

Dolphus Weary on Mission Mississippi

Theology and Race Workgroup Meeting
Oxford, MS - February 24, 2001

Charles Marsh: John Perkins and The Voice of Calvary community in Jackson, has not only been a model for our own work and witness in racial reconciliation and in prophetic Christianity, but it also has provided rich theological material for our own reflections about Christian witness in the world. I could go on for quite some time about all the extraordinary experiences I have had here, bringing students there, conversations. I am honored that you are with us today and that you will share with us the nature of your work.

Thank you for being here.

Dolphus Weary: I am really delighted to be here and to have this opportunity to share with you and to have this opportunity just to be vulnerable about Mississippi and what Mission Mississippi is about and the kind of things we are doing to make a difference.

[I] had the privilege of growing up in Mississippi in a place called Mendenhall. I grew up in a family of eight children. My father deserted us when I was four years old, therefore we understood what it meant to grow up in poverty. What it meant to grow up in a small town that has a lot of draw backs (in terms of racism in the 40s, 50s, and 60s). Growing up in Mississippi for an African American male- and this is personal which is why I am not talking about females- there were all kind of limits put on our lives. And you could write the word *hopelessness* in the black community, and in the white community you could write the word *hopefulness*. And that's the way it felt growing up in that community was a sense of hopelessness. And for me, my dream was "How in the world could get out of this hopelessness?"

I started playing basketball in high school and all of a sudden when I graduated from high school, I went to Piney Woods Junior College, because I couldn't get into a Christian college though my desire was to go to a Christian liberal arts college. But in 1965 the flavor of the country changed and among the number of schools we knew about, we could not find a Christian liberal arts college that was open to accepting black students. So I ended up going to Piney Wood School and while I was there God sent a team of people and I ended up in California. When I left

Mississippi, I said “Lord, I ain’t never coming back. I am leaving, and I ain’t never coming back.” But you know something, I got to California and I discovered that the racism beat me out there. For some reason, I don’t know how it did it, but it beat me out there.

Mendenhall Ministries

I traveled with a Christian basketball team in 1970 that went to the Orient. And there I was challenged about being a full time missionary overseas, and I was saying, “Any place but Mississippi, Lord, please, any place but Mississippi.” But God brought me back to Mississippi, ended up in Mendenhall, ended up in the community that I didn’t like, and we began to dream some dreams. And the dreams that we began to dream was, “Is our Christian faith were strong enough to impact the needs of a poor community?” That was the dream we started dreaming. Or was the best thing we could do for poor people to tell about Jesus and Heaven one day. And for me, I had grown up on the spirituals. You can’t think of a Negro spiritual that doesn’t have a “hereafter, one day, by and by, it is going to get better.” And the question that we began to ask was, “Is God concerned about poor people today?” And so we began to say, “Let’s apply this to our community.” And so we began to think about how in the world we could bring the gospel alive within a poor community and that ended up starting a health clinic, an elementary school, a thrift store, a farm, a law office, a recreation ministry, a housing ministry, a whole ministry for that particular community. Then a few years ago, 1997, we began to feel like maybe our work in Mendenhall was done. Maybe it was time to move on.

Mission Mississippi

While I was thinking about it someone from Mission Mississippi began to talk to me about taking up the reins of Mission Mississippi and give leadership to what we call a statewide movement of unity and reconciliation within the body of Jesus Christ. How do we get the church community, the Christ community, to really take seriously this whole concept of unity. I still wrestle with how to do it, but we have been doing some things to try to challenge the body.

When I came to Mission Mississippi I had to make a distinction between what Chris [Rice] and Spencer [Perkins] were doing and what Mission Mississippi was doing and I am not sure if I heard it from you Chris or from Spencer, but what I heard was that was Reconciliation

101.

You first got to get people added to the agenda. You can't be 202 or 303, but people who have never added to the agenda are not ready for it. And so I said, Wow, what I am going to do is to get them ready for the next step. How do we get the church community throughout the state ready for the next step; and the next step is going deeper. But if people won't walk into the room, and if people won't hear it, and if it is not on the agenda, then how in the world can you move people? And so we want to move it onto people's agenda. And there were a number of challenges we were faced with in trying to move it to the agenda.

