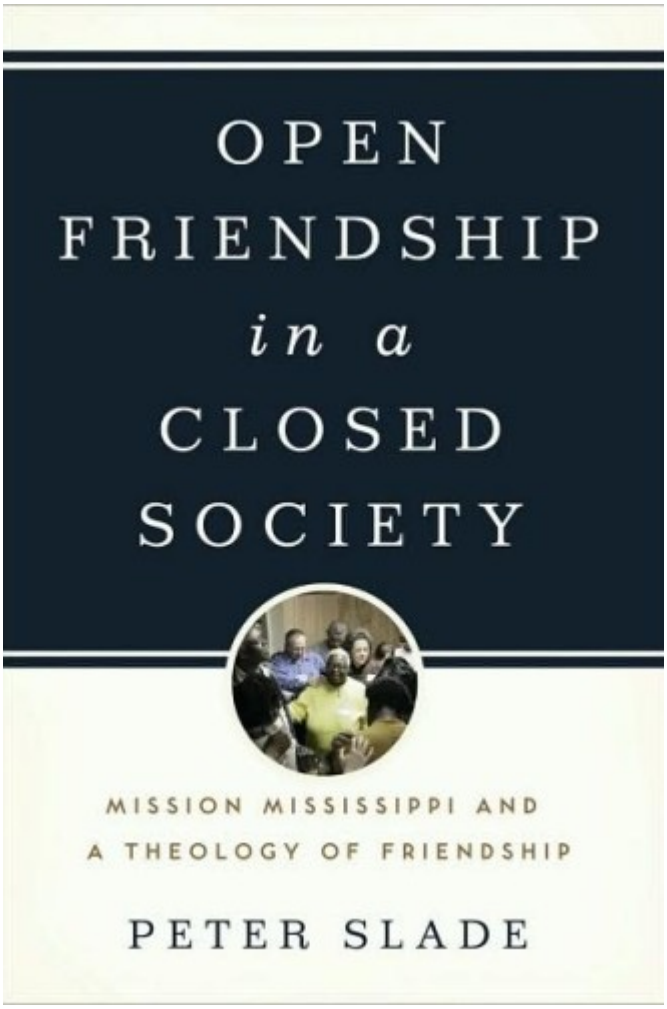
Mission Mississippi

by Joseph T. Reiff in the March 8, 2011 issue

In Review



Open Friendship in a Closed Society

By Peter Slade
Oxford University Press

Anyone familiar with the civil rights movement knows the importance of Mississippi in that story. Countless citizens of that state, along with some key "outside

agitators," risked their lives to open up a segregated society. That history has been recounted in John Dittmer's *Local People: The Struggle for Civil Rights in Mississippi* (1995), Charles Marsh's *God's Long Summer: Stories of Faith and Civil Rights* (1999) and Charles Payne's *I've Got the Light of Freedom* (2007).

Beginning this year, Mississippi public schools are required to include instruction on the civil rights movement in the curriculum for every grade. "To not know history is to repeat it. And to learn the good things about Mississippi and America and the bad things about Mississippi and America is important for every Mississippian," Mississippi governor Haley Barbour stated. Judging from his recent remarks downplaying the terror caused by the Citizens' Council in Yazoo City in those days, the governor might benefit from such instruction himself.

Much is known about Mississippi's racial past. But what about race relations today? Peter Slade, a former student of Marsh's, has addressed that issue by examining Mission Mississippi, an organization he calls "the largest sustained ecumenical racial reconciliation initiative in the U.S."

The book's title is significant: although Mississippi has indeed changed in the past 50 years, Slade sees the "resegregated world of contemporary Mississippi" as a society still closed in many ways. He offers incisive theological, sociological and biblical critiques and does not let Mission Mississippi off the hook, especially the white conservative evangelicals involved in it. At the same time, he does not dismiss the group's efforts; the book strikes a delicate balance between constructive criticism and a deep awareness of and sympathy for the perspectives of the parties involved, both white and black.

