

Report: Mississippi, Northern Ireland & Israel

The following is a report on the Mastery Foundation's work during March in Clarksdale, Mississippi, Northern Ireland and Israel. I hope you will take the time to read it and find out more about the magnitude of the possibilities and work ahead of us in 2004.

April 12, 2004



CLARKSDALE, MISSISSIPPI

In Mississippi, the Mastery Foundation works directly with citizens committed to bridging the divisions in their community and making it a better place to live.

The first two days in March, four of us – Myrtle Gallow, Allan Cohen, Peter Block, and myself – traveled to Clarksdale, Mississippi to talk with people there about our strategy and activities for the coming months. We started our visit with a lunch in a private room at a local restaurant. Twenty participants from our last two Community Empowerment workshops came to talk with us and to share their perspectives on the possibilities and challenges facing their community.

Not only was it a great conversation, it gave us a context for the meetings and talks we would have with other citizens during our stay. Here is a summary of the underlying concerns as we heard them expressed again and again by young and old, black and white, wealthy and poor.

“We need to get more people involved, to encourage volunteerism. If you are interested in building community in Clarksdale, you go to meetings where you find the same people and the same lack of results. There are too many organizations knocking on the same doors. We can reach out to churches, groups, and service organizations that are already organized, but sometimes it is hard to bring people together who are already attached to their own organizations with their own missions.”

“The public schools are not providing the kind of education our youth deserve. One reason we are losing 20 to 30 year-olds is their need to move out to find good schools for their children. While many elected and volunteer groups are working on this problem, it is complex and slow to change.”

“We need more activities for kids after school, activities that will bring kids together across racial

and economic divides. Everyone agrees that there is nothing for young people to do. We lack a dialogue between all of the different agencies committed to supporting youth in Clarksdale. We also need to work with parents, and not just the youth. People are missing an outside perspective. A lot of kids have never been out of Clarksdale.”

“The economy is very bad, and there is talk of losing even more jobs. We are lucky that farming is doing a little better right now. By one estimation, it takes a \$7 an hour job to motivate people and give them a better life than government provided benefits. An income of \$20,000 to \$25,000 a year is enough to live independently in Clarksdale. Clarksdale needs businesses that employ black females. Before the casinos (along the Mississippi River; half an hour away), there were almost no businesses that employed black females in decent paying positions. Thirty-five miles from here there are towns that are growing. Why not here? Maybe it is the power structure in town. We need to get new people involved. The old guard is changing, but it is a slow process.”

“Race relations are troubled. The changes in race relations are moving at a snail's pace. We can desegregate, but we are not going to integrate in our lifetimes. The public school has a white prom and a black prom. Two things “they” will never integrate: the country club and the schools. There is a church on every corner but even they don't get along. We have superficial get-togethers for an hour and a half, but then we don't go over to each others' homes. The power base is still old white cotton money. An African-American fraternity worked to bring a YMCA chapter into Clarksdale. It was to be an integrated institution with youth controlling its board. But a phone call from one person in town ended it: ‘We're not ready for this yet.’”

“The misuse or misdirection of support moneys. There is money in this town. What about the doctors, lawyers and churches? Can we direct their benevolent giving to Clarksdale instead of elsewhere? We are trying to get a United Way going. There is no



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interagency council. A lot of money is wasted on more studies, or on rehabilitating houses that the occupants won't own."

That evening, during a potluck dinner at the old Greyhound Bus station which has been newly renovated as a community center (including the wonderful neon sign of the running Greyhound), we had a chance to hear from the 50 people who gathered there, some of their ideas for what they would like to see the Mastery Foundation do this year in Clarksdale.

There was widespread agreement among these past participants that the first priority is to increase community awareness of our programs and bring people to the conversation who are not obvious candidates and therefore are not usually included. In particular, they expressed a concern for working with young people and their parents. These participants also asked us to work with them and teach them how to use our principles and methods in their work with others.