In the middle of all of this, I took on the role of the fund-raiser for Mendenhall which means that I traveled a lot around the country: Chicago, Detroit, New York, California, Seattle. And I have been on a number of dominant, white, Christian campuses, I have been in black churches and in white churches, and that is why the board of Mission Mississippi said why don't you talk this message which you have been taking around the country and deliver this message: the heart of it to Mississippi's closed society and maybe by the word of God working in the people of God maybe we can get a movement going that will be a statewide movement. I need to say this: when I came to Mission Mississippi, it was designed as a statewide movement, but it had settled in to being a local movement. Everything Mission, Mississippi was doing was Jackson. And so people in Tupelo and Corinth, Oxford and around the state had heard about that thing called Mission Mississippi but it didn't have an impact for other communities because we did not design and plan a strategy for how we were going to get around the state. And so when I came on the board they said to me, "Get it out of Jackson, work on developing a statewide movement and image for Mission Mississippi as an umbrella, a place where the body of Christ [can] come together across racial and denominational lines, to pray together, to share together, and to work together."

Weekly Prayer

Let me talk a little bit about some of the practical things that Mission Mississippi does. One of the backbones of Mission, Mississippi is the time of weekly prayer together. We would meet on Thursdays from 6:45-7:45. It used to be from 7-8, but then we realized that some people had to be at work at 8 am. Every time we do things we have to think not only about business people and non-businesses. And not only do we have to think about what is best for white people, but we have to think about what is best for black people. We had a number of white

people that said, “I don’t have to be at work until whenever, lets meet from 7-8.” So that is how the decision came, but a lot of black people had to be a work at eight to punch a clock, so we had to say lets make an adjustment here. The adjustment was that we met from 6:45-7:45 am.

What is significant is that we intentionally go to a black church one Thursday and to a white church the next Thursday in order to involve as many churches in this process as we possibly can. So we develop a schedule every quarter and intentionally go to a black church and a white church. Then we also try to involve some of the schools. We might go to an inner city school once a month and we might go to an academy for a time of prayer together. It is amazing people to watch people, when we went into Lanier High School, an inner city high school, to walk in there and watch some of these business men say, Wow. There are some offices periodically, maybe once a year.

Last year, we added every Tuesday as well because there were so many churches that were getting left out. If you go to churches once a year, you can’t change or influence them. We do a black church one Tuesday and a white church the next Tuesday, so we are involving more churches throughout the city of Jackson, on this regular ongoing, intentional effort to come together to pray.

When we come together, the first fifteen minutes is breakfast: coffee, juice, donuts, fruit (now that is typically a white church, let me qualify that). Now we keep trying to tell folks keep it simple, keep it simple, but you go to a black church and you got grits, biscuits, eggs, and so we try to say, “Hey, that is not the emphasis.” The first fifteen minutes is talking, interaction, eating and sharing. Then we ask the pastor to give a five-minute devotional, because the emphasis is not on preaching time, but on getting together to pray. Then we have a few announcements and for twenty-five minutes we break up into groups of four to six people all over the room.

There is a prayer list we pass out: praying for the city, praying for the mayor, for the governor, we are trying to give people a heart to pray for rather than always criticizing (Christians are good at that too). So all of a sudden you got six people in a group, we take two minutes for them to share personal concerns, and then about twenty minutes of them praying around short prayers whatever. The heart of it is it is not a time for someone to preach it is not a time for someone just to show up- we have relationship building, an ongoing thing done on a regular basis.

Movement of Reconciliation

[For] reconciliation- and we believe this with all our hearts- ultimately we must move from the prayer room to the action room. We start off by doing prayer and we are hoping that out of that relationships can get built and that those relationships look like something different than the world as we move out from there. So that is every third Wednesday of the month we get together and do that and that might be forty people, it might be fifty people that show up for that on that regularly consistent basis.

