



**Mark Newman.** *Divine Agitators: The Delta Ministry and Civil Rights in Mississippi.* Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2004. xvii + 352 pp. \$22.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8203-2526-2.



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**Published on** H-South (December, 2004)

## One Assessment of the 1960s Movement

In September 1964, the National Council of Churches (NCC) began a civil rights project in Mississippi that it named the Delta Ministry (DM). The NCC, a New York based group that represented most Protestant and Orthodox Christian denominations in America, started the DM after its interest in the southern black freedom struggle deepened in 1963. The organization planned the DM to last for ten years, but it became Mississippi's largest civil rights group by 1967 and provided numerous services and programs for area blacks through the 1980s. Mark Newman's *Divine Agitators* provides an account of the Delta Ministry's history, activities, successes, and limitations. His study is the first of a crucial organization that historians have previously neglected or ignored altogether. Yet *Divine Agitators* does much more than trace the development and detail the achievements of a single civil rights group. In examining the DM's post-1965 activities, Newman exposes the challenges and restrictions that faced the Mississippi black freedom struggle after federal legislation ended de jure segregation in the decade's early years. In other words, the author focuses attention on what became of the movement after integration occurred, which is a period civil rights scholars have only recently

begun to analyze. Because *Divine Agitators* examines the plight of one group in the wake of successful African American direct action protests and judicial victories, it provides an indispensable contribution to existing civil rights scholarship.

Newman clearly explains the Delta Ministry's original goals and uses them to measure the group's successes and failures. He argues that the DM sought to provide "relief, education and training, self-help initiatives, economic and community development, and the fostering of indigenous leadership and leadership skills" in the poorest areas of Mississippi (p. 9). Consequently, the Ministry's primary work occurred in the Delta, but it also established projects in Hattiesburg and McComb. Despite the existence of numerous obstacles, the DM achieved many of its objectives. For instance, Ministry workers successfully pressured state and federal agencies to distribute relief funds to the state's poorest communities. They also distributed tons of food and clothing to local blacks and supervised the establishment of federally funded health clinics in Mound Bayou and Greenville. Newman estimates that the DM registered approximately

70,000 blacks through their local voter registration efforts. One of the book's most intriguing stories concerns the DM's registration efforts in Hattiesburg after the death of area activist Vernon Dahmer. Furthermore, the Ministry generated 6,000 jobs in twenty-six years through their economic development programs. While Newman presents many accounts of DM successes, it is in revealing the organization's limitations and failures that the author makes his most crucial points.

A lack of adequate funding proved the DM's most important obstacle throughout its existence. Some NCC denominations, particularly those in the south, refused to contribute to the program or constantly threatened to withdraw their financial support of DM endeavors that they deemed too controversial or divisive. As a result, DM staff members often spent more time raising funds than helping poor Mississippians. The best example Newman provides that illuminates the DM's economic restrictions appears in his examination of a project known as Freedom City. Shortly after its formation, the Ministry purchased 400 acres of land near Greenville as an alternative to the out-migration of displaced black field hands. Ninety-four residents moved to the commune in July 1966. The group's main goals for Freedom City were economic self-sufficiency and political independence for its inhabitants. The commune became the DM's primary project soon after its planning began. Organization leaders began a number of classes for women and children, and taught agricultural techniques and industrial skills to males. Yet the ambitious experiment ultimately failed due to numerous financial setbacks and poor planning on the DM's behalf. For example, the Ministry exhausted all of its initial funds before the construction of permanent housing for residents began. Economic problems mounted due to the indifference federal agencies and church groups possessed concerning the project, and outside industries failed to relocate their businesses to Freedom City as DM leaders had planned. Due to these and other setbacks, the project eventually collapsed. The failure of Freedom City, therefore, demonstrated that single civil rights groups depended on substantial support from outside sources to offer meaningful social, economic, and political changes for poor blacks in the late 1960s and 1970s.

Another limitation the DM faced was the tension that existed within the black community during the post-1965 African American struggle. The strains ultimately distanced civil rights organizations from each other and dissolved groups from within, and separated blacks on the local, state, and national level. Class divisions lay at the

root of most problems the DM encountered from African Americans. The black middle class and their churches offered little support to Ministry activities, and often criticized their efforts as too radical. Activists from the middle classes affiliated with the NAACP because of their conservative, gradualist approach to social change. Black Mississippians who had attained some economic and social stability in recent years did not want to risk their status for an unpopular, and losing, cause. Although Newman maintains that "the divide between (the NAACP and DM) often arose as much over competition for power and influence as over class or ideological differences," his evidence suggests that class-based tensions within the black community provided an impenetrable barrier for Ministry workers (p. ix). In addition, the DM faced internal problems by the 1970s. Under the direction of Owen Brooks, a black northerner who the NCC appointed DM director in 1967, the group split into two separate units. Brooks wanted the DM to focus on statewide goals that achieved broad results, while the concerned staff of the Delta Ministry wished to promote projects and leaders on the local level. After 1977, the DM existed as a one-man organization under Brooks. Newman convincingly establishes that internal problems, rather than white resistance, impaired the post-60s movement.

Despite the numerous strengths *Divine Agitators* possesses, two issues concerning the author's sources exist. First, why did Newman not consult the Mississippi State Sovereignty Commission files in Jackson? He mentions the group three times in his text but ignored their papers. It would be interesting to know how the state's self-described "segregation watchdog" reacted to DM endeavors. Newman, in fact, does not cite any materials from Jackson's Mississippi State Archives. It is puzzling that he failed to consult their collection or, if he examined the holdings, neglected to mention it in the endnotes. Finally, and more importantly, Newman fails to critically examine the biases inherent in some of his evidence concerning Freedom City. As the commune fell apart, DM organizers often blamed black residents for the collapse. Instead of analyzing this view as a product of frustration or class and/or regional bias, Newman substantiates the assumption without producing any supporting evidence. He states that local blacks "proved incapable of developing and sustaining disciplined work schedules," resisted authority, refused to work, and "misused and did not maintain" farming machinery that the DM purchased for their use (pp. 127, 136). Newman concludes that commune residents "were unable to adjust to Freedom City's demands for self-support and self-governance" (p. 222).

Such a view is tantamount to blaming local blacks for commune failure without taking their situation and opinions into account. My suspicion is that their appraisal of the situation would differ greatly from those of their supervisors.

Despite these relatively minor grievances, Mark Newman proves that the Delta Ministry had “a significant impact on the black struggle for equality in Mississippi” (p. xi). Most importantly, *Divine Agitators* reveals the limitations civil rights organizations faced in the post-1965 movement. Federal apathy, organizational rivalries, class conflict within the black community, and the agricultural displacement compounded problems blacks faced as the 1970s began. In addition,

illiteracy, inadequate health care, educational restraints, and poor job training continued to plague the state and made the DM’s struggle quixotic in scope. More studies of the 1970s movement are needed to provide a complete understanding of the accomplishments, shortcomings, and true potential the second reconstruction had to transform the social and economic fortunes of southern blacks. Perhaps Owen Brooks said it best when he observed that since the 1960s, “The situation in Mississippi is not better, although for many individuals things are better” (p. 209). Newman’s study of the DM validates such a conclusion. Civil rights historians must now discern if Brooks’s statement applies to other states and communities, or if it is another feature unique to the Magnolia State.

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**Citation:** J. Michael Butler. Review of Newman, Mark, *Divine Agitators: The Delta Ministry and Civil Rights in Mississippi*. H-South, H-Net Reviews. December, 2004.

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