The next morning we took all we had heard to a meeting with the two local Clarksdale citizens – Steve Stewart, publisher of the daily paper, and Doris Miller, Program Director of CURET, a local non-profit organization – who have kept the conversation alive over the past two years. We agreed that this year we will work on the following three areas:

Expanding the circle of participation. We will bring more citizens into the conversation by holding another Community Empowerment Program, and encouraging more individuals to become part of the group of active volunteers working to improve Clarksdale. We will also provide some shorter programs such as evening lectures to draw in the participation of those on the margins of the community and to introduce them to new ideas and possibilities for themselves and for Clarksdale.

Keeping the conversation going. We will continue to design ways to reconnect past participants with each other and with the purpose of building a better Clarksdale. In addition to the ongoing monthly potluck dinners, we will also design community meetings and half-day programs to counteract our natural isolation, to keep everyone

engaged, inspired, and talking, and to extend the boundaries of what can be safely discussed.

Developing local leaders. Our methodology is uniquely effective at connecting people, creating trust and relationship, and giving people new ways of listening and speaking that lead to new possibilities and actions. Participating in our programs is a beginning, but learning to use these skills requires more than simply experiencing their effectiveness. So we will offer training classes and programs for those who have asked for a deeper understanding and knowledge of how to apply the tools we offer.

To ensure we have the funding to do all this, we will also put in place a plan for funding the next three to five years of our work and develop a network of financial support for what we are doing in Clarksdale and in Mississippi.

Perhaps the best summary of what we are committed to in Clarksdale was given by one of the high school students who participated last year. He and the other students in the workshop talked about building a bridge between the students who attend public schools and the students who attend private schools. At the lunch, someone asked him if there was a bridge yet. He thought for a moment and then said, "There's a bridge, but there's not much traffic on it." Our work is to create more traffic on all the bridges that connect the citizens of Clarksdale to each other and to their community.

Northern Ireland

In 2003, we completed the first, five-year phase of the Ireland Initiative, which was designed to bring together and build a strong network of community leaders working on conflict resolution, community building, and peace and reconciliation in Northern Ireland. 2004 marks the beginning of the second phase of transferring to these leaders the distinctions and approaches we offer and working with them at the grass roots level to support their success.

There are two main purposes for this visit to Northern Ireland. We need to finalize dates and locations for the programs we will offer here this year, and we want feedback from participants in the Intensives about the topics and areas where they want us to go deeper or offer more. In addition, we

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have a new, small video camera and Carole Schurch, a friend, volunteer, and sponsor, has agreed to come along and capture interviews and footage we can use to tell others about our work.

Annie O'Hare picks us up at one of the Belfast airports on Sunday afternoon and we drive on to Derry - Londonderry. Annie's sister is Mary Breslin, the person who coordinates all our activities in Northern Ireland. We are having dinner at Mary's tonight, but she is not feeling well, so Annie will be doing the cooking.

Gathering at Mary's house are the members of the team who put on the Making a Difference workshop. The diversity of participants at these interfaith workshops is reflected in this team. There are two clergy, Patricia McBride, a Presbyterian minister and new board member, and Eamon O'Connor, Catholic a priest from Roscommon. The laity are well represented by Annie, Marie McGuinness, Gene and Patience Riley, Mary Gillespie, Norman McClelland, and Paula McGinley.

I am forever impressed by how often and how far people go to participate with us. Marie and Eamon have driven more than four hours from the center of the island to be with us. In spite of Mary's absence, it is a wonderful evening of good food, work, and conversation. No matter how much we can manage by e-mail and conference calls, nothing replaces the warmth, fun, and empowerment we all seem to feel at just being together.

On Monday, Mary continues to be under the weather, but she has done such a good job of setting up our meetings that Carole and I manage on our own.

We have lunch with a Kate O'Dubhchair from the Centre for Peace Building in County Donegal. She and a couple other participants have had some success in using some of what they learned at last year's Intensive. She was also at the Community Empowerment Program last summer and remarks on the exercise where participants write their hopes and fears on sticky notes and then group them on the walls. As it happened in the meeting room there were a lot of windows. So the fears were grouped together on a wall, and the hopes were grouped together on

the window panes next to the wall. The placement was accidental but it quickly became metaphorical – the Wall of Fear and the Window of Hope.

