

# Interview with Peter Slade on Open Friendship in a Closed Society: Mission Mississippi and a Theology of Friendship

**PLT: What is Mission Mississippi?**

**PS:** Mission Mississippi is a large ecumenical racial reconciliation initiative started in Jackson in 1992. It is now working across the state with chapters in different cities. It really is a remarkable Christian organization in a state (and country) where most churches are almost completely segregated by race. Their slogan is “Changing Mississippi one relationship at a time,” and that was something that really caught my imagination.

**PLT: Why?**

**PS:** Well, it suggests that the organization’s theology of reconciliation is rooted in their understanding of personal friendships. What is interesting is that the sociologists Michael O. Emerson and Christian Smith, in their book *Divided by Faith*, dismiss evangelicals’ insistence on personal relationships as the answer to the problems of racialized churches. Theologically, I thought that there was a lot to be said for friendship and reconciliation! I think I wanted to save a theology of friendship and reconciliation from being thrown out with the sociologists’ bath water and I hoped that a study of Mission Mississippi’s lived theology might enable me to do that.

**PLT: What do you mean by lived theology?**

**PS:** As I say in the preface to the book, I am convinced that theologians should pay much more attention to churches’ beliefs and practices. This is what they live out—their lived theology. In this book I wanted to take these Christians in Mission Mississippi seriously when they made claims about the importance of prayer meetings to racial reconciliation and the importance of forming intentional cross-racial friendships.

**PLT: What does *Open Friendship in a Closed Society* contribute to the conversation on racial reconciliation?**

**PS:** There are a number of publications by sociologists studying multiracial congregations that are written to be accessible to ministers and laity. I think my book brings the insights of contemporary theologians to bear on the matter—particularly Jürgen Moltmann’s theology of open friendship, Miroslav Volf’s metaphor for reconciliation as embrace, and the theological reflection around South Africa’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission.

I also think there is something important for churches, activists, and theologians to consider about Mission Mississippi's model. Activists—those committed to a radical prophetic style of ministry—tend to move a small number of people a long way. Mission Mississippi, on the other hand, is developing a strategy of moving a large number of people a small distance. Dolphus Weary, the Director of Development for Mission Mississippi, calls this approach "Reconciliation 101." If you really want to think about the way the Gospel can bring about social change, you have to ask: how do we move a lot of people? When the "lot of people" happens to be people who go to church and the movement is towards reconciliation, then something important is going on.