Thirdly, we do a pastor's time, once a month. The third Thursday of the month we get pastors together and we are trying to grow this one because right now we are trying to develop a culture for pastors to come together. Right now we have about fifteen pastors that come together. What we are trying to say is this, "How do we change our language in the pulpit on Sunday morning? And the way we change our language is to begin to understand something from the other person's perspective.

Let me give you a hard division in our state. What happens when 90% of black Christians vote Democrat and 90% of the white Christian vote Republican? What is the preacher going to say on Sunday morning when he goes in the pulpit? If you don't have a place, where you can come as a pastor, if you don't have a place of freedom where you can ask some questions and be able to go to the pulpit with a little more knowledge. You still might hold to your beliefs but you will not be ignorant and judgmental about a whole group of people who might think differently than you politically on some issues. Now we are just not getting there. We ain't been able to talk about everything, but we are trying to create a place for that to happen.

A movement of reconciliation and unity has to be a movement where we can listen to people who think different than we do. If reconciliation is only the fact that we got to get people to act like we act, and think like we act, then we've got a weak premise for developing it. Unity and reconciliation ought to be that you and I can differ on some issues but we can still work together and share together because there is a bigger something that we ought to be looking at rather than finding ways to divide up. The pastors meeting together is a place where pastors ask hard questions and talk about hard issues.

Eating Together

Then we do a city wide picnic every year where we partner churches together: we ask a black church to partner with a white church and work on the menu to bring food to the city park and they work together to distribute it and their members come and this past year we had 32 churches, 16 pairs of churches working on this and that is a baby step in this movement as well.

Then we do something that is called a two and two restaurant day. Where we get 15 or so restaurants to do a 22% discount for Black, White, Asian, interracial groups to come to that restaurant two times a year on a particular day. They have agreed to it so that we can encourage somebody to intentionally identify somebody that they want to go and have a place to get to know them a little better. The 22% discount is just a throw in to encourage it along, to make that happen. Those are safe places. Please understand everybody might not be at the level that we are. People are scared to death to cross some barriers. Ignorance is a dangerous thing, and people are scared to death. So we are always trying to ask the questions where do we start off with some safe things that we can begin to get people in a room. The picnic is one of those. And then we do a Christmas party at the end of the year where we just get together and celebrate...

Mayor and Governor's Prayer Breakfasts

[Mission Mississippi became involved in organizing the annual mayor's prayer breakfast] It was 95% white and 5% black. Now I am excited to tell you that we have now created a culture: the mayor's prayer breakfast is a place for people to get together and you walk into a room and it is 60% white and 40% black. It is a neat thing to see people coming together and it is representative of the city itself in some form. We ain't made it to 50%/50% yet and we might never make it but we are changing the way the room looks because it is important to be able to get people together.

The last thing I am going to say is that we asked the governor to allow us to do the same thing. We finally got a governor who has a little more sensitivity to some spiritual things and believes in prayer and stuff like that. We talked to the governor about having a Governor's prayer breakfast or a Governor's prayer luncheon. We did it; we pulled it off. The first of this month, the first of February we had the first statewide Governor's prayer luncheon, pulled together people from all over the state had about seven hundred-fifty people there: black, white, 35% came from outside of Jackson, the rest came from Jackson. We tied it into what we called

our first statewide conference on unity and reconciliation. We had people from all over the state coming in for it.

Statewide Conference on Unity and Reconciliation

The idea is to train people and encourage people to go back into the battle. Think about it. Think about a church in rural Mississippi. Think about a church in Oxford. Think about a church in Grenada that says we are going to take this thing serious and start trying to deal with our membership, start trying to deal with the community. People get burned out, they need a place of respite, and so we are hoping our conference will be a place of respite for people who come to be encouraged to go and stay in the battle a little longer. We hope to produce some How-To workshops. We did ten workshops this year. We hope to do some How-To workshops, so people can go back to their communities and do some things in their communities. That's it!

Questions:

Ecumenism

Ellen Armour: I am wondering about the issues of theological differences. You talk about Christianity as a kind of common ground that brings these folks together, but what about differences between them either as they cut across black and white lines, or as they separate black and white folks. How do you deal with those kinds of issues as they come up?