Because we offer workshops and programs, the Mastery Foundation is often mistakenly thought of as another organization trying to establish itself in the field of peace and reconciliation or conflict resolution. In reality, our expertise is in neither of those areas. What we are is an organization with new and empowering tools to make available to those already working on reconciliation and community building. Kate is one of many people we will meet with over the next few days who has a strong interest in working with us to develop more command of those tools.

This afternoon we are invited to a seminar arranged by the Holywell Trust. There are about 50 people at the meeting at least half of whom are students from Rutgers and West Virginia Universities. They are spending part of their spring break here, learning about the situation and going home to write papers for classes in sociology and conflict resolution.

Sometimes it seems there as many people studying conflict in Northern Ireland as there are engaging in it. We have been told since we began this Initiative in 1998, that groups (particularly American groups) come and go with great ideas and the best of intentions but little affect. People outside the situation have the impression you can produce results simply by lifting people from one community and another community and bringing them together. But real accomplishment is a slow process of building trust and common ground. The challenge is to create enough authentic relationship that they can build a new future together.

There is also a funding-driven pursuit of the five groups targeted for help by government agencies – victims, ex-prisoners, youth, women's groups, and persons displaced from their homes – that has made many of these groups suspicious of organizations who offer to help them.

But this group is here to listen and to learn. A local panel talks about the issues and hopes for Derry-Londonderry. Their observations and questions are compelling.

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- What happens to good ideas that they don't happen?
- How might we engage the community within the walls of Derry in becoming and celebrating an intentional community?
- We are miles away from celebrating diversity. We need to work on issues of respect and the recognition of differences.
- The whole community is suffocating from its own introversion.
- There is enormous difficulty in mobilizing people around things like citizenship and solidarity.
- We have mostly a rights-based model of citizenship with no comparable sense of responsibility.
- Why are we talking about reconciliation? There are two cynical answers – to prepare Protestants for a united Ireland or to prepare Nationalists for no change. Other possible answers are: To stop the violence, and it is in my own self interest.

Monday evening we meet with some past participants from the Derry-Londonderry area. I ask them how the Mastery Foundation can support them now, and we have a great conversation about the difficulty of dealing with those tense and difficult situations where someone is upset or where two or more people are in conflict with each other. The culture of Ireland and Northern Ireland is one of great caution in what you say and to whom. Great care is taken to avoid conversations that could be unpleasant or upsetting. As the line in a Seamus Heaney poem says: 'Whatever you say, say nothing.'

Tuesday morning we meet with the head of the Holywell Trust, who is exploring the idea of creating an intentional community within the old city walls. Then it is off to the outskirts of Belfast to spend the afternoon in conversation with Brian Kenneway. Brian is a Presbyterian minister and one of the brave souls who came to our first conference in 1999 (when we were just another suspect, do-good, American organization) and has remained a friend ever since.

Our talk is of politics and the prospects for the future. The shared (what they call devolved) assembly has been dissolved for some time now, and there is no indication it will be reinstated anytime soon. That means Northern Ireland is again under the direct rule of the British government. In the

last election, the more conservative Unionist voters dominated and the power went from David Trimble's moderate Ulster Unionist Party to Ian Paisley's hard line Democratic Unionist Party. Paisley refuses to recognize or talk with Sinn Fein, and the result is a stalemate.

Parties and organizations on both sides have long used the refusal to recognize or talk with other parties and organizations as a way of holding on to their position. Brian tells us about a recent trip to South Africa that was organized for the two groups in conflict around Drumcree Church in Armagh. In the end, only one group went because going together risked too much for either group.

We drive back to Derry for a quick dinner and then to Omagh for a gathering of participants at the home of Margaret Geelan. It is St. Patrick's Day eve, so it is impressive that there are fifteen of us seated around her large dining room table. From the liveliness of the conversation, you might mistake it for Christmas eve.

The group is full of enthusiasm and ideas for more work they want from the Mastery Foundation. One request is to help invent or develop a language free of sectarianism so people can discuss issues together and move from expressions of individual citizenship to common government. They also want more work on how to distinguish and separate the story from the facts. Another intriguing question is what if you take 'no' as the beginning of a conversation rather than the end of one? How can you hold that conversation so that people keep engaging and growing? And one more poignant observation is about the power and hurt of the exclusion that is such an ordinary part of life here and how oblivious they have become to that as a culture.