As a Mississippi exile who grew up in the 1960s in Jackson and served as a United Methodist pastor there in the mid-1980s, I can say that though this is, as Slade admits, "a white Englishman's study of a Christian racial reconciliation movement in Mississippi," he gets the story remarkably right, with all its nuances.

Started in 1992 by a loose coalition of white and black evangelicals in Jackson, Mission Mississippi's early efforts were geared toward big events. The first, held in Mississippi Memorial Stadium in October 1993, featured the interracial team of Tom Skinner and Pat Morley as headline speakers and culminated in a symbolic raising of a large cross on the field by an interracial group of pastors. That symbolic act of atonement took place in the very stadium where 31 years earlier Governor Ross

Barnett rallied opponents of integration during halftime at an Ole Miss football game on the night before the black student James Meredith arrived on campus. Meredith's arrival precipitated a riot and forced President Kennedy to send in federal troops to restore order.

Mission Mississippi's focus gradually shifted from big events to personal relationships. The shift was signified by a new motto, "Changing Mississippi . . . One Relationship at a Time." By 1997 the organization centered on developing interpersonal and institutional relationships. Its mission included partnerships between black and white congregations, support for African-American business ventures by wealthy white Christian business leaders, a restaurant discount program by which two couples—one white, one black—could eat out together to develop a friendship, and a weekly interracial prayer breakfast held in various locations around Jackson.

Mission Mississippi has had some success in branching out across the state, with chapters in 19 communities currently, but Jackson remains its center. Neddie Winters, a black businessman currently serving as the group's president, was recently quoted in a Jackson newspaper saying, "We can't deny the fact that race makes a difference. We have to rise above it and see that grace matters more than race." The group's primary goal is not to integrate every church but "to encourage all churches to become places where anyone can feel comfortable."

The most significant theological analysis in Slade's book is the link he makes between theologian Jürgen Moltmann's concept of "open friendship" and Ole Miss historian James Wesley Silver's 1963 moniker for Mississippi as the "closed society." The comparison is fitting given Silver's use of religious language to describe how Mississippi white culture of the early 1960s demanded adherence to the "true faith" and the "all-pervading doctrine" of white supremacy along with "acceptance of and obedience to an official orthodoxy" (segregation).

Moltmann characterizes "closed friendship" as involving relationships among people who are alike, the "inner circle of one's equals." Jesus, however, is "radically opposed to this privatization of friendship," and he offers an alternative to the usual hierarchies of human relationships. Churches may well understand this difference but still revert to a closed position, discarding the "gospel of creative love."

A fascinating element in Mission Mississippi is the role played by a pastor and a lay member of Jackson's First Presbyterian Church. A perennial bastion of theological, social and political conservatism, First Presbyterian had leaders who supported slavery, helped install the Jim Crow system and resisted integration in the 1950s and 1960s. Fiercely opposed to any suggestion of the reunion of southern and northern Pressbyterians, the church was a key player in the formation of the Presbyterian Church in America (PCA) in the 1970s.

Neverthless, Pastor James Baird of First Presbyterian was instrumental in the founding and early growth of Mission Mississippi, and Lee Paris, an attorney, entrepreneur and deacon at First Presbyterian, was involved in Mission Mississippi's leadership for years (he is still a member of its board) in response to what he understands as a clear calling from God.

While Slade commends First Presbyterian's (and especially Paris's) involvement, he criticizes Mission Mississippi for avoiding any mention of justice in its literature and for focusing on interpersonal relationships without any attention to issues of systemic injustice that are so central to race relations. This omission is due to the southern Presbyterian doctrine of "the spirituality of the church" which distinguishes between the "pure gospel" and the heretical "social gospel."

The problem, of course, is that such a doctrine amounts to support for the current social and political system. As Slade puts it, "Masquerading as one of the great doctrines of Southern Presbyterianism, the spirituality of the church is in fact the time-tested political strategy of powerful men to perpetuate an unjust status quo free from moral censure."

Slade's account of First Presbyterian's history of support for systemic injustice elicited an anguished response last summer from an African-American PCA theologian, Anthony Bradley (his blog posted in July was titled "Why Didn't They Tell Us?"). Bradley felt betrayed when he learned of the "racist and pro-segregation roots" of the 1964 founding of Reformed Theological Seminary in Jackson and of the PCA a decade later. Bradley's post precipitated over 100 comments.