DW: How do we deal with those issues of theological differences? They do come up and they are coming up. They're a hard part of what we are trying to do. On one hand you have somebody who is called a conservative evangelical on one side, and on the other side you have somebody who is called a liberal. How do we begin to bring those together? One of the things we try to create with Mission Mississippi is that Mission Mississippi is an umbrella that says it is OK for you to come if you have a Christian faith. (Mississippi is probably about 60-75% what is called Christian; where people belong to a Christian church.)

Now within that we asking some questions, how do we draw a circle of inclusion rather than a circle of exclusion? Many times denominations draw circles of exclusions, but we are not a denomination we are a movement of the body of Christ and so we are constantly trying to ask questions about how to we draw circles of inclusion. When I first came to Mission Mississippi I

met with the Catholic leadership and I said, “This is who we are, we are a Christian movement of unity in the body of Christ.” This is who we are; we want every church who believe to be a part of this. This is who we are and we got a lot of support from the Catholic Church. We had a church that, because we added a Roman Catholic to our board, pulled away. [They] said we will no longer support Mission Mississippi because you have a Roman Catholic on the board.

On the other hand there was another church that was in more the liberal camp and they didn’t have [anything] to do with Mission Mississippi. But . . .they are [now] saying, “Wait a minute, we want to support and we want be involved because you are bringing some people to the table that we thought would never come to the table before.” You see, we are constantly trying . . . to deal with inclusion.

At our conference Tony Evans came and spoke, and Tony gave me two words that I want to work on and think about. The two words are *membership* and *fellowship*. We want to say to people: “You choose to be a member of a church, denomination, and that is your membership, that is where you put your money, that’s where you put your time, that is your membership. But fellowship is much broader than that, fellowship is the body of believers that talk about one day going to heaven and being in heaven. That is a broader body of people.” So we keep trying to push a button in the culture, we might not be winning, but we [are] trying to be clear.

Next week, I am meeting with the Episcopal leadership because the Episcopal Church pulled away from Mission Mississippi before I got there. I want to meet with them, I want to talk, and we might not agree, but I want to make sure they know who we are and what we are about. There may be some times when people are going to say things you don’t like and that is OK. That is why you have your denomination, so you can say what you want to say. That’s why you have your membership over there, so you can preach what you want to preach. But in the broader context we are trying to help people think outside of that box.

Personal Piety and Social Responsibility

Michael Cartwright: Religious historians talk about a two party system in American religion, those who focus on the personal Evangelical and those who focus on the social transformation, social justice. You are focusing on the personal and you are using Evangelical images, metaphors, and practices. I am a little worried about this in the sense that you have some very rich practices of coming together at the table, but the way in which you describe those practices

seems to accent more of their personal importance as opposed to their social transformation importance. I know that is dicey because if you start telling folks, “Look how radical you are!” they might back off. It also seems to me to be a real danger to get sucked back into what is essentially an individualistic piety.

DW: It is a tough one. We believe that we need to bring them both to the center. We got to bring the ones who believe in a personal salvation, a personal relationship, and that whole personal “me and my faith” and all that. And we got to bring them, not to loose that message, but to take on a greater social consciousness.

MC: The center of what? The center of the table?

DW: The center of where we can meet together and walk together. Because otherwise I won't come into the room if you are in the room. A good classic one is if I narrow the Presbyterians down to P.C.A. and P.C.U.S.A: P.C.A.s won't come into the room where P.C.U.S.A.s are. And we talk about racial reconciliation! That is a tough one. We can spend our energies trying to fight those barriers and that is a hard one, it really is.

I tell people all the time, I am scared of Christians. I am just scared of them. I don't know what to say. When I go into some churches I don't know what to say. I don't know whether I can quote somebody. Because somebody hearing me is going to cut me off for the rest of the message and they are not going to hear nothing I say because I quoted Martin Luther King or I quoted this person or that person. And so I am just scared of Christians and that is not a good statement.

