**Mississippi Movement Memories, by Mike Miller. *Christianity & Crisis*, 10/21/91. Book Review of *Minds Stayed on Freedom*, by The Youth of the Rural Organizing & Cultural Center. Westview Press, Inc., 1991.**

Holmes County is the setting for this extraordinary oral history of the Mississippi civil rights movement. *Minds Stayed on Freedom* is told in the words of the black people who participated in the Holmes County (Miss.) Freedom Movement in the mid-1960s. They are interviewed, some 25 years later, by black students under the auspices of the Rural Organizing and Cultural Center.

You should read the book twice, the first time just to hear the stories of these extraordinary people, the second time to reflect on their meanings. Most of those interviewed were poor and formally uneducated in the ‘60s. They did, however, live near Mileston, a small farming community that was started by the Far Security Administration, one of the New Deal programs to be shot down by Dixiecrats and other conservative Democrats – but not before it established a little space of independence for black farmers in this piece of rural Mississippi. (So much for the automatic association of federal programs and dependency; this one was exactly the opposite.)

The Mileston farmers owned their own land and had their own community. But they were the first to become involved in sustained efforts organized by the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) to register to vote: They had discovered that local economic independence isn’t enough. When they wanted loans they couldn’t get them – from either private banks or the Federal Farmer’s Home Administration. And they couldn’t get their cotton ginned, either. Read carefully – especially if you see community development as a strategy (as distinct from being a tactic) for black independence: *When others control markets and capital, freedom is sharply limited.*

With anyone who was part of the movement, *Minds Stayed on Freedom* brings back memories—of the courage of the first handful of people who went to the county court to register to vote; of their denial and their persistent return; of those magical turning points when the courage of the few began to spread and become a mass movement; of violence and the fear of it; of the Ku Klux Klan, the White Citizens’ Council, and the white sheriffs who supported them; of the debates about violence and nonviolence (most of the people interviewed loved Martin Luther King and had guns to protect themselves in their homes – they saw no contradiction between nonviolence and self-defense); of freedom schools, citizenship classes, community centers, boycotts of white segregationist merchants, sit-ins and protest marches; of the breakthroughs the movement brought about by finally forcing the federal government to intervene; of local election victories and federal grants; of the bittersweet results of it all – no more police brutality, political representation, some improvements in public services, and no end to the stark poverty that continues for most southern blacks.

Let some of the participants’ words give you a flavor of that story:

On the power of the Bible: Rev. J.J. Russell:

That’s the best weapon of all times. When I get it out…The policeman starts tremlin’ – he have his pistol – ‘n’ he goes to shaking…There’s something about this Bible that if you carry your Bible with you, you don’t have to worry about anything. Ain’t nobody gonna bother you.

On Mississippi Freedom Summer, Mr. Jodie “Preacher” Saffold:

You know I was happy. I wanted to come out from under slavery…I put my life on the line; I marched; I done every damn thing…I was overrejoiced…I didn’t want to come (up) like my gran-daddy come. And I didn’t want my kids to come like I did.

On school integration, Mrs. Annie Washington:

…[T]hem white college students would come over…and they would get big iron baseball bats and baseball sticks. And because we were so small, we had no protection. So we would run into the woods to try to get away from them.

(In the book’s introduction, Jay MacLeod, the oral history project’s adviser, makes an interesting observation: Holmes County blacks were more interested in ending split sessions – which meant that school was closed during cotton-picking time – and in equal education than in “integration.” They had to be convinced of busing and integration by the more middle-class leaders.)

On [northern] white college students working in the movement, Mr. Shadrach Davis:

I think they were drilled by SNCC before they ever came here…Come here and stay with us and prove to us that they wadn’t no more than us, and it wasn’t right for us saying “Yes ma’am” or “No ma’am” or “Yes sir” to ‘em. Say “yes” and “no.” They tol’ us that…

On seeking to register to vote, Mr. T.C. Johnson:

When I first went to try to register to vote, it was only three of us…We were met by some German Shepherds and the sheriff…and some of the deputies. This kinda put a little fear in your mind…

(In those days, you had to go to the county courthouse to register to vote.)

On black-white relations, Mrs. Leola Blackmon:

When we was children…[we] played together, and we’d eat at each other house…[A]fter this Movement came about…seems like they say, “This is ours, and we don’t want nobody to have it.” I can’t understand how that hate came about.

‘Everything Needs Changing’

While *Minds Stayed on Freedom* is not an analytic history, it provides the basic material to begin serious analysis of a number of questions that are just now being revisted by black Mississippians, many of them veterans of the ‘60s. Why couldn’t the movement survive its success? What happened when more middle class people, and the majority of the black pastors who had stayed out of the early period of the movement, began to become involved? Did their presence preclude the possibility of pursuing economic justice along with civil rights?

What was the role of Black Power, and the elimination of whites from SNCC in 1966? How did some whites remain active and apparently effective (as, for example, Henry and Sue Lorenzi in Holmes County)? Why weren’t poor black Mississippians, the vast majority of blacks in the state, able to hold their black middle class and pastors accountable to an economic agenda? What have been the benefits of integration? What have been its costs? The list could go on.