Just as important as First Presbyterian in the Mission Mississippi story is the role of some influential African-American pastors in Jackson, along with Voice of Calvary, an interracial ministry in west Jackson founded by John Perkins, an African-American Mississippi native who founded the Christian Community Development Association.

Dolphus Weary, a black preacher and Perkins protégé, became executive director of Mission Mississippi in 1997 and now serves as its director of development.

While supportive of the ministry, Perkins is also critical of the emphasis on "changing Mississippi one person at a time," seeing it as a naively individualistic approach to a problem that is institutional and systemic. In direct opposition to the spirituality of the church doctrine so important to many of Mission Mississippi's white evangelical supporters, Perkins characterizes the church as "God's force on earth, and that force is to challenge all other institutions."

Slade, who teaches at Ashland University in Ohio, arrived in the U.S. from the U.K. in 1997 and spent three years at the University of Mississippi's southern studies program. His previous theological training (both academic and practical, including community development work in Britain) made him a natural candidate for Ph.D. work at the University of Virginia and for involvement in the school's Project on Lived Theology. This book is a revision of Slade's dissertation.

The scholarship does not get in the reader's way. Slade deftly employs various theoretical perspectives to describe the context for Mission Mississippi and to show that the perceived dichotomy between academic and lived theology is false: "Just as for the regular person in the pew, theologians' religious beliefs and convictions spring, at least in part, from their reflection upon their own lived faith in their particular cultural context."

Though Slade is clearly sympathetic to the criticisms offered by Perkins and others, the book's last two chapters explore the actual practices of Mission Mississippi, especially its weekly interracial prayer breakfasts. He also considers Weary's belief that addressing systemic issues is something Mississippians are not yet ready to do. Weary's goal is to keep as many churches and individuals, white and black, involved in the organization's work as possible in the hope that (in Slade's words) "as Christ-centered, reconciling friendships develop, both parties will see the need to address issues of justice in their society."

Slade makes use of two key themes of theologian Miroslav Volf. One is the need to find a middle ground between "cheap reconciliation" (in which no demand is made for justice from the oppressor) and "strict justice" (which insists that forgiveness and reconciliation can come only after justice is done). The other is Volf's notion of "double vision," in which individuals (in this case, black and white) "must seek to

hear and understand the other's truth and then seek to see themselves and their claims to justice and truth from this new perspective." Slade also draws on South African theologian John de Gruchy's discussion of reconciliation in Pauline theology. Slade sees Mission Mississippi's call to African-American churches to reconcile with whites as a request "to befriend those who have benefited from their economic exploitation for years."

This reconciliation may happen on occasion at Mission Mississippi's weekly prayer breakfasts. Although some of the organization's critics view these events as superficial, Slade uses interviews with participants and his own participant-observer accounts to argue that the usual format, ending with small interracial groups sharing concerns and praying with and for each other, provides a significant first step toward genuine reconciliation. The practice of intercessory prayer in these groups opens the way for a deeper level of relationship which challenges the closed society. "Rather than finding comfort in a homogenous closed prayer circle, the participant engages in the often uncomfortable task of meeting people with whom they have little in common and who challenge their preconceptions." On occasion this encounter has led to genuine experiences of bearing the burdens of others across racial lines, as Slade relates in some poignant stories.

Given the difficulties of creating and sustaining truly multiracial congregations as documented by recent sociological studies, Slade contends that the Mission Mississippi model may offer a better route to reconciliation: "Maintaining these delicate cross-racial, cross-cultural, and cross-denominational networks is difficult enough without saddling the project with the insistence on achieving this in the statistically near-impossible environment of a single congregation."

The church, Slade says, "should always find itself rubbed raw against the restrictive barbed wire of society because it sees the coming kingdom on the other side of the fence." Mission Mississippi, though in danger of fitting too comfortably into Mississippi society, has given some blacks and whites a way to glimpse that other side of the fence.