Spring 5-2017

Delta Hands for Hope: A Force for Reconciliation and Sustainable Development in the Delta?

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Delta Hands for Hope: A Force for Reconciliation and Sustainable

Development in the Delta?

by

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A Thesis
Submitted to the Honors College of
The University of Southern Mississippi
in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirement for the Degree
of Bachelor of Science
in the Department of Geography

December 2016

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Abstract

This case study focuses on the question of whether Delta Hands for Hope, a distinctive, possibly unique faith-based organization, is able to facilitate racial reconciliation and sustainable community development in the Delta community of Shaw. If so, is it a potential model for sustainable development for other communities of the Delta and beyond? This thesis builds on existing literature about sustainable development and development in the Mississippi Delta. The original, empirical research is based on Grounded Theory methodology, a participant/observer perspective, and data gathered through in-depth, open-ended interviews. This research work suggests that racial division is pervasive in every area of the Delta's social structure and that it perpetuates generational poverty, a struggling educational system, failing city infrastructure, and lack of economic opportunities. Also, the pervasiveness of racial division requires the pursuit of racial reconciliation as part of successful and sustainable community development. Delta Hands for Hope is demonstrating an ability to facilitate racial reconciliation and therefore sustainable community development. Because of this, its philosophy and programs can be used to develop a more effective model for community development in the Delta and potentially other low-income regions.

Key Words: Community development, racial division, faith-based organizations, Mississippi Delta, poverty, racial reconciliation

Dedication

Jessica L. Davis:

Thank you, my daughter, for your encouragement, your confident

belief in my abilities and this project, for proofing pages late at night, and most of all, for

your love and friendship.

I love you.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my thesis advisor, Dr. Mark Miller, for suggesting this project, and his confidence that I would do it justice. I am very grateful for the insightful, wise, and consistent guidance that he has given me throughout the process of research and writing.

Additionally, I would like to thank the Center for Undergraduate Research of the University of Southern Mississippi for funding my research through the Eagle Scholar Undergraduate Research Grant.

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Introduction

Overview

The faith-based non-profit organization Delta Hands for Hope (DHH) is located

in the rural city of Shaw, Mississippi. Shaw is in the heart of the Mississippi Delta,

approximately 12 miles south of Clarksdale, and is in both Bolivar and Sunflower

counties. The Delta experiences poverty rates that are higher than national or state

averages with Sunflower County being one of the 20 poorest counties in the nation

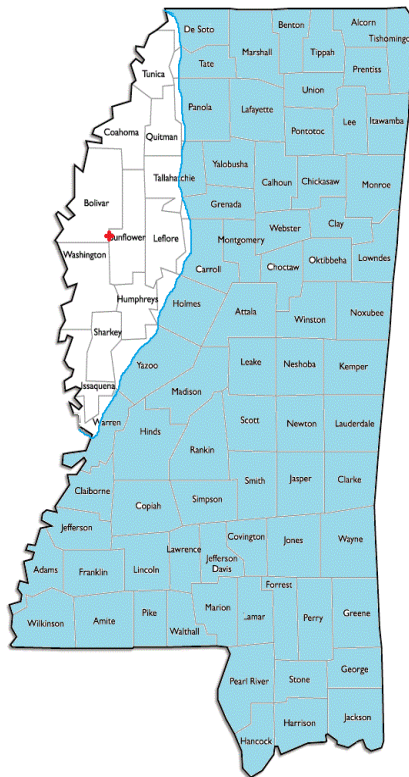(United States Census Bureau 2013).

Illustration 1. The Delta is in northwest Mississippi and is shaded white on the map. The red cross marks the location of Shaw in the

heart of the Delta and in Bolivar and Sunflower counties. Map by author using base map by World Atlas.

Delta Hands for Hope was incorporated in 2013 with the purpose of promoting community development in Shaw through a focus on children and youth in the areas of education, health, recreation, and spiritual development. Its focus was established in 2012 through meetings its founder, Jason Coker, had with community leaders to find out what they felt were Shaw's greatest areas of need. Delta Hands for Hope's approach to development is to build on a community's existing strengths, rather than emphasizing the community's needs, or deficits. They believe that this approach is instrumental in addressing generational poverty and the disenfranchisement from the main stream of Delta life that its residents experience.

Delta Hands for Hope is potentially unique, not because it is a faith-based organization, but because it is intentionally inclusive in forming partnerships with other organizations as well as with the outside groups it welcomes as volunteers. Rather than competing with other churches, other faith-based organizations, and public or private organizations, DHH seeks to partner with them. Delta Hands for Hope is also unique in that it has made a long-term commitment to Shaw of 20 years. The length of its commitment is based on an understanding of the complexity of generational poverty and the challenges of economic development in the Delta. DHH spent its first year listening to the residents of Shaw, building relationships with them, and developing its programs out of that interaction.

Problem

The social structure of the Delta is one of racial division resulting in a two-class society based on race. Whites hold economic power and African Americans the political

power. Shaw was a prosperous city until the political power shifted to its African

American residents. That shift resulted in whites leaving and taking their downtown

businesses, which meant that most of the city's tax base went with them also. Shaw is

now a predominately African American city with only six percent of its population white.

White flight also marked the beginning of the city's economic decline which today leaves

it with a struggling school system, deteriorating infrastructure, and a lack of economic

opportunity. The racial division of the Delta creates great difficulty for cities like Shaw in

starting and sustaining development. Interactions between government, private-sector

business, and citizens are heavily racialized (Harvey 2013). Racial division is pervasive

in every aspect of life in the Delta and presents significant barriers to community

development for predominately African American communities as well as the entire

Delta region.

Purpose

The purpose of this thesis is to understand the potential of DHH to facilitate racial

reconciliation and sustainable community development in Shaw. Delta Hands for Hope

appears to be unique among the many non-profit, community development organizations

that have tried to bring about meaningful and sustainable change in the Mississippi Delta.

I anticipate that in answering the question of whether DHH is a force for racial

reconciliation and sustainable development in the Delta, my findings will yield additional

insight into the challenges to development faced by Delta communities, how those

challenges can be met, and that this insight will contribute to developing a sustainable

community development model that is effective in the Delta. There is also a need for

further study of the political and economic impact of faith-based organizations in a

geographic context (Reese 2004, and Beaumont 2008). This study should also contribute

to the research field regarding the role of faith-based organizations in community

development.

Research Questions

This research seeks to answer the question of whether Delta Hands for Hope is

facilitating racial reconciliation and community development in Shaw? If so, how, and is

it sustainable? For this research, sustainable is defined as development that can be

continued by Shaw residents without continued assistance. Is being a faith-based

organization an advantage to DHH, and if so, how? Is the length of DHH's 20-year

commitment to Shaw an advantage, if so, how? Also, could DHH potentially be a model

for sustainable community development in other Delta communities?

Methodology

The research for this thesis is qualitative, guided by the principals of Grounded

Theory. This method allows data to guide theory rather than trying to understand DHH

through theories which might yield inaccurate results in the context of the Delta. The

methodology is based on interviews using open-ended questions designed to encourage

participants to express their experiences, feelings, and observations. Detailed notes taken

during each interview are transcribed, coded, and analyzed. Following Grounded Theory

protocol, data from each interview are compared to those of previous interviews to

discover any commonalities, differences, or themes, and to ensure unexpected

developments are quickly noted and followed up on. This research was also used as my

research for the McNair Scholars Program and the University of Southern Mississippi

(Travis 2016).

The researcher conducted in-depth, open-ended interviews with all the major

leaders of DHH, including key participants representing University Baptist Church in

Hattiesburg that partner with DHH. Interview subjects also included members of the

Shaw community who are not directly involved with DHH, to help assure a diverse range

of perspectives, faculty and staff of the University of Mississippi who are knowledgeable

about Shaw, a former resident of the Delta, and a pastor from another state that served in

the Delta.