What was the impact of federal grants, particularly those for “citizen participation,” on the autonomous organizations of the movement? In some recent reinterpretations, the federal role is increasingly understood as destructive. Here’s how Mrs. Leola Blackmon (in Carroll County, Miss.) describes it – and note that she is talking about the earliest period of the poverty program, not the time following conservative and liberal attacks on it:

[W]hen Head Start got into the county, that split up everything. When they got the pre-schools…our leaders all jumped out of our organizations, our Freedom Democratic Party, and went for those jobs. That left the peoples that were following. Y’know how that is when something happen to a leader and nobody else can really just go on. They had peoples to take over, but didn’t have nobody strong enough to know the issues and follow them up…Then those poor peoples who had all interest in these leaders, they started saying, “They using us to get everything for themselves!” Which it was true. It was sure enough true.

Blackmon goes on to say that everything still needs changing:

Schools. It’s in a bad predicament, worse than when my children was there…The banks. The courthouse….Far as jobs in Carroll County, everything needs changing…

Organizers and Organizations

I was in SNCC in Holmes County in the early ‘60s. SNCC certainly debated the issue that faces all organizers and organizing groups: What is the relationship between the organizers and the organized? We thought of it as a debate between Atlanta headquarters and the field. But it was more than that. Jim Forman, SNCC’s talented executive director, saw SNCC as the center of a growing federation of organizations for which it would provide leadership. Of course the federation would be democratic, but SNCC would be at its center – in the same way that the Southern Christian Leadership Conference was at the center of the movements and organizations that related to it.

Bob Moses, SNCC’s equally talented Mississippi director, saw SNCC playing a role that was not at the center by alongside the center. Local projects would begin to connect to one another in counties, then in the state, then across state lines in the Black Belt. More currently, the Saul Alinsky-founded Industrial Areas Foundation (IAF) – which I was also associated with from 1960 until 1970 – debated and resolved the same question in favor of the direction argued by Forman. Unlike SNCC, the IAF didn’t fall apart; quite the contrary, it is slowly building a national presence for community organizing in a period with little social movement. SNCC, on the other hand, operated within the context of a rapidly developing social movement in the black South. Unfortunately, especially in its late years, it reacted to, more than provided, leadership for that movement, and ultimately it chewed itself up.

*Minds Stayed on Freedom* is, nonetheless, a tribute to the SNCC organizers, whatever their weaknesses, and their role in unleashing the talents and power of those who had been at the bottom of Mississippi’s social ladder. Indirectly, it is also a tribute to an unsung heroine of the movement: Ella Baker, who in many ways was an organizer’s organizer. She nurtured SNCC’s early development as an organization of organizers; her story is a book begging to be written.

Outside the Institutions

In yet another dimension, this book tells an organizing story. SNCC didn’t work through institutions, and frequently it went into an area with no invitation from local leaders. When field secretaries entered new towns, they sometimes had to sleep in their cars for weeks until the first breakthrough: A black homeowner would let them stay at their place. In Greenwood, where I worked, it was Laura McGee who “owned her own place.” SNCC looked for and developed courageous people into new leaders. It found them in the few places of independence available to black people – beauticians and independent farmers, for example – and in day laborers, sharecroppers, tenant farmers, and domestics, who weren’t independent and who frequently sacrificed job and home to be movement pioneers. Only a small number of black pastors participated, and black teachers and others were also conspicuously absent in this early period.

The black preacher comes in for some heavy criticism from these veterans of the struggle. On the relationship of the poor farmers who were first involved in the movement, and the preachers and teachers who came later, T.C. Johnson tells us:

…[I]t would be a little tension because the grassroot people were the first to do anything, where the preachers and the teachers were afraid…[S]ome of the preachers wouldn’t let ‘em [church members] invite us there. We got turned down a lot of times from the black minister. And the black people were supporting him, paying him. He said he didn’t believe in mixing politics with the Bible, but it was fear.

Exceptions existed, to be sure, but about most of them Johnson says, “These other preachers, they’d come in and hoot and holler well after everybody had registered and was runnin’ for positions.”

Like Fred Ross – Cesar Chavez’ “secret weapon” in developing the Farm Workers Union – who couldn’t work through the Catholic churches in California because the pastors wouldn’t let him in, the SNCC organizers had to go directly to the people without the blessing of local institutional leadership.

While significant numbers of lower to middle-income people can be organized through institutions, equally significant numbers cannot. Many of them are alienated from churches, civic clubs, and other groups that might have linked them to an institutionally-based organizing effort. Or, they are in institutions, but their institutional leaders are opposed to participation in community action; or they participate but in right-wing groups. Community organizers ought to address them as well as the people who are more linked to society, even if they are not yet the beneficiaries of its promises for democratic participation and economic well-being. *Minds Stayed on Freedom* is about an inspired attempt to do just that.