Wednesday is St. Patrick's Day, and as you would expect, it is a big holiday here. While it is unquestionably big with Catholics, it is also popular with many Protestants. Many towns have parades, and on a sunny day, everyone turns out to watch and applaud. Afterward, many of them will stop at the local pub for a drink, which on this day they refer to as "drowning my shamrock."

At home, I might remember to wear green on St. Patrick's Day, but here you actually wear shamrocks

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– not artificial shamrocks but real shamrocks. You buy bunches of them in little pots (wee pots as they say here), then you take them out of the dirt, clean off the roots as best you can, wrap the roots in foil, and pin the live plants onto your jacket. Our friend Gerard Finnegan and his daughters brought us all the makings which still look lively when we take them off at the end of the day.

We have prevailed on Gerard to make time for a breakfast meeting to talk about having a Community Empowerment Program in Derry-Londonderry again this summer. Two former British Army bases, one on each side of the river, have been decommissioned and given back to city. So a huge redevelopment process is beginning, and there is interest in having a Community Empowerment Program for those working on this project and those working on the idea of an intentional community. The experience could help individuals who represent diverse interests come together and create a foundation of relationship and trust on which they could then build and work together.

Because so many businesses are closed for the holiday, we use the rest of the day to visit possible sites for this year's programs and to shoot video footage we can use later. It is a cold, windy day, but the sun is shining on the people of St. Patrick, making the countryside look as glorious as advertised by the Tourist Board.

Thursday, we are in Belfast for lunch with another group of participants. Again, they emphasize the value of being able to talk and work with people in the midst of emotion and conflict. They also recognize that none of them is free from the cultural and personal prejudices that continue to divide Northern Ireland and are eager to do the work to get underneath those feelings and to take on their own development.

Over the past five years, Peter Block and Werner Erhard have led our annual, intensive, three-day program (Intensive I), and for the past two years they have also spent an additional two days on leadership training. This year, our own team of Mastery Foundation leaders will lead Intensive I, and Werner and Peter will lead Intensive II so that past participants from Intensive I can work on the issues and areas that challenge them most. The

conversations we have had on this trip have given us an abundance of raw material from which we can now plan and design Intensive II.

Each day of the visit (and since my return to the US), I have checked in on Mary Breslin. She has been diagnosed as having gall stones and is now awaiting surgery. Meanwhile, she has returned to work part time and is actively engaged in finalizing plans for the 2004 programs.

Israel

In Israel, the Mastery Foundation is only beginning the first phase of creating a familiarity with our work and building a broad network of relationships among those who are working on peace and coexistence.

Carole and I arrive in Tel Aviv on Friday afternoon and meet Debbie Frieze who has already arrived. The Jewish Sabbath begins tonight at sundown, so Friday and Saturday are the weekend here. Some of us are old enough to remember when most businesses in the U.S. were closed on Sundays. Here most everything is closed on Saturday.

So our first day in the country will be some much-needed time off and a chance to relax with friends. There has been an unusual amount of rain here this winter, and spring is well underway with flowers blooming everywhere and temperatures in the low 70s.

On Sunday, we meet with Sari Gal and Ruthi Gilat from the Rabin Center. Sari and Ruthi came to the Ireland Intensive in 2002 and last year they invited us to give a program for 25 of their staff and leaders and volunteers in the Handshake Program. This year, they want to discuss two new program ideas with us. We meet at a restaurant in the old port city of Jaffa that is the southern part of Tel Aviv and have lunch overlooking the Mediterranean Sea.

Their first idea is to host a Community Empowerment Program with participants from several separate communities: Rosh Ha'ayin and Kfar Kassem, B'nai Tzion and Jaljulia, and Lod.

Rosh Ha'ayin was originally a traditional Yemenite Jewish community, but 20 years ago it

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began to attract a younger and more Westernized Jewish population. These two groups are divided. Local politics are still driven by old loyalties, but there have been recent changes, and today there are four women on the city council – an unusually high number in Israel. There is also the possibility of including participants from the nearby Arab village of Kfar Kassem, a poor municipality dominated by four families or “hamullas” and dealing with problems of violence, drugs, and conflict.