Location

The Delta is the floodplain of the Mississippi and Yazoo rivers and is bordered on

the west by the Mississippi River and the Loess Bluffs on the east. Because of its rich

soil, the Delta became the location of large cotton plantations. The social structure of the

Delta was developed by cotton plantation owners in the 1800's who created a society

based on white aristocracy and African American enslavement. The structure of that

society is still in place and has resulted in deep distrust between whites and African

Americans, as well as generational poverty, inadequate education, and a lack of economic

opportunities for African Americans. The development of jobs other than agriculture for

African American residents in Shaw was repeatedly blocked to ensure adequate cheap

farm labor. This lack of economic opportunity is reflected in the higher than average

poverty rate of the Delta. An example of this is Sunflower county, where part of Shaw is

located, which is one of the 20 poorest counties in the nation.

Anticipated Conclusions and a Few Surprises

Because the Delta has a history based on plantation agriculture and segregation, I anticipated that racial division would be a factor in the challenges faced by DHH in working toward sustainable development in Shaw. I was deeply surprised, however, to find that racial division is pervasive in every aspect of Delta life and is perpetuating the poverty of the Delta. I was also surprised to learn the extent to which racial reconciliation is key to achieving sustainable development in the region. Based on the philosophy of DHH and its understanding of generational poverty and community development, I anticipated finding DHH able to facilitate reconciliation and community development. The organization surprised me with its incorporation of racial reconciliation in every aspect of what it does from its organization structure to its programs and the degree of its success.

Organization of the Paper

Chapter 2 of this thesis reviews the literature on the complex geography and society of the Mississippi Delta: the setting for the research work that follows. Chapter 3 explains and discusses the theory of grounded qualitative research that informed and guided this research project, along with the specific research methods and procedures the researcher followed. Chapter 4 details the research findings, based on extensive in-depth, open-ended interviews with project participants. Chapter 5 concludes the thesis with discussions of the overall research findings, the researcher's learning experience through the thesis process, research conclusions that were expected as well as those that were surprising, strengths and limitations of the research, and indications for further research.

Illustration 2. Flying into the Delta (thanks to a DHH volunteer who is a private pilot) allowed me to more fully grasp how plantation farming has shaped, and continues to define the physical landscape of the region. It has also shaped the social landscape. (All photos by author unless otherwise noted.)

Chapter 2

Literature Review

Racial Division in the Delta

The historical roots of the Delta's regional identity, as documented by historian

James C. Cobb (1992), are found in both an elite Delta planter class and the slave labor it

was both afraid of and dependent upon. The planter class viewed itself as an aristocracy,

and as such indulged in a lifestyle of indulgence and extravagance whether crop yields

were excellent or poor. Society was structured with the planters at the top, followed by

other classes of whites. The gulf between whites and slaves was wide, and strict rules

governing acceptable interaction of slaves with whites carried heavy penalties if violated.

This social structure based on race was essential to maintaining what the planters

considered the Delta way of life. Those in the planter class, due to the wealth generated

by cotton, held great political power in the state and guided state policy for their own

interests, from pursuing levee construction and maintenance to the treatment of slaves

and later freedmen.

Cobb reveals a region obsessed with cotton, the wealth to be gained from it, and

control over the slave labor it was so dependent upon. During Reconstruction, it became

evident that the freed slaves would use the planters' needs for labor to demand fair

treatment and the freedom to exercise their rights. In response, white planters played a

dominate role in the brutal Redemption period using violence, coercion, and rigged ballot

boxes to regain political power. These means were essential for the rebuilding of the

"Delta way of Life" after the Civil War and to regain control over the movement of

African Americans. The Black Code, or Jim Crow laws, were used to place African

Americans into legalized servitude once again at the mercy of the white elite ruling class.

Cobb notes that while the Freedmen's Bureau and other agencies worked to

ensure the rights and well-being of African Americans, those efforts were undermined by

the Federal government by either allowing Delta farmers to administer the programs

themselves or allowing them to appoint those who did. Programs intended to alleviate the

poverty and suffering of former slaves were instead used to coerce or punish African

Americans into compliance, and in many cases actually increased the profits of the

planters. "Cooperative" farm workers were allowed to receive federal assistance when

not needed on the plantation which defrayed white planter expenses. When plantation

owners needed workers for their plantation, federal programs for food or housing would

be stopped to force African Americans back to the plantations. Planters negotiated leases

with freedmen allowing them to rent farm land in exchange for part of the crop. The

leases would contain stipulations that the tenant must buy equipment from the owner, and

only sell their crops to him. Tenant farmers, more often than not, found themselves being

cheated out of fair market value for their crops. Planters shifted from tenant farming as a

means of ensuring their crops were planted and harvested, to sharecropping which was

more profitable. Sharecroppers were provided housing, paid for by a portion of the crop,

but were required to buy seeds, equipment, household supplies from the plantation store.

A few sharecroppers might end up breaking even or with a couple of dollars' profit, but

the vast majority found themselves more in debt after selling their crop. The plantation

owner made money from the crops, the inflated prices at the plantation store, and by

receiving Federal money to subsidize the barely habitable housing they provided the

sharecroppers.

Harsh and violent reprisals were used against anyone who violated the strict

separation of African Americans from the Delta life experience by whites. Cobb recounts

efforts by plantation farmers to free themselves of the dependency on black labor by

enticing Chinese immigrants to move to the Delta to be field hands. The Chinese were

unwilling to put up with the harsh working conditions and low wages of plantation work,

and opened stores to sell goods to African Americans which the Delta planters allowed.

Unfamiliar with Delta social code, Chinese treated their African American customers

with respect, socializing, and even intermarrying with them. Delta whites immediately

barred Chinese children from attending school and cut all social interactions with their

parents. Faced with the treatment reserved for African Americans, the Chinese too began

to treat African Americans as inferior. Whites who felt called as Christians to offer

medical care or food out of compassion for American Africans found themselves told to

leave their homes and the county or face physical harm. Lynchings and beatings were

considered legitimate responses to any perceived threat against the planters Delta way of

life. Traced from its beginnings in the early 1800's, the history of the Delta is that of a

region whose regional identity of a two-class society based on race has shaped and

perpetuated generational poverty and a lack of economic opportunity for African

Americans living there (Cobb 1992).

The research of geographer Charles Aiken connects the historic complexity of the

Delta's economic problems to specific, contemporary social issues in the Delta. Races

were historically segregated geographically, with the majority of African Americans

living in substandard housing. Beginning in 1964, the federal government's War on

Poverty built housing projects and offered subsidized rent in an attempt to provide

adequate housing. There was fierce opposition from the white population who did not

want the federal housing in their communities. The communities where federal housing

was provided did not offer any economic opportunity for African Americans, and

unemployment was almost guaranteed, but those realities were outweighed by their need

for livable housing. African Americans left their rural substandard housing and moved

into federal housing in what had been predominately white cities. The federal

government's housing projects inadvertently contributed to white flight and deepening

poverty. Well-intentioned but misguided policies of the federal government continue to

inadvertently perpetuate the generational poverty in the Delta because of the area's

racially divided social structure (Aiken 1990). It is because of this racially divided social

structure that the construction of Federal housing results in white flight and a further

decline in economic opportunities. Both Cobb's and Aiken's research indicate that policy

that does not account for the racial divisions in the Delta will not be sustainable and may

perhaps worsen the conditions it is intended to alleviate.

The social structures of the Delta are reflective of the southern plantation era,

Aikens notes. Continued inequities between races are a major factor in the region's

poverty rate which is among the highest in the country. African Americans gained

political power in the aftermath of the civil rights movement and voter registration. They

were elected to community and county government positions in areas with a majority

African American population, but this did not translate into economic power since whites

continued to own the vast majority of businesses and control the jobs. As political power

shifted, whites fled communities they no longer held political power in and took most, if

not all, of the local economic base with them (Aiken 1990). Twenty-three years after

Aiken's research was published, Harvey's research also finds that the social structures of

the Delta are racially designed with whites controlling the economies and African

Americans the local politics (Harvey 2013). The poverty rates for the Delta communities

that have a majority African American population continue to be higher than national or

state averages (U.S. Census Bureau 2013).

Illustration 3. Prior to a shift in political power to African Americans, Shaw was prosperous community
with a thriving downtown business district. Following white flight, the majority of the downtown buildings
are abandoned, like this one, and in various stages of deterioration.

In seeking to understand the living conditions of the very poor, Edin and Shafer

(2015) studied poor communities all over the United States, including the Delta, in the

mid-1990s. They found that the very poor struggled to survive even with welfare benefits

but were able to avoid becoming destitute. The federal and state governments enacted

welfare reform in 1996 in hopes of helping people move off federal assistance. Cash

assistance was cut drastically and the money rerouted to benefit the working poor.