Stephen Ray: I'd like you to comment on what I experience as the paradox of the whole project that Mission Mississippi is doing. I firmly believe that lives will only transform because of the personal relationship of Jesus Christ, that basic evangelical affirmation. But my experience teaches me that people use that personal relationship precisely as an excuse not to be transformed. It came up for me when you said you are afraid to talk to Christians. Whenever I see somebody identify themselves as a Christian I know that they are dealing on the level of that

personal, Evangelical faith and my experience has taught me that that becomes the most difficult and intransigent. So, I mean, how do you deal with that?

DW: Therein is my fear, but you got to have a place to start. If somebody tells me they are a Christian, I take them at their word and Mission Mississippi takes them at their word. We don't put a microscope on people when they come into the room Mission Mississippi, you are a Christian, do you believe in this? We accept that at face value. Now when I develop a relationship with them, I might go in deeper in some of that. Because of our relationship I can now say some stuff. I will not say in my Mission Mississippi circles, unless somebody asks me, I am a registered Democrat. I won't say that, I am scared. There is going to be some Republicans there that just think ain't no Democrat can be a Christian. Do you see what I am saying? I am a little nervous about saying that, because I don't want to turn them off. But if they ask me, I will say I am a registered Democrat, OK? We keep trying to encourage the Christian community to really begin to think differently in so many ways. We have messed up the word Christian, you know, we have messed it up. I went to speak to a Christian Academy [laughter], and I didn't know what to say. This was a Christian Academy

CM: Which one was it?

DW: I ain't going to tell you that [laughter]. But, yeah, it was all white. So I am saying, "How can I handle this? Everything about me said the reason it was started was to keep me out. How can you say you are a Christian and try to shut the door and keep me out?" I wrestle with that all the time. How do I keep from being judgmental? How do I keep pushing a button that says if you are a Christian we really need to think differently about how we love each other across these barriers? We want to keep pushing the button. We want to push the button in conservative circles and in liberal circles in order to make it happen.

Historical Transformation

CM: I am intrigued by the strong cooperation you have from First Presbyterian and from First Baptist. I read the narrative of First Baptist in the 60s. This is a church that the night that Medger Evers was gunned down, convened a Board meetings a few hours before his murder

trying to develop a formal policy of how to respond to all the interracial visitors that were coming from Tougaloo College, and that night decided to make official their closed door policy. What happened to that congregation over this 30 year period that enables it now to embrace Mission Mississippi, for you to be invited to speak? What is going on there theologically, culturally, politically?

DW: Good question, I don't know if I can answer that part of it. The part I can answer is that Frank Pollard was at that church and might have been there during those turbulent times and he left. When they asked him to come back, he said the only way he would come back was if the church would take an open door posture. For ten to twelve years he has been preaching and teaching and feeding people some stuff that can help them grow out of that old thing. And he also told me that a few people had to die [laughter]. I also think he took a posture of understanding the culture and the nature of what he was dealing with, and he knew that in order to move them from point A to point B he needed to start teaching them some Biblical principles. He started doing that. So much so that when he had E.V. Hill and Tony Evans to speak in those evening services, in 1998 he said, I think it is time [to invite an African American to preach at the morning service]. He met with his deacons, some of those old head deacons, and they said, "we think it is time." That is when I spoke in both of the morning services. It was one of the most emotional times for me to get to preach. I woke up at 4 am in the morning and I was just crying, I said, "Lord you know that I can't say this. I can say it in Seattle, I can say it in Denver, but I can't say it in Jackson, Mississippi, in a church with so much history to it." But God gave grace and we were able to share in the first service and after the service I went down and people were just lined up such that the pastor had to get me to start the second service, because a number of those people were at a different point now and saying we really need to do something different.

Listen folks, reconciliation is a good idea, always remember that, it is a good idea. But to make it work is something people don't want to deal with although it is always a good idea. It takes a whole lot more work to do it than just a good idea.

Theological Transformation

EA: I wondered if you see theological transformation happening as a result of these conversations. Are people's concepts of what it means to be Christian and of the God that they worship changing as a result of this dialogue?

DW: I think it is too early to tell.