Kfar Kassen is famous because of an incident that occurred there in October 1956 at the beginning of the Suez War. An early curfew had been declared, unbeknownst to the villagers still in the fields. Villagers returning home after the curfew were shot by Israeli soldiers on the order of their superior officer, and 49 were killed. Initially, news of the event was censored. Eventually the case resulted in a landmark ruling by the Israeli Supreme Court that army and other security forces not only have the right, but the duty to refuse to execute commands which represent offenses against human rights and the state’s legal code. In the 1950s an industrial park was built at the border of Rosh Ha’ayin on land taken from Kfar Kassem. Today, Kfar Kassem would like to receive some of the taxes earned by that industrial park, for which negotiations are now underway.

B’nai Tzion is an old and wealthy moshav (similar to a kibbutz but its members are more independent). They approached the nearby Arab village of Jaljulia about cooperating on education issues and creating a connection between the two schools.

The third area that might be included in the Community Empowerment Program is Lod, a bankrupt city outside Tel Aviv and near the main airport. The Rabin Center offers its Handshake program there and has started work based on Franklin Roosevelt’s Four Freedoms: freedom of speech and expression, freedom of worship, freedom from want, and freedom from fear.

The second program the Rabin Center would like us to offer in August is an advanced leadership course for those who participated in the program we offered at the Rabin Center last year. Both Ruthi and Sari tell us they have observed these participants taking on greater leadership roles in

their communities, even in the face of increasingly difficult circumstances. This advanced program would also include those from Israel who have attended other Mastery Foundation programs in Ireland, Northern Ireland, Mississippi.

On Monday we are to leave for Jerusalem at 8:30am. As I’m finishing getting ready, Debbie comes to my room to tell me that the spiritual leader of Hamas has been assassinated by the Israeli army, and that Hamas has declared all-out war on Israel. (Hamas is the main fundamentalist Islamic movement in the Palestinian territories. It is dedicated to the destruction of Israel and the creation of an Islamic state in Palestine, and is best known for its tactic of suicide bombings against Israeli civilians.) Debbie, who has been in Israel several times when there was tension, says she is concerned about how serious this is.

I call Amit Leshem. Amit came to the Intensive in 2002 and to our Mississippi program in 2003. Her work with the Van Leer Institute is focused on Palestinians, and she often travels to the West Bank to see them. When I tell her we need to know whether or not to come to Jerusalem, she reassures me. We aren’t going to be on public buses, and nothing is likely to happen for several days. But we do decide we will change the location of our participant gathering in Haifa from an outdoor café to our hotel lobby.

Our driver takes us to Jerusalem on a different road than we have taken in the past, and at the junction where traffic can go in and out of Ramallah, there is a checkpoint. They aren’t very interested in us and wave us through, but it is unsettling to have machine guns pointed directly at you anywhere in the world.

Our schedule on these trips does not leave much time for sightseeing, but since this is Carole’s first trip to Israel, Debbie asks the driver to stop at the Western Wall on our way to the hotel. We check first with a friend in the Israeli diplomatic corps that it will be safe, then drive into the old city. You have to walk through a security screening similar to an airport to get to the Wall that once was part of the second temple. The Wall has been separated by another wall or fence so that two-thirds of the length is available for the men who come to pray and a third

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is available for the women. Near the women's wall is a wooden table piled high with prayer books. I find one in English and it falls open to a prayer for peace.

Our first meeting in Jerusalem is at the offices of Shatil in the Talpiot industrial area. Shatil was created by the New Israel Fund to support NGOs in Israel that are working on human rights, social change, and pluralism. Shatil provides workshops and consulting to the NGOs and coordinates coalitions of organizations that want to work together and need a neutral partner. They are also initiating a few projects of their own. They have a paid staff of 100 (not all of them full time and no volunteers to speak of) and work with 300 to 400 organizations each year.

Three executives with Shatil have attended the programs in Ireland and Northern Ireland. As a result of their experience, they have invited us to meet with the director and a facilitator to talk about the work of the Mastery Foundation and where it might be useful to Shatil.