Returning to the Delta 15 years later, Edin and Shafer see the same families living with

no visible cash income, now the poorest of the poor. The authors find slum landlords

charging high rent for housing that is bordering uninhabitable, but refusing to invest in

repairs or maintenance. The racial division between have and have-nots has only widened

with the have-nots trying to live on $2 or less per day per person. Without cash income to

pay rent, utilities and other living expenses, a sub-economy has developed. Those who

have cars bring in cash by providing taxi service, while others use their food stamps to

purchase ingredients to make popsicles or other food items to sell. Edin and Shaefer note

the common practice of people selling food stamps for cash, even though they may only

get half of the actual value. That cash pays the rent and utilities, but then they run out of

food stamps and food before the end of the month. Women sell their bodies, as necessary,

to raise cash to take care of their families. This cycle of extreme poverty is perpetuated

by lack of adequate education, lack of jobs, lack of transportation, and the lack of

preparedness - including appropriate social skills and clothing - to have a job (Edin and

Schaefer 2015). A nation-wide study by Hong and Pandley in 2008 finds that the poor are

in need of basic education, training that fits the current job market, and health care since

many of them are unable to work due to serious health issues. The shift in federal policy

for welfare recipients from an emphasis on education as a means to obtain a job, to "work

first" or job over education, has also contributed to the exclusion of the poor from

participating in the training and education to which the rest of society has access (Hong

and Pandley 2008).

      In 1990, Duncan research rural poverty and politics in three American

communities, one of which was located in the Delta. She evaluated economics, education,

social services, the potential of upward mobility, human and social capital, class

stratification, and who held power. In the Delta, she found a segregated society based on

race with plantation owners having complete control. Powerful whites would grant

limited power to African American individuals, known as "Toms," who were responsible

for ensuring other African Americans voted the right way, as white interest dictated.

Votes were regularly bought and sold. Fear of crossing whites prevented change since

they controlled the jobs, and even who received the benefits of social services. The big

farmers kept out other industry to ensure a readily available cheap labor pool. Education

was seen as a threat to that cheap labor pool, with the result that the education available

to African Americans was poor and their ability to attend could be sporadic based on the

farmer's labor needs. Duncan found that a majority of African Americans in the Delta

had no comprehension of any kind of life other than that of being victimized, and they

were unable to imagine going against the system (Duncan 2014).

Twenty years later Duncan (2014) returns to the same Delta community. She

finds very little change in the racially segregated system of the Delta. A few African

Americans who had left the Delta and found success in other places had returned home,

and were slowly introducing new ideas. The key to their being able to refuse to conform

to the old established class rules and try to bring about change was their ability to be

financially independent of whites. They faced the mistrust of other African Americans

who saw them as a new generation of "Toms," as well as the anger and resentment of

others who feared a worsening of their circumstances if the white establishment became

angry. Duncan finds a culture of poverty: children growing up without being trained how

to think, dress, or interact to join mainstream society, and without a vision of any other

kind of life other than the Delta class system. Whites she interviews describe African

Americans as choosing to stay in poverty because they meet needs in the present instead

of planning for the future, and as being lazy, not wanting to work. According to Duncan,

choosing the present over the future is part of a generational culture of poverty, a way of

adapting to being kept in a place outside acceptable society and having poverty viewed as

personal inadequacy and inferiority in spite of inferior education, low wages, and high

unemployment. White ministers related to her their fear of providing any assistance to

struggling African Americans, even children, because it would not be tolerated by their

congregations. Cut off from the larger society, African Americans in the Delta develop

skills and tools to survive based solely on what they experience and perceive as necessary

to survive within the system (Duncan 2014).

Leeuwis (2000) conducts six case studies in rural communities where negotiation

would take into account differences and provide for the handling of conflict when diverse

interests clash. Participation models of development take into account that some

participants are unwilling or unable to hear the viewpoints of the others. But, Leeuwis

notes that if key stakeholders do not believe they need each other to develop a solution to

their respective problems, a negotiation approach does not make sense. Negotiation is

also not possible when one participant does not see the problem as their concern and feels

the solution lies solely with the other party (Leeuwis 2000). Whites in the Delta ascribe

poverty to poor choices, while African Americans feel disenfranchised by whites.

In a survey of 238 Mississippi communities by Parisi, Grice, Toquino, and Gill

(2002), they find only 119 as having the community capacity to come together and

collectively act in pursuit of economic development. The researchers identify four things

foundational to building that capacity: social capital, a local/civic building to meet in,

human and economic characteristics (e.g., education, employment), and spatial

characteristics (e.g., population, location). Those 119 communities were also the only

ones out of the 238 surveyed to still have a significant white population in place with its

economic power and presence (Parisi, Grice, Toquino, and Gill 2002). In contrast, the

predominately African American communities struggle with failing educational systems,

deteriorating buildings, high unemployment, a lack of civic buildings, and often a lack of

transportation to other communities that might have meeting facilities available. Social

capital (social networks of trust, along with shared values and norms of behavior that

enable and encourage social cooperation) is also often lacking. Social structures in the

Delta are shaped by race and by their nature reduce community social capital through

racial division and the resulting mistrust and opposing interests (Harvey 2013). Asset-

based community development relies on the talents and assets of a community and is

based on the assumption that people themselves can be the driving force in development

(Mathie and Cunningham 2003). African American communities such as Shaw, even

with the talents and motivation of local leaders, find that failing infrastructure,

insufficient tax base, and lack of economic opportunities hinder their attempts.

The racially structured two class system of the Delta is painfully illustrated by

Brown and Cromartie (2006) through their presentation of a geographic life history of

Mrs. Dorothy Mae Scott, an African American who migrated from the north back to her

Delta home community. Brown and Cromartie utilize a combination of qualitative

research techniques, including in-depth interviews and photography. After working and

saving money in Chicago, Mrs. Scott was able to buy her family property and additional

land, hoping to support herself by farming. Her children were not interested in joining

her, so she leased acreage to whites to farm. They never paid her any rent. For three years

they planted, harvested, earned money, and would not pay her the rent they had agreed to.

She took legal action, but it did not produce payment. She had stepped out of both the

proper role of an African American woman, and the accepted norm of land ownership.

An African American landowner, especially a woman, was outside Delta norms. Whites

felt free to drive up to her home and tell her they wanted to buy her land, what they

would do with it, whether or not she indicated she wanted to sell it. She saw that as their

sense of white entitlement. The assumptive way they informed her they wanted to buy

her land deeply angered her. The authors note that African Americans migrating back

home to the Delta return to both a loved homeland and a place of racism, a place where

whites have always controlled the economy, one of the poorest regions in the United

States (Brown and Cromartie 2006).

Barton and Leonard (2010) research the potential for incorporating social justice

into tourism planning to promote racial reconciliation and sustainable development in the

Delta county of Tallahatchie. Again, they note the social systems and norms of the county

and of the Delta that continue to perpetuate racism. They see racial reconciliation as

helping both sides find peace and healing, bringing common ground to divided priorities

and as essential to developing a sustainable tourism industry (Barton and Leonard 2010).

To discover the degree race is an obstacle to community development in the lower

Mississippi Delta, Harvey (2013) conducts in-depth interviews with 73 leaders of four

Mississippi Delta counties. He interviews both white and African Americans leaders. The

interviews reveal a deep distrust and polarization between the two races, and social

structures racially designed with whites controlling the economies and African

Americans the local politics. He finds that the usually productive approach of consensus-

based community development has a non-productive outcome in the Delta due to the

obstacle of race (Harvey 2013). A necessary consensus for community development

could not be reached by the two races due to distrust.

Faith-based Organizations in Development

There is a small but steady stream of research literature on faith-based

organizations (FBOs) in the disciplines of geographic, economic development, and

community development. In his introduction to three papers presenting research on faith-

based organizations (FBOs), Beaumont (2008) notes that there is a need for further study

on the geographical, political, and economic impact of FBOs from a human geography

perspective (Beaumont 2008). Laura Reese's (2004) research on the efforts made by

urban congregations to facilitate economic development in Detroit lead her to the

conclusion that the role of faith-based groups in social services is far better documented

than its role in community development. Like Beaumont, Reese also states that more

research on FBOs and economic development is warranted (Reese 2004).