You see the pastor of First Baptist Church, Jackson, had me to preach in 1998. First Presbyterian Church 15 years ago would not even talk to me about support of Mendenhall and being involved. They said to me, "We support a black ministry in Canton, do you want us to stop supporting them and support you?" Now they support 150-200 white ministries, but they were going to put it on me, put the weight on me, "do you want us [to stop] this other ministry and support you?" And I looked at them said, "No, I just want to encourage you to keep on supporting them," and I left. Now, they are all involved, but they are involved in certain levels. Whether or not they are ready to change some of their theological positions I am not sure, but they are involved and they are getting more involved in the process.

Diversity & the Black/White Paradigm

Barbara Holmes: I know that Jackson has a pretty large Choctaw population. Is that correct? I was wondering if your organization reaches out to them too in terms of them also having Christian churches. Is the dialogue widening past Black/White discourse or is it just...

DW: We have not made it there yet. The Mississippi culture is so deep Black/White - so deep. We are trying to get a toehold to bring that together. And as we do that we are really hoping that it becomes easier for that to spill over a greater minority like the Choctaw.

Luis Pedraja: I realize that the culture of Mississippi and most of the South has been very strongly a Black/White struggle paradigm. There is a deep history of pain and there is a very strong need for reconciliation. But by creating a culture of inclusion rather than a culture of exclusion by constructing that paradigm, if I come in as a Hispanic or as an American-Asian or a Native American and I see the construction going on I say Oh, that is wonderful, but I am still

being excluded because there is no sense of openness to be welcome into that. There's a sense of being a non-being in that culture. And I think that as long as the paradigm served is still presented that way you are going to have segments of the community -- and some of the segments are growing rapidly -- that are still going to feel that sense of exclusion. So I was wondering what were your thoughts on that, because reconciliation is a broader issue and in creating a culture of inclusion rather than exclusion sometimes we exclude by just not presenting an alternative.

DW: This one I really don't have an answer for, some of those others I claim not to have an answer on when I have one, but this one I really don't have an answer. We need to put it on the agenda and I have to confess it is not on the agenda. When we first started working with Mission Mississippi I said, Boy. Lord, it is going to take 90% of my time to work with the White community and 10% of my time to work with the Black community. I was in for a rude awakening. I thought Black folk were ready and White people were not. Let me tell you something, Black folk are no more ready for reconciliation than White folk. It was a rude awakening for me, a rude awakening. Now I guess I have tunnel vision so much so but certainly I appreciate that sensitivity that we do need to look at a little bit more. Thank you for raising that for me. It is one that we do need to broaden the walls a little more for.

Cheap vs. Costly Reconciliation

BH: Some people think that the reason what has happened in South Africa has ostensibly worked is because of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. I just wanted to follow up on your statement about Blacks not being quite ready for this reconciliation process and whether or not it may be because we have leaped from the point of oppression to the point of reconciliation without the truth part, without the admission, without people letting their pain out. So instead what we see are generations of post-traumatic stress syndrome and folks who haven't been able to have any process to let out the pain. So reconciliation doesn't seem like such a good idea when no one has heard what happened to you.

DW: I need to write down your words, you make it sound so good!

I just know, here is a terminology I use, I just know when white people in general talk about reconciliation they think about the last ten years, fifteen years at the most, at the most, at the most. So they look at what has happened in the last fifteen years. When the average black person looks about reconciliation it is thirty years, fifty years, three hundred years. It is like, “why now?” So there is a lot of distrust when someone says “lets join hands now.” Why now, I didn’t hear this five years ago?

The other thing I have to say is that reconciliation as a serious issue has only been maybe five years. Five years is being liberal. It has been one of those nice things you talk about, but when it comes down to work we have only been working on this thing for about five years. We need to keep that in mind, when you are talking to a certain group of people.

Peter Slade: When I was in Greenville, I noticed that your message was that reconciliation is a process, a long journey; but by the time it gets to the front of a Baptist church, it becomes, “You need to come to the front, confess your sins, and you will be changed [snap] and it will happen.” The Evangelical message, “We are all sinners, we have all fallen short of the glory of God, you need to repent, come forward and it will happen instantly, and it will all be changed,” kind of flattens everything out. And it strikes me that the cost of reconciliation is not equal. It is far more costly for African Americans to come to that point. What might be being offered is actually some kind of cheap reconciliation.