Among the issues and concerns they are facing as an organization are: how to facilitate connection and trust between Jews and Arabs, particularly in the workplace; how to promote pluralism within Jewish society, which includes religious diversity and integrating new immigrants; and how to cope with the human rights violations that result from the fence being erected between Jewish and Palestinian areas. Recently, Shatil has become more interested in what they call 'dialogue for action' as distinct from dialogue for the sake of dialogue. They repeat the comment made by an Arab participant to a Jewish participant at a recent dialogue group: "You come here so you can sleep better at night. I come here so that you don't sleep better."

Given the morning's events, today is especially tough for anyone in Israel working on peace and coexistence between Arabs and Jews. While they struggle with questions about what difference they are making, I find myself newly impressed and inspired by the courage it takes to continue in the face of such difficult conditions.

After talking for two hours, we agree that the next step will be for more Shatil people to participate in

a Mastery Foundation program, perhaps by sending some people to one of the Rabin Center programs. The director asks us about funding, which gives us an opportunity to talk about the remarkable donors committed to our work. Because of their support and generosity, we are able to pay the costs of having our facilitators travel to and stay in Israel while our partner organization pays local program costs such as meeting rooms, lunches, and supplies. And in those cases where it can, the local organization also pays a program fee.

Our next meeting is with Amit Leshem at the Van Leer Institute. We are there to discuss her Jaffa (or Yafo in Arabic) project which brings together 14 Arabs and Jews living in that community. Their goal is to create bridges showing that Jews and Arabs can live together. Amit is concerned that her facilitators know how to talk about conflict but not how to move into action. We spend some time talking with Amit about the possibility of offering a Community Empowerment Program as part of her project and agree to work together to develop a proposal.

Tuesday on our way to Haifa, we stop at the village of Neve Shalom/Wahat al-Salam (Oasis of Peace) which was established more than 30 years ago as a place where Jews and Arabs could live together. Ahmad and Maram, two participants who came to Ireland in 2002, live here. We stopped just to say hello, but Ahmad surprises us by asking if we would consider offering a Community Empowerment Program in Tamra, the village northeast of Haifa where he grew up.

Tamra has a population of 30,000 people who are predominantly young and Muslim. Ahmad tells us that taking initiative, volunteering and engaging in community work are not well developed ideas in this village. "When people are stuck where they are," he says, "they don't want to be reminded that they are able to do more than they are actually doing." So Ahmad sees the possibility of our program helping people in Tamra address their helplessness – "the general problem we all suffer from."

We arrive in Haifa and host an afternoon "open house" in our hotel lobby. Former participants and friends who are in town stop by for coffee and conversation. It's great to have a chance to hear their stories about what they have been doing. It is also

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encouraging to hear them ask for more work with us when we return in August. They are definitely ready to go deeper into what they have learned and how to apply it.

On Wednesday morning we visit the Leo Baeck Education Center. Founded in 1938 as a preschool, this was the first Reform Jewish institution in Israel. Today, in addition to a junior and senior high school, the campus includes a community center, a sports center, a synagogue, and an early childhood center.

We have been invited to Leo Baeck by one of our participants in Northern Ireland in 2003, who is interested in the possibility of our working with the social workers who manage and staff the Community Center. After a tour and meeting on the campus, we also visit two community centers they have established in the Arab section of Haifa and in a mixed neighborhood. A quarter of their community center members are Arab, though they tell us it is now difficult to raise money for activities that integrate Jews and Arabs.

Back in Tel Aviv on Thursday, we meet with some of the participants in last year's Rabin Center program. We are particularly interested in finding out which ideas have stuck with them and proved most useful. We have an engaging discussion about the role of silence in our programs—and how deeply it challenges people from this region. Almost all participants from Israel give this their lowest evaluation in follow-up surveys. So our questions about that set off a lively discussion about the impatient, action-oriented character of those from Israel, their unfamiliarity with experiential learning, and their need for a better intellectual understanding of our purpose in including silence in the design.

Just as in Northern Ireland, the conversations we have had in Israel have laid the groundwork for the next steps in widening this network of relationships and providing us with a foundation on which we can build. Of course, there are likely to be changes in plans and corrections in course throughout the year, but it is a good beginning, and we look forward to going to work on the possibilities and opportunities in front of us.