In examining the role of African American churches in the African American

experience, Lincoln and Mamiya (1990) note that in the South, rural churches were an

important catalyst for change. These churches functioned as a social structure, a

community meeting place, a place of political activism during the civil rights movement,

and more recently as mobilizers of the African American vote. The authors note that

because a person's economic status denotes social status, the worst form of racism

against African Americans has been economic in nature. African American churches

have a long history of mutual aid: they funded banks, African American colleges, and

funeral homes. In the present, there is a growing number of local African American

pastors who are involved in seeking economic development in their own communities

(Lincoln and Mamiya 1990).

Kretzmann and McKnight (1993) do not see potential problems with the

involvement of religious institutions in providing services. Rather, they see uniting

religious institutions with other community resources as a way of building communities

from the inside out. Religious institutions typically have resources in the form of

personnel, facilities, materials, equipment, and expertise already in place with an

economic base that other groups might lack. Partnerships between public institutions,

individuals, private sector, associations, and religious institutions can more fully mobilize

community assets (Kretzmann and McKnight 1993).

In contrast, Foley, McCarthy, and Chaves (2001) present ambivalent views about

the role of faith-based organizations (FBOs) in social services. On the one hand, the

researchers note concern over the possibility of religious intolerance resulting in selective

rendering of services. On the other hand, faith-based groups have demonstrated an ability

to reach across lines to help such as during the Civil Rights Movement. The discussion on

the effectiveness of FBOs as service providers in place of the government is also

ongoing, but it is recognized that they make significant contributions to the well-being of

poor communities. They see congregations and other religious bodies building the human

base for community renewal and individual advancement. Even with those significant

contributions, they feel that sustainable impact would be dependent upon not just on

FBOs but also the resources and determination of the government to reverse the long-

term trends to falling wages and decreases in government services (Foley, McCarthy, and

Chaves 2001).

Clarke takes a broad look at FBOs, civil society, and international development.

He finds that different types of FBOs are active in the lives of those in poverty and in

political issues affecting them (Clarke 2006). FBOs have been involved in health-related

activities but their effectiveness has not been determined. Since local churches or FBOs

could be important allies in efforts to provide both social services and preventative health

to at-risk populations, DeHaven and other researchers focus on evaluating their

effectiveness. Their research reveals that FBOs are effective in improving health

outcomes and in promoting behavioral change (DeHaven et al. 2003). Reese and Shields

(2000) seek to determine what factors in Detroit appear to contribute to FBOs'

engagement in urban economic development. They conclude that the particular

personalities and theology of individual religious leaders, rather than a particular

denomination, determine to what extent and how they engage in economic development

activity (Reese and Shields 2000). Reese (2004) looks at faith-based economic

development in Detroit's urban inner city. She observes that, as of 2004, there were not

enough faith-based development efforts to enhance government work in a significant way

and so they might not be a viable alternative to government efforts. Reese notes that the

role of FBOs in social services is far better documented than its role in community

development and more research on faith-based community and economic development is

warranted.

Other ethnic churches are also playing an important economic role in their communities. Choi (2010) offers one of the first studies of ethnic entrepreneurship and religious institutions in community economic development. He notes that Korean churches in Los Angeles, California are functioning as small business incubators for Korean entrepreneurs. The churches are rich sources of information and connection for new Korean immigrants and are there to support, guide, and assist Koreans in establishing their own businesses. Choi notes that there is rarely any discussion of the role of religious institutions in entrepreneurship (Choi 2010).

After Hurricane Katrina devastated New Orleans in 2005, there were concerns about inequities in redevelopment. Churches Supporting Churches, a FBO, equipped local pastors to lead their neighborhoods in identifying roots of inequities and redevelopment needs, and involved neighborhood residents in gathering data. A Geographic Information System was paired with video programs to record areas of devastation as members of the neighborhood provided description and identification of sites. These data equipped the community to influence redevelopment at the community, city, and state levels. Churches Supporting Churches viewed the local pastor and his or her congregation as partners and sought to empower them for their own behalf (Duval-Diop, Curtis, and Clark 2010). Viewing community members as assets and partners resulted in an effective partnership for change and helped the community members develop skills and experience to advocate for themselves in the future.

Corbett and Fikkert (2014) find that ineffective or unsustainable attempts by religious groups to address poverty and community development are linked to an incorrect view of themselves as the answer and those they seek to help as broken or the

problem. This view results in programs based on an assumption of what the problem is

and a resulting solution that is not sustainable by the community itself. Both those

seeking to help and those in poverty feel discouraged and often feelings are hurt on both

sides. In contrast, religious groups that see those in poverty as being assets themselves,

and the ones best able to identify the problem and solve it, are then able to come

alongside as partners in a sustainable manner. Faith-based organizations may actually

cause more harm than good in their attempts to provide solutions if they do not allow

those in poverty to express what their needs are and how to meet those needs. Effective

FBOs see the people they desire to help as being needed assets, resources, and strengths

with critical knowledge and experience of the issues, root causes, and solutions. It is

foundational to sustainability and effectiveness that an organization walk with the poor as

coworkers, not as rescuers (Corbett and Fikkert 2014). Other research also points to the

importance of shifting an agency's or organization's view of those in need from that of

being clients, to that of citizens who can themselves be the driving force in economic

development (Mathie and Cunningham 2003).

Chapter 3

Research Procedures

Because of the complexities of discussing racial and other social issues with those

living in the Delta, and the importance of gaining insight into the impact of racial division

on sustainable development, I chose to use Grounded Theory methodology to conduct

qualitative research through the use of in-depth, and open-ended interviews.

Grounded theory is distinctive both in its approach and methodology. Instead

of research driven by a pre-determined theory which might be flawed, Grounded Theory

allows data to guide the researcher in developing theory (Glaser 2014). A distinctive

component of Grounded Theory methodology is the ongoing comparison of newly

collected data with previously collected data. These continuing comparisons help the

researcher identify emerging commonalities, differences, and themes, and helps ensure

that unexpected developments are quickly noted and further investigated (Charmaz

2014). This ongoing data comparison is made possible by coding the data (analyzing it in

order to define and label it) as it is collected. Other researchers, such as Welch (2012)

have found the inductive process of Grounded Theory helpful in not only understanding

concepts within a specific setting (e.g., sustainable development in the Delta), but also in

gaining a larger understanding of complex concepts beyond a specific situation. Based on

my readings about Grounded Theory, I determined that the process of using data to

develop theory is best suited to the purpose of this research, which included potentially

sensitive subject matter in a region that is notoriously suspicious of "outsiders." In

addition to interviews, I found the landscape of Shaw to be a valuable resource for

visualizing the effects of racial division. Following the dictum of Glaser, and Strauss

(1999) that "all is data", I included photography as one of my qualitative research

techniques. Research in the Delta by Brown and Cromartie (2006) provided me with an

instructive example for using photography in collecting data regarding racial division and

its effects in the region.

African Americans may discuss racism and its resulting inequities with each

other, but very few are comfortable having the same conversation with a white person.

Specific facts, such as no grocery store in the community, are stated clearly by the

interviewees, but there are nuances in speech and body language that require awareness

of context to grasp the entirety of what is being communicated. Qualitative research of

this nature can be a useful tool for revealing these hidden meanings as well as context:

how the individual's understanding of social structure, relationships, and past experiences

work together in how they understand and respond to what they experience (Merriam

1998).

My research results will be shared with DHH, research participants, and the City

of Shaw. Therefore, those results need to be easily understood by everyone, not just

experts in the field of community development. Joseph Maxwell (1996) notes that

qualitative research techniques satisfy this objective since they have demonstrated an

advantage in producing easily understood results and in evaluating current programs

(Maxwell 1996). I expect this approach to yield the greatest possible insight into whether,

or not, DHH is effecting change in the community of Shaw, the methods DHH is using,

and what, if any, advantage being a faith-based organization has given DHH.