DW: You are right. I preach a message and my message is what I am getting ready to say here. “You can’t do that unless you do this. You can’t really be seriously reconciled to each other until you have been reconciled with God.” That is the message. So I push people towards a personal reconciliation with God, then once you have been personally reconciled I talk about two healings: the healing reconciliation between me and God and then the healing reconciliation between me and my brothers and sisters.

What I discover is that there are so many people who want to go from instantaneous healing over here and therefore there is an instantaneous healing over there. So people say to me, “I don’t see you as a black person.” I say, “you are lying” [laughter] because of that kind of instantaneous talk. There is some W-O-R-K in-between personal salvation and the work of reconciliation; there is some work that needs to take place. And I meet people all the time who

say that we *ought* to be. The language that Christians talk is that we *ought* to love each other, we *ought* to be reconciled... and I am saying, “Hold on, I am tired of that. Lets not talk about what we *ought* to be, lets talk about what we *are*, what we are doing.”

Conservative Evangelicals say the Bible says this: “if you give your life to Jesus, then you ought to love everybody.” But most of the time, what we have done is predetermined what we want the *everybody* to be. Somebody comes up and says, “Do you love...” And you say, “Oh, yeah!” because in your head you have already predetermined that the everybody is the box in front of me and not the broad perspective that we need to take on and to have. It is a challenge! I was speaking at a church on the coast in the morning and I told them that I was going to speak at First Presbyterian Church in the evening and this lady came up to me and said, “Yes, go get them, go get them...” And I said, “No, excuse me, I am sorry, that is not the message of Mission Mississippi, it is not to *get* anybody.” The message of Mission Mississippi is to encourage people to do what God has already said we ought to already be doing.

Somebody has got to be the voice encouraging that and that is what we want. We want to keep encouraging even when people think they are tired of hearing it. I deal with these “integrated” churches, you know the Agape Fellowship in Jackson. Agape didn’t want anything to do with us, because they got it right. It is an integrated church and they didn’t need anyone. I had to go in and tell them that number one you don’t have it right, because you haven’t created a place for leadership to grow all the way to the top. “Integration” at that church is the people at the top are white. The good news is the brother is changing: he is a part of Mission Mississippi, he is a supporter of Mission Mississippi. I said you ought to model this church to the rest of Mississippi and you ought to work through these other things to show that the model works. That reconciliation is not just a tokenistic thing, but [also] something that allows people to walk through the doors. Anybody can come through the doors, get saved -- whatever terminology-- become a part of the leadership, and end up being the pastor.

LP: I appreciate what you say about some of the integrated churches because that has been my experiences throughout and I have argued about that. I have a couple questions more dealing with my views on reconciliation. Reconciliation assumes that there was a time when there was unity and that is a problem. That needs to be addressed because there wasn’t a time when there was unity. Reconciliation with God also assumes there is an admission of sin and I wonder how

many people are willing to admit that they are guilty of the sin of racism and of enslavement or at least of getting the fruits of that.

Finally reconciliation in terms of how it plays against restoration: is reconciliation away of assuaging the conscience of whites that might feel a little guilty about the past, but allowing the status quo to stay where there has been this inequality that because of racism and injustice has brought the communities to different levels? If you reconcile everything is fine but you haven't restored equality but maybe reconciliation needs to be talked about alongside of restoration because that is part of the Christian message.

DW: I have a friend in South Africa doing mission work and he said, "Dolphus, I want you to come to South Africa some time," and I said, "Yeah I can come and talk about reconciliation." He said, "No you can't. If you come to South Africa and the places where we are working you cannot talk about reconciliation because reconciliation is too painful. Reconciliation also talks about restoration. And you got families sitting there and there is another family that has a building on the land that they took that is getting wealthy off of it. If you start talking about reconciliation, there is too much behind the scenes, and too much other stuff that would have to come out." We do talk a lot about a cheap reconciliation and we want to move from I am sorry to now, let us walk together as brothers and forget all these things.

