark, an African-American woman who moved to McComb from Sacramento, California, with her husband, John, a few years ago, was frightened at first by what she knew about the state's reputation on race. Then she read Weary's 1990 autobiography, *I Ain't Coming Back* (Tyndale).

"I just read his book and my whole concept changed," she said. "The people are so friendly here. Both the blacks and the whites are very nice people here."

A Rough Upbringing

Weary wasn't always so inspiring. There was a time when he hated Mississippi so much he vowed he would never return, as the title of his autobiography indicates.

Weary grew up poor in Mendenhall and learned firsthand about

racism. A college basketball scholarship and a spot on an evangelistic basketball team enabled him to achieve his ambition of leaving the state.

He lived in California and traveled in the Orient, playing basketball and sharing his Christian faith. The Asians took to him so much he considered becoming a missionary in the Far East. But he says he felt God leading him back to the South.

"I realized that no matter how far I ran, whether to California or even to Taiwan, I could never run away from the Mendenhall inside of me, the one in my head and in my heart," he wrote in the book co-authored by William Hendricks. Weary returned in 1971 and went to work for Mendenhall Ministries, a religious group dedicated to improving the lot of the area's poor blacks.

The task was daunting. Another black community leader, John Perkins, had been beaten by lawmen because of his efforts and had moved to Jackson, his health broken. Weary got to work, with a thrift store, clinic, legal services and preschool classes among his projects, but he avoided one of his central issues—race.

"I was excited to see oppressed people bloom as a result of our work. But I saw little reconciliation with our white neighbors, and that bothered me a lot. I realized that I myself had not dealt with the pain I'd grown up with in a segregated society," he explains. "There was still some bitterness alive, deep down inside me. God was telling me to deal with it. He wanted me to seek reconciliation with the one type of person I most detested—the Southern white."

Weary soon after met a pastor during a speaking trip to the University of Illinois. "He was white," Weary wrote. "He had a noticeable Southern drawl. He was a Southern Baptist preacher. I stereotyped him immediately: Racist!"

But in talking with the man Weary discovered he wasn't racist at all. Rather, he was a concerned Christian who wanted to help his fellow humans. Weary noted: "That incident, more than any other, showed me that I needed to be quiet and listen and not be so quick to stereotype. Yes, racism was deeply rooted and widespread in the South. But the place to start stamping it out was in me."

With that new attitude, Weary began making true friendships with Southern whites, many of whom also longed to get past racial barriers. Weary's book was published three years before Mission Mississippi formed.

By 1997 he had taken Mendenhall Ministries as far as he felt he could, and the same year, he received his doctorate. Thus when he was invited to take the helm at Mission Mississippi, he agreed. He's now finishing a sequel to his first book, titled *I Can't Never Leave*.

'Scratching the Surface'

Though many of Mississippi's racist stereotypes are as outdated as Texas gunslingers, problems remain. Weary recalls taking a group of black youths swimming in a river in the 1970s at a spot normally frequented by whites. Some whites threw cans into the water upstream and began shooting at them as they drifted toward the swimmers. Weary got the message, and they left.

More recently, he has been told on more than one occasion that he would not be welcome to speak at certain white churches, even though their pastors wanted him to. Mission Mississippi has also met resistance from some black churches.

Weary is convinced the solution to these barriers is basic Christian love. "We need to know how to get together and learn how to talk to each other and at least listen to each other," he says. "I think that we're just now scratching the surface of all this."

A bit of cross-cultural understanding can help. To that end, Mission Mississippi recently published a cookbook, *Chit'lins to Caviar*, with recipes from white and black cultures ().

Although racially integrated churches are on the rise in Mississippi, Weary says simple partnerships between white and black churches can work wonders. Such congregations could hold a joint service at each church and swap pastors annually.

What's not needed is condescension. "The mind-set of the white church is, 'How do we make the black church a missionary venture?'" Weary says with a chuckle. "We don't want you [whites] to go help that church; we want you to become partners." He recalls the way a black pastor described it to a white pastor: "We don't want your old clothes."

The integration that is occurring either is taking place in new churches or is resulting when black people begin to attend white churches, he observes.

"What I want to see happen is for somebody white to get up on Sunday morning and say, 'I'm going to a black church,'" Weary

says. "I'm not so interested in putting together black and white churches. I'm more interested in black and white Christians seeing themselves differently."

Ernest Herndon is religion and outdoors editor at the McComb, Mississippi, Enterprise-Journal. He is the author of 17 books including Nature Trails and Gospel Tales (InterVarsity) and the upcoming Paddling the Pascagoula (University Press of Mississippi).