The Institutional Review Board (IRB) of the University of Southern Mississippi

granted approval for this research on November 26, 2015. Interview subjects included the

major leaders of DHH, community members not directly involved with DHH, members

of University Baptist Church in Hattiesburg who are actively involved with DHH, pastors

who have lived in the Delta, and faculty and staff of the University of Southern

Mississippi who are knowledgeable about Shaw and the Delta.

I interviewed all participants in person, with the exception of four who were

interviewed by phone. There were 15 participants, all of which were adults 18 years of

age or older. Participants were encouraged to freely express their experiences, feelings,

and observations through the use of open-ended questions in the interviews. I scheduled

interviews for at least an hour and a half in length to allow time for participants to

become comfortable with me and encourage a relaxed atmosphere where they would feel

free to talk openly and at length. Because Shaw does not have a community center or

building suitable for conducting interviews, except for DHH's building, I conducted the

majority of interviews there. This also gave me the opportunity to observe civic groups

who were meeting in another part of the DHH building, and witness young people

dropping by to talk with Lane Riley, Director of DHH. My interviews of Lane took place

in her apartment, while she was driving me around Shaw, and in DHH's building. I

interviewed members of University Baptist Church, Hattiesburg, Mississippi, who are

involved with DHH at Java Werks coffee shop in Hattiesburg. My interviews with staff

and faculty of University of Southern Mississippi were held on campus. Detailed notes

were taken during each interview and were later transcribed, analyzed, and coded. To

maintain confidentiality, all physical data are locked in a file drawer.

My attendance at DHH functions as a participant/observer was used to build a

relationship of trust with participants, to collect data on the interaction between the

director of DHH, the youth and adults of Shaw, and outside groups. Lane, the director of

DHH, has an open-door policy so that youth feel free to drop by, which they often do

after school. I was there on a Friday and had the opportunity to participate in "hanging

out" with Lane and a few of the young people in DHH programs. As they talked with

Lane about their day and the DHH leadership program they are in participating in, their

enthusiasm replaced shyness with me and I was shown the parts of the building

renovation they had done. One young man showed me where he painted on the front of

the building and how, with his new skill, he plans to start a painting business. I also

attended a cookout that University Baptist Church (UBC), a predominately white church

in Hattiesburg, hosted Hattiesburg for DHH youth and chaperones following their tour of

the USM campus. I assisted UBC members and an adult chaperone from Shaw in food

preparation and setting up the serving table. Being there gave me the opportunity to

observe how Lane and DHH youth interact in an environment outside the Delta, and the

interaction between the group from Shaw and UBC youth and adults. This form of

qualitative research enabled me to identify methods used by DHH, and to observe the

degree of effectiveness of DHH programs in bringing about development and

reconciliation.

Extensive reading of available literature on community development, faith-based

organizations, the social structures of the Delta, and the history of the Delta provided me

with a more accurate understanding of the complexities of the region and the framework

within which DHH and the community of Shaw are interacting. I analyzed and coded the

data I gathered from reading pertinent research literature, as well, and compared the data

from the research literature to the data I collected through interviews and participant

observer activities. This comparison allowed me to identify commonalities, differences,

and themes between the data from literature and data I collected firsthand, which helped

ensure that any unexpected development was noted and followed up on.

Face to face interviews were conducted with the director of DHH on November

18, 2015, and February 12 – 14, 2016; the pastor of University Baptist Church in

Hattiesburg who is actively engaged with DHH and a member of University Baptist

Church who is also a board member of DHH on February 10, 2016; a resident of Shaw

who is familiar with DHH on February 13, 2016; a pastor and resident of Shaw who

serves on the board of DHH on February 13, 2016; a resident of Shaw who has children

in DHH programs and who also volunteers with DHH on February 13, 2016; a pastor and

resident of Shaw who is active with DHH and whose wife is a board member; a professor

at the University of Southern Mississippi (USM) whose areas of research include the

South and Mississippi on February 19, 2016; an employee of USM who took a group of

USM students to work with DHH on community projects, on March 23, 2016; a white

pastor from out of state who served in a white church in the Delta, on February 19, 2016;

and conversations with a white pastor who grew up in the Delta, September through

December 2015.

Phone interviews were conducted with a former intern that worked for DHH, on

February 13, 2016; the founder and board member of DHH on February 18, 2016; a

phone interview given by the director of DHH to a Sustainable Development class at

 USM on April 15, 2016, and a phone interview with the Deputy Clerk of Shaw on June

24, 2016.

I collected data as a participant/observer in Shaw on February 13, 2016 as the

DHH director interacted with Shaw youth, and on April 16, 2016 when the director of

DHH, youth participating in DHH, and adult chaperones from Shaw attended a cookout

in Hattiesburg hosted by the adults and youth of University Baptist Church.

Discussion of race, inequities, and the differing perspectives of whites and

African Americans has historically been resisted by whites, and avoided by African

Americans because of white reprisals. Because of the resulting complexities of discussing

race with those living in the Delta, I did not directly ask questions about race in the

interviews. Instead, interviewees were asked about their experience with and observations

of DHH, and Shaw itself, which they responded to while also volunteering information

about racial issues in the Delta. Questions were worded to avoid simple yes or no

answers. Scheduling an hour and a half for interviews created a relaxed interview

atmosphere which was conducive to participants moving from talking about DHH and

Shaw to sharing their personal experience of living in the Delta. This provided valuable

insight into the complex relationship between race relations and community

development.

Chapter 4

Results

Pervasiveness of racial division

This research was conducted with the expectation that racial division would be
one of the challenges face by Delta Hands for Hope (DHH) in facilitating community
development in Shaw. However, the findings reveal that racial division is pervasive
throughout every aspect of life in the Delta and is the major barrier to sustainable
development. The social structure of the Delta is that of a two-class system based on race
that continues to perpetuate poverty for both African American individuals and
predominately African American communities such as Shaw. This pervasiveness is
systemic, a way of life that has existed so long it is lived out unconsciously, like
breathing. Shaw exemplifies the pervasiveness of that system in the present, as well as
the barriers to sustainable development it produces.

The Director of DHH described the original population of Shaw as being almost
evenly divided between African Americans and whites prior to white flight and as
currently being approximately 93 percent African American and 7 percent white. Several
residents described downtown Shaw prior to white flight as so busy on weekends that it
was difficult to find a parking space. The town had its own grocery stores, shops,
warehouses, and an attractive downtown. Whites owned the businesses, held office, and
maintained the city infrastructure. A longtime resident of Shaw explained to me that
basic city services of water and sewage were present and well maintained in all white
neighborhoods. Although the city received federal grants to repair, maintain, and expand

water and sewage lines, those services were not extended to African Americans whom, it

was thought, did not need indoor plumbing and water. Lawsuits were brought against the

city to force it to provide and properly maintain those basic services to African

Americans as well as whites. The city was ordered to provide equal services by the

courts.

As whites moved out of Shaw, they closed their businesses which resulted in the

loss of tax base needed by the city to maintain and improve its infrastructure, an

important aspect of economic growth. During interviews, I was told that the entire

community of Shaw was under a "boil water" notice for over year. Aged water mains had

cracked open allowing contaminants to enter the water supply. The city at that time not

only lacked funds for repair, but was also unable to pay its water bill from the water

association. For over a year, each student was given two bottles of drinking water each

morning when they arrived at school. The "boil water" notice was lifted in 2015, but old

water mains continue to break. During a trip to Shaw in February 2016, the Director of

DHH showed me a large hole behind DHH's building where a water main had ruptured

in November 2015. Repair attempts had decreased the amount of water leaking, but the

size and depth of the hole presented a significant safety hazard three months after the

break occurred.

Illustration 4. The break in this water line behind DHH, and the safety hazard presented by the excavation hole are symptomatic of failing infrastructure.

Whites maintain racial division through land ownership and prefer not to sell or rent property to African Americans. It was related to me that the majority of the abandoned buildings downtown are owned by one man, one of the richest white men in Shaw. He is unwilling to rent, sell, renovate, or demolish the buildings. An example of this type of racial division is the tutoring center for children in kindergarten through fourth grade in Shaw that is run by three Irish nuns of the order of the Sisters of the Presentation of the Virgin Mary. They serve the African American children in Shaw and tried to purchase a very small abandoned lot from this man that is adjacent to their tutoring center and were refused. This form of racial division has led to a downtown area that except for the City Hall/Police Station, Post Office, and a church, is largely abandoned and in various stages of deterioration. Walking along the downtown sidewalks one can see remnants of ceramic tile flooring in store entranceways, and architectural

details that hint at the once thriving business area as described by the residents I spoke

with. The refusal of the white owners to cooperate with those who would like to renovate

downtown is a barrier to attracting new businesses to Shaw and therefore to community

development.