The last thing I want to say on that is that I serve on the Board of Belhaven College. About six years ago we were sitting in a boardroom with twenty five white men, two white females, and I am the only black. The student body is about 18-20% black, one of the highest black populations of students of any Christian college in the country, no staff, people, teachers, none of these things. I said "Guys, we do not need the federal government to come in here and tell us about an Affirmative Action program. Each of you are Christians and have the power of the Holy Spirit. We ought to be able to look at the picture and say that something is wrong. We ought to start pro-actively doing something about it rather than waiting on someone to tell us and reacting against them telling us. We ought to be smart enough to make this thing happen." I think they were ready to kick me out of the room, but the bottom line is we now have more African Americans on the Board, we now have several staff people in key positions, professors that are hired full time. It is now looking different. Reconciliation must go to a deeper level of

saying we must change some things, even at the top, if we want it to move forward. If we want it to be equal, then it should be equal all the way, not just down at the bottom.

Chris Rice: Listening you talk to all of us is really encouraging. You are in such a dilemma because on one hand you are trying to win the average person to the table, but really behind that you have a much deeper agenda that if were you to share you wouldn't get them.

I fear that a lot of racial reconciliation stuff is really very event driven. That is really the way white folk want to keep it, it is enough to come to the event together, to come out to lunch together- that is reconciliation. There is a fundamental inequality between Blacks and Whites in Mississippi. There is this difficulty though of not being able to do this 101 and 201 within the same organization. So I am wondering how does that move? How does the process move whether it is Mission Mississippi doing it, or a collaboration behind the scenes move forward in Mississippi and Jackson?

DW: Wow. Y'all are going to get so tired of me saying, "I don't know." But I have learned in my old age that it is OK not to know.

I think that when I first came to the table, in my mind, I gave that to you and Spencer. We'll get them ready, but when they are ready we will push them over here. Now that that missing link is there, I do not know what we are going to do with it. My Board is not there, I am just now getting them to see that we should not do major events. They want to ask me about numbers and how many; but things ain't about numbers. We are just now beginning to get that clear a little bit. We are getting ready to go into a five year planning program and that is going to be a question that I am going to be raising. What are we going to do about the next step? John Perkins talks about it in terms of developing the [Spencer Perkins] Center, but who is going to pick up that mantle right now? There is no one picking up that particular mantle.

Judging the Results

SR: There is one point I want to make. In part of what you are doing there is always the danger when we are assessing it, and I don't think you fall into this danger, of assessing it by results. That comes out of the whole modern view that you know exactly what God is going to do with

something. But there is a way in which, just in terms of work that you are doing, that just doing the work is the whole point and God is going to do with it what God is going to do with it.

DW: Listen, this is the worst ministry I have ever been a part of! I am saying, it is hard to sell it. When I was at Mendenhall I could talk about poor kids. I can show them houses that were dilapidated, I could show them how people needed the Lord, I could do all of that. I can't even put my arms around this one; it is hard to put my arms around it. My Board wants to do a businessmen-type of strategy which says, "Start a chapter here, put a chapter there." But we are dealing with hearts and relationships. You know, it is not that easy. They want a franchise thing, so I am trying to say you can't franchise this, you can't run up in Corinth and say you got to start this and all that kind of stuff. They'll say, "Who are you?" We ran into some problems here in Oxford. We came in and there is a group that has a service periodically and [said], "Who is this Mission Mississippi to come in here and think we need to drop what we are doing?"

We trying to come up with a different culture which says, how do we go into a city and help whatever things are going on? How do we come along beside them and what can we do to assist greater relationship building, not just meeting for Thanksgiving service, but how do you take the Thanksgiving service and do something else that might lead to greater relationships?

CM: I want to thank you for encouraging us today and to affirm your work and the power of your witness. I know that there are many frustrations but that there are many things to celebrate and I appreciate all that you are doing. God bless and we hope to talk to you again sometime soon.

DW: Thank you. I think we are in a winnable war in the Christian community. It is not the easiest one, but it is a winnable war.