



# THE VIEW

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## MISSION MISSISSIPPI: TRAVELING THE LAST MILE IN RACE RELATIONS

BY  
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Virtually all Mississippians, and Southerners for that matter, have been in those conversations where after reflecting on the dark bygone days of racial strife in the South we then breathed a sigh of relief that the worst of those days were behind us. But equally as often, someone offers the sobering opinion that we still have a ways to go.

In that regard there is a somewhat more troubling phenomena developing. It is hard not to notice that as the younger citizens among us mature and commence to engage in discussions about social issues there is, somewhat understandably I suppose, an obvious insensitivity to the remaining wounds inflicted by the decades-long struggle for racial equality. I use the term “understandably” because younger people, both black and white, were spared the unpleasantness of being witnesses to the indignities and worse of life in Mississippi leading up to the 1950’s and on into the 60’s and 70’s. Hence their reaction to the customary, “But we’ve still got a ways to go,” comment is often along the lines of “I haven’t done any of that stuff to anybody so I don’t need to feel any responsibility for making amends.”

Clearly, the “last mile” toward racial reconciliation may be one of the toughest. Traversing this last mile is the goal that Mission Mississippi, an organization built just for this trip, has set out to accomplish. While I have not been nearly as involved in my local Mission Mississippi organization as I should have been, I have been there enough to learn of its work and to deeply appreciate those like Dr. Dolphus Weary, Pastor Neddie Winters, and Dan Hall and many others who have dedicated themselves to traveling that last mile and to bring as many who will come with them.

Mission Mississippi recently sponsored its Mayor’s Prayer Luncheon in the new Jackson Convention Center. The honored guests were the Mayors of Mississippi’s municipalities. Prayers and remembrances were offered for these and other public servants who strive daily to serve their fellow citizens in these difficult times. The keynote address was brought by

long time Mission Mississippi supporter Dan Jones, Chancellor of Ole Miss. He offered a poignant lesson based on his life's experiences in other cultures of how easy it can be for well-meaning people to misunderstand one another unless they work hard at keeping this from happening. Even more to the point, Chancellor Jones talked of the challenges faced in ridding ourselves of seemingly harmless traditions that carry a different, more harmful meaning for others of our friends and neighbors whose experiences are vastly different from our own. Jones stated that we often have good intentions to promote better race relations, but that we must take the next step and act on those intentions. This is precisely what Mission Mississippi is in business to do. The motto of Mission Mississippi is "Changing Mississippi.... One Relationship at a Time."

Local meetings of Mission Mississippi follow that motto quite well. White and black citizens discuss ways that in our day-to-day activities we may have, perhaps unknowingly, acted in an insensitive or perhaps even racist manner based on stereotypes that may have been ingrained in us since birth. Uncovering and dealing with these delicate feelings are what make the last mile of racial reconciliation such a tough one to travel. History clearly shows that in doing away with all of the old Jim Crow era laws that made racial discrimination a matter of legal statute providing for such things as racially separate waiting rooms and drinking fountains, we had all of the force and power of the federal courts and Congress and later state legislatures to scrub the books clean of such inequalities. What is left is the part of the job that can only be accomplished on a human-to-human basis.

As I often tell my classes, Mississippi is fortunate that we are closer than any other state in the Union to being evenly divided racially. If we are to ever prosper in Mississippi it must be together because neither black nor white can make it without the other. Thankfully, Mission Mississippi understands the terrain to be traversed over the last mile toward racial reconciliation and that preachers like Dolphus Weary, Neddie Winters, and Dan Hall are willing to lead the way.



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## **ABOUT THE INSTITUTE:**

Elected to the United States Senate in 1947 with the promise to "plow a straight furrow to the end of the row," John C. Stennis recognized the need for an organization to assist governments with a wide range of issues and to better equip citizens to participate in the political process. In 1976, Senator Stennis set the mission parameters and ushered in the development of a policy research and assistance institute which was to bear his name as an acknowledgment of his service to the people of Mississippi.

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