Illustration 5. The once upscale store adjacent to DHH is now simply the remnants of its storefront
and a portion of the interior floor of ornate gray and white ceramic tiles.

The racial division in the Delta required two educational systems. White schools

were well funded and maintained with student attendance expected. In contrast, African

American schools were significantly underfunded, in need of maintenance, and the

attendance of students was considered unimportant, particularly when they were needed

in the plantation fields. Desegregation laws resulted in white flight from the public

schools and the establishment of academies whose tuition would offer a legal form of

segregation. The fundraising and investment in public schools by whites was redirected

to private academies. White flight from predominately African American towns and cities

also affected the funding of the public schools serving those communities as a much-

needed tax base was lost.

The residents of Shaw express great pride in their school, it has been a central part

of community life and is a major employer. One person described the high expectations

for students in the 1980's, who were expected to buckle down and work hard. As funding

dropped over the years, and academic achievement, the Shaw School District has been

merged with two other districts. One resident, who participates with a group that mentors

high school athletes and provides scholarships, described having to re-establish their

work in the high school due to the mergers. Although the people of Shaw have pride in

their public school and athletic teams, it is in a struggling school district.

The upper floor of the high school has been condemned for years due to severe

problems with mold and no funds for remediation, but students continued to attend

classes on the first floor and use the gym. In 2015 the rest of the high school building was

condemned and the entire high school student body, teachers, and administrators moved

into Shaw's elementary school, Mc Evans. Mc Evans, had adequate classrooms for 300

elementary students, now has an additional 150 students without any additional

classrooms. Two separate schools are operating under one roof with the high school

housed in one wing and the elementary school in the other. The Director of DHH noted

that Shaw's school district was merged with two other districts but instead of combining

the three school budgets to operate all the schools, they have been decreased to one

budget. According to a board member of DHH, the school district is considering closing

the Shaw school and busing the children 30 miles to a central school, which would have a significant economic and social impact on the already struggling community. The educational problems Shaw faces are indicative of a systemic problem that perpetuates inequities in the funding and quality of education available to children in predominately African American Communities.

Racial division is also a major contributor to Shaw's classification as a food desert, or a community where there are no grocery stores to purchase fresh produce, fruit, or other healthy food. Prior to white flight, Shaw had grocery stores and the economic base to support them. Now a couple of gas stations and convenience stores are the only places where basic food items such as bread, milk, and some canned goods can be bought, but not fresh fruits or vegetables. Because of the poverty rate and economic decline of Shaw, chain grocery stores have been unwilling to open a store in the community. The nearest grocery store is approximately 12 miles away in Cleveland, which has a population with a slight majority of whites. For many in Shaw, transportation issues mean those 12 miles are either a hardship or an impossibility. One resident I interviewed is completing a degree in Business Administration at Delta State University with plans to open a grocery store in Shaw. His goal is to sell locally grown fruit and produce, locally raised and processed meat, all at prices affordable to Shaw residents. The grocery store will provide employment and be used to teach youth business skills, healthy eating, and cooking habits, how to raise and process their own meat, fruit, and vegetables. He sees the lack of access to healthy food as a major barrier to the health and development of the community and noted that other African American communities also struggle with this.

The Plantation Class

The power of plantation owners is still present and actively wielded to maintain

economic power. Whites hold this power and, through it, have great influence on policy

and development outcomes such as where new industry locates. One resident relayed to

me that Shaw was a strong contender when the State Legislature was considering

locations for a state university in the Delta, but plantation owners used their economic

and political influence to ensure that the university was not located in Shaw. Instead,

Cleveland became home to the university that was to later be renamed Delta State

University. He also spoke of a second major lost opportunity that happened in the 1950's.

Baxter Labs was seeking to a locate a facility in Shaw which would have provided job

opportunities other than farm work. The plantation farmers saw that at a threat to their

source of cheap farm labor and voted it down just as they had done with Delta State

University. A third lost opportunity occurred when the Empowerment Zone Initiative of

HUD in the 1990's sought to include Shaw in its efforts to create jobs in economically

depressed areas. The City Board again voted it down since it was an opportunity for

African Americans to have employment opportunities other than working for plantation

owners. He noted that had these opportunities not been blocked by the farmers, Shaw

would be the prosperous and growing town that Cleveland is today.

Racial Reconciliation and Sustainable Development

Considering the social structure of the Delta and the continued power of

plantation farmers, sustainable community development is not possible without racial

reconciliation. Every roadblock to community development in Shaw has roots in the

Delta system of racial division: unsafe drinking water, deteriorating infrastructure, lack of economic opportunity, struggling schools, and no local access to healthy food. Every effort to promote sustainable development is undercut by the intentional inequities inherent in the Delta way of life. Delta systems have created and perpetuate generational poverty which has a negative impact beyond simple economic survival. The generational poverty perpetuated by racial division results in children having no one to teach them ways of thinking, dressing, or interacting that would prepare them to envision or pursue a life different than the one allowed to them (Duncan 2014).

There are deep community and individual wounds in Shaw from the racially motivated blocking of economic opportunities and educational progress, as well as the violence committed by whites that African Americans have experienced in their lives. One man shared with me his memory of coming into town as a youth and seeing the body of an African American man who had been lynched and left hanging as a warning. I asked him if he felt physically safer now than back then. His response was no, back then you could see the hatred in a person's face, now it is hidden behind deceit. Community wounds are most obvious in the difficulty of many, especially young people, to imagine any kind of life other than being poor in the Delta, and in the fatigue community leaders feel with trying to help people develop a new perspective while simultaneously working hard to break down restrictive societal norms. Racial reconciliation is necessary to bring healing to the community and a renewal of energy in the pursuit of development.

Delta Hands for Hope and Racial Reconciliation

Reconciliation can be defined as the act of moving from a relationship of

hostility and separation to a relationship of peace and friendship. Reconciliation also

carries the connotation of the removal of the offense. Delta Hands for Hope is actively

facilitating racial reconciliation in Shaw not only with school-age children, but also with

adults in the community. There are things specific to DHH that are particularly effective

in racial reconciliation: it is a faith-based organization, its founder Jason Coker with his

vision and ties to Shaw, its director Ms. Lane Riley and her genuine love for the people

of Shaw, its organizational structure that is inclusive, and its intentionality of promoting

racial reconciliation in its program design and methods.

Faith-Based Advantage

Shaw is an extremely religious community with thirty-three churches serving its

rural population of under 2000. I was told that almost everyone in Shaw attends church,

usually a church where most of the members have some family connection. This results

in strong community ties and an awareness of what is going on in Shaw. A member of the

police department relayed to me that she felt this connectedness is a large part of why

Shaw has a low crime rate unlike other Delta communities with high poverty rates. The

deep importance religion holds for Shaw residents makes it easier for a faith-based

organization to win trust than one not connected to faith. DHH and the people of Shaw

have a common ground through religious faith both in the basis of hope and in pursuit of

community development.

The founder of DHH, Jason Coker, told me that he and the board had struggled

with whether to incorporate as a non-profit or a faith-based non-profit but chose the latter

because of the greater potential. When asked why being a faith-based organization was

important, he stressed that people don't have to be faith-based to volunteer, any group is welcome, but that DHH and its people do what they do because of their faith. That faith includes the belief that every human being is valuable and deserving of respect and compassion, that diversity means we all have something that is needed to contribute: a stark contrast to the racially divided environment of the Delta. Jason spoke of a Jewish Student Center group from Yale that was scheduled to come and assist DHH on some projects in Shaw, and a group of Japanese exchange students that had already come and worked with DHH and residents of Shaw. The diversity of the groups that Jason knows and connects with Shaw is also helping break down racial barriers through the positive interaction and experiencing of people outside of the Delta.

The effectiveness of DHH as a faith-based organization in Shaw is directly connected to its theological view of inclusiveness and the worth of all people that shapes the organization's vision and programs. In contrast, faith-based groups that have a theological basis of intolerance and exclusivity can actually perpetuate inequities (Foley 2001). There are three white churches in Shaw: Southern Baptist, Catholic, and United Methodist. Of those three churches, I was told that the Catholic and United Methodist have been more welcoming of DHH and its work in the community than the Southern Baptist which is more exclusionary in its theology. In contrast, DHH is intentional in reaching across racial, cultural, social, economic, and denominational lines to forge partnerships to better facilitate reconciliation and community development.

Delta Hands for Hope works closely with Together for Hope, a financial initiative of the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship (CBF). Together for Hope is a 20-year commitment to the 20 poorest counties in the United States which includes Sunflower

County, one of the two counties in which Shaw is located. The CBF does not consider

itself to be a denomination, but rather a network of individual Baptist churches that have

united to assist each other in ministry without demanding conformity to rules established

by a central authority. The ministry approach of CBF and DHH is not problem or lack

driven, but rather asset based, seeing the value and strength in every person. DHH

expresses its faith by coming alongside in friendship, listening, assisting where asked,

and recognizing that the people of Shaw are its greatest assets.

Rev. Jason Coker

His official title is Dr. Rev. Jason Coker, pastor of Wilton Baptist Church in

Wilton, Connecticut, and founder of Delta Hands for Hope, but he introduces himself as

Jason Coker from Shaw. With an undergraduate degree from William Carey University, a

Masters of Divinity from Yale Divinity School, and a PhD. from Drew University, his

life is very different from what the white community of Shaw predicted for him. In

addition to being the founder and a board member of Delta Hands for Hope, he is also on

the Governing Board of the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship. He identifies himself as

Jason Coker from Shaw, Mississippi, because he feels Shaw is the place that forged who

he is today.

Jason told me that he grew up as "white trash" which placed him outside the

sphere of acceptable white society. Instead of white private schools, he attended Shaw

public schools: Mc Evans Elementary and Shaw High school. His friends were the

African Americans he went to school with and he was welcome in their homes. Because

he was viewed as "white trash" he was ostracized by the white churches of Shaw and did

not become a Christian until attending college at Delta State University in Cleveland. He

wanted to honor God through doing well academically and has always felt a great sense

of responsibility to Shaw for shaping him as a person, as well as a genuine love for the

people in Shaw.

On trips to Shaw to seek ways to contribute to his home town, Jason related that

the adults trusted him because they knew him. In contrast the younger people were

skeptical of the white man they did not know. When they heard that he had attended Mc

Evans and Shaw High School, their schools, it removed their skepticism and gave him an

opportunity to get to know them. Jason stated that he feels his having grown up in the

African American community of Shaw has shortened by years the amount of time it

would otherwise have taken DHH to earn the trust and acceptance of the community.

While at Yale, Jason developed relationships with a wide variety of people, most

of whom were financially well off. This network of relationships has been the source of

bringing groups of various ethnic and faith backgrounds, as well as socio-economic

classes, to Shaw. Jason and the Board of DHH believe that the diversity in the outside

groups coming to Shaw is essential to help young people think beyond the narrow vision

of themselves that racial division has demanded. Positive interaction with these groups

builds self-respect, builds trust, and exposes them to social norms and values other than

the restrictive ones of the Delta.

Jason is well versed in issues of community development and the role racial

reconciliation plays in it. He embodies the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship's theological

understanding of and approach to community development: it is the people of the

community themselves that have the greatest insight into the challenges of the

community, the solutions, and are themselves the greatest assets. DHH programs are

based on that positive view of the community, not problem or need driven. It is common

for whites in the Delta to blame African Americans for their own poverty rather than the

result of an inequitable system. Shaw is open to Jason and DHH not simply because

Jason grew up in their community as one of them, but because he has demonstrated that

he values their trust and respect, and genuinely loves them.

Lane Riley

The director of Delta Hands for Hope, Miss Lane Riley, is originally from North

Carolina. Lane is an extremely energetic, warm young woman, with a heart for building

relationships. She also has a keen understanding of community development,

generational poverty, and the racial dynamics of the Delta. Lane is also very adept at

knowing how to expand the world-view of the youth in her programs through field trips,

interaction with visiting groups, and taking them on work trips to help other

communities. She encourages both the youth and adults of the community to feel free to

ask for her help with their ideas for projects or programs. The focus is on their ownership

of the project and helping them find ways to do what they want with minimal help from

her. That is a reversal of the typical interaction with whites in the Delta which is one of

control and resistance to the ideas of African Americans.

That Lane is a white woman is in itself a reason why DHH is effective in

facilitating racial reconciliation in Shaw. It the face of pervasive racial division, Lane has

slumber parties for teenage African American girls at her apartment. She is in and out of

their homes, as well as those of the adults that volunteer, not as the director of DHH, but

as a friend. One mother told me that Lane was like one of her own children, an important

part of her family. The mother shared what a wonderful time her two teenage daughters

had when Lane invited them to go with her to her parent's home in North Carolina for the

holidays. Lane deeply and genuinely loves the youth of Shaw, and she describes them as

"her kids". She sees the adults, also, as good people with a lot to offer her.

Lane addresses issues of race simply by being herself with the kids and youth.

She told me how surprised they were that she knew a song by a black artist. That surprise

became shock when she asked them if they didn't think she would know the artist

because Lane is white. It was the first time they had talked about race with a white

person. Once a month Lane holds a 30 minute "101" session with each of her girls where

they can talk about anything they want: problems at home, sex, school, ask her questions,

or simply dream aloud. Where the racial division in the Delta leaves African American

youth typically ill-equipped to envision and build a good life for themselves, Lane offers

them academic help, leadership training, budgeting and financial instruction, problem

solving skills, visits to universities, and opportunities to help others in Shaw and

elsewhere. Lane also offers them opportunity for spiritual growth, one of the things the

community asked DHH to do in addition to focusing on education, health, and recreation.

The Bible study she has for girls is not about proselytizing, or using the Bible to judge

their lives, but to encourage them to ask questions, develop their own faith, and

understand how deeply God loves them.

Hunger is a way of life for many children in Shaw and directly connected to the

economic inequities resulting from racial division. Lane relayed to me that 32 percent

of the children in Shaw experience food insecurity (the continuous problem of not

enough food or healthy food). She offers food at every DHH program because she never

knows who gets fed at home. As the Director of DHH, Lane oversees a USDA Summer

Food Service Program that served 6,787 meals in 2015 to children 18 years of age and

younger.

Lane's philosophy is to listen, start small, and build with the community so they

will have something they know how to continue when she is gone. Where whites have

blocked opportunities, avoided social contact, and treated the people of Shaw as inferior,

Lane seeks to work with them to meet their goals, shares her life with them and seeks to

be a part of theirs, and has a deep respect and love for them. Lane facilitates racial

reconciliation by who she is and through the programs of DHH that she directs.

Organizational Structure

Delta Hands for Hope models racial reconciliation through its organizational

structure. The Board of DHH is comprised of African American and whites, members of

different denominations, long term residents of Shaw, and those who live outside the

Delta. Board members work together out of mutual respect and affection for each other

and out of love for the community they serve. These board members model racial

reconciliation and friendship for the community. Shaw, like many other communities,

experiences division among the members of the City Council and factions vying for

power within the community. The board of DHH is a model for city leaders,

demonstrating cooperative decision making based on what is for the good of the

community rather than individual preferences.

DHH did not come to Shaw with preconceived ideas of what the problems were and how to fix them. In 2011, Jason Coker met with the Presentation Sisters of the Blessed Virgin Mary who had established a tutoring program for children in Kindergarten through fourth grade and knew the community well. The strengths and assets in Shaw were identified and in 2012 Jason met with local community leaders in Shaw to determine the vision and mission of DHH. The community requested that DHH focus on school aged children in the areas or health, education, recreation, and spiritual development. When DHH incorporated in 2013 its focus and programs reflected what the community felt was its most pressing need. It is a work of reconciliation in the Delta to ask an African American community what their needs are, how they want to address them, and then to assist them, rather than do it for them.

Intentional Reconciliation

Reconciliation does not happen by accident. It requires honesty about the cause of enmity or division, and intentional actions to remove the source of offense. Jason Coker, Lane Riley, and the board of DHH, all focus on empowering while the Delta system disenfranchises, listening while the Delta system silences, and expanding people's vision while the Delta system dims it.

In my conversations with Jason, Lane, and board members, every program DHH engages in and how it is run addresses the various aspects of racial division. The focus is relational. A volunteer from University Baptist Church in Hattiesburg, a Cooperative Baptist Fellowship church that is very involved with DHH, exemplifies this focus. He organizes and personally does a lot of the renovations for DHH's building, and is very

skilled at it. His progress has been slowed down numerous times because he takes every

opportunity to teach kids how to saw, paint, hammer, and patch bricks. They learn skills

they have no other way of obtaining, as well as being around a positive and caring male

role model who happens to be white. In an email to other volunteers, he described the

building renovation not as an end, but a means to achieve the real goal of getting to know

the people of Shaw and build relationships with them, particularly the youth. On a visit to

Shaw, one of the high school boys took me outside to the front of the building to show

me the part of the building he had painted. There was so much pride in his face. He also

began to tell me how with his new skill, and a small salary he would earn by working for

DHH, he was going to both save for college and buy equipment to begin his own

business painting porches, fences, rooms, whatever anyone needed. The skill and self-

esteem he gained by being included in the renovation work, and being mentored, will

have positive repercussions throughout his life. As for the volunteer, he acknowledges

that he and others do have a lot to offer to Shaw, but that they receive far more from truly

knowing the people of Shaw. It is an intentional choice to seek and build relationships

between whites and African Americans.

While doing interviews, I heard repeatedly how the youth in Shaw had no vision

for their lives and how that has changed since DHH came. They know that along with

community leaders, there are white people who believe in them and are there to help

because of the intentional racial reconciliation that DHH engages in.

Illustration 6. This is more than a skillfully painted section of DHH's building. It represents a young man's newly acquired skill and realization that he now has the means to earn money and invest in his future.

Delta Hands for Hope and Community Development

The effectiveness of Delta Hands for Hope in promoting racial reconciliation results in its being able to facilitate sustainable community development in Shaw. Civic leaders speak of being re-energized in their efforts for improving life in Shaw since DHH is now a partner in meeting short and long term goals. A city official I spoke with told me that she was very familiar with DHH and that it was having a very positive impact on the community. She stated that because of DHH, there were now numerous opportunities and positive activities for Shaw's children and youth. She went on to describe to me how very active Lane is in helping the city with fundraising for community projects, and volunteering in whatever capacity is needed and how appreciative the city is for her willingness to help. Lane is on a committee that oversees a garden project at Mc Evans

elementary school. She has also been appointed to the Mayor's Committee on Health.

Shaw has not had a community center, nor access to a building large enough for

community events. DHH has met this community need by allowing their building to be

used free of charge.

Illustration 7. At one time this building was a grocery store. Now owned by DHH, it not only
serves DHH but also functions as a community center for Shaw.

Delta Hands for Hope has both short and long range plans. Most pressing is

helping Shaw's youth develop a vision for their lives, and a plan of how to obtain the

necessary education or training that they need to become economically self-sustaining.

DHH is participating in planning for a local grocery store that will provide healthy and

affordable food, employment opportunities, and training in running a business. There are

also plans for DHH to build a commercial grade kitchen and café adjacent to its current

building. This will help with the Summer Food Service Program, training for youth in

food service and running a café, and create jobs.

Illustration 8. DHH purchased this lot that once was an upscale store and plans to build a café.
This café will contribute to the renovation of downtown Shaw, as well as its economic
development.

Perhaps the most significant and far reaching part of DHH's facilitation of

community development is that of changing the way people view themselves, the

potential of their life, and their place in the world. Jason told me of taking a pastor and

his wife from Shaw to a Cooperative Baptist Fellowship conference held in Texas. Most

of those in attendance at the conference were white, but the keynote speakers were

African Americans. The speakers addressed issues of social injustice which the couple

from Shaw were in total agreement with. What was surprising and healing for them was

to hear such a large group of white people in passionate agreement. The racial division of

the Delta is insidious in how it presents its two-class society based on race as being

representative of all white people.

The foundation of sustainable community development is social capital, the

ability of the people in a community to articulate a shared vision, formulate long term

plans, and work together to achieve them. DHH is facilitating the growth of that capital

through encouraging and assisting residents in learning how to develop and enact their

own ideas, by giving youth the tools needed to move out of the culture of generational

poverty, and by assisting the city government in addressing community needs and

modeling cooperative leadership.

Shaw has extremely creative people and capable leaders that have been

encouraged and re-energized by DHH. The pervasive system of racial division will not

disappear overnight, but its power to thwart community development is being diminished

by the racial reconciliation that is happening in Shaw. Delta Hands for Hope knows it

will take time, perhaps a generation to fully turn things around, for Shaw to be able to

sustain its own community development. Delta Hands for Hope is committed to be there

throughout the journey.

A Model for Sustainable Development

There are specific aspects of how Delta Hands for Hope designs and executes its

programs that can be used to develop effective models for sustainable development, not

only for the Delta, but also for other communities struggling with social and economic

inequities. Those aspects are: how it views itself in relationship to those it seeks to serve,

an in-depth understanding of generational poverty and racial division, its belief system of

inclusiveness rather than exclusivity, and its willingness to make a long-term

commitment to ensure sustainability.

Sustainability requires that a community be able to continue development after

the assisting organization leaves. That ability cannot be achieved when an organization

views itself as a rescuer and those they serve as broken. Such a viewpoint overlooks the

fact that it is the people themselves who best know what challenges they face, and have

the most realistic understanding of how to address them. A rescuer mentality can result

in programs that are ineffective and lead to frustration for all involved. Delta Hands for

Hope views itself as there to partner with capable and gifted people, assisting them where

they request, and investing in the strengths and assets already present. It is a relationship

of peers and friends which brings encouragement, inspires hope, and infuses new energy

into the community and its leaders, while further equipping the community to continue

development on its own.

A deep understanding of the effects of generational poverty, social abuse, and the

amount of time necessary to achieve sustainable changes has been a key factor in the

development of DHH's realistic and effective programs. That understanding led DHH to

initially focus on building relationships, and growing its programs slowly and soundly

rather than seeking the fastest results. Because it understood the root of Shaw's decline,

racial division, DHH has made intentional racial reconciliation a part of everything it

does.

Foundational to DHH's effectiveness is its belief system of inclusivity. Because

of it, the organizational structure of DHH, and its programs, model racial reconciliation.

A philosophy of inclusivity has enabled DHH to seek and form partnerships with other

organizations and develop relationships across racial, denominational, and economic

lines. By being able to welcome diverse groups of volunteers, DHH can help youth and

adult volunteers of Shaw to see a different way of living beyond what they have known in

the Delta.

Generational poverty and the effects of racial division are complex and far-reaching, there is no fast fix because it is a systemic issue. DHH is focused on assisting the people of Shaw to begin and sustain the development of their community themselves. The willingness of Delta Hands for Hope to make a long-term commitment to Shaw enables them to build a solid foundation, one that Shaw can continue to build on.

Chapter 5

Conclusions

It is difficult to fully understand the pervasive and persistent barriers to sustainable development that racial division presents from statistics and literature alone. I found that it is only in listening to the people who are actually experiencing inequities and struggles in their daily lives due to racial division, that we can accurately understand its relationship to sustainable development, and, hopefully, the way forward to changing the social systems that perpetuate it.

My hope was that the use of open-ended questions would result in participants sharing their experiences and perception not only of DHH, but also their lives in the context of the Delta. Surprisingly, in all but one interview, as participants talked about Shaw, DHH, challenges, and hopes for the future, their experience of racial division in the Delta was interwoven into their conversation. Barriers because of race have been, and remain, the warp of the fabric of their lives as African Americans in the Delta. This was emphasized to me during one interview, in particular. The participant was telling me what a profound and positive impact Lane, the director of DHH, is having on the children and youth of Shaw because she is a white person who respects and genuinely loves them. That brought to his mind how hard his father, a sharecropper, worked to avoid being in debt to the plantation farmer. His father had seen other men fall in debt, die, and their children be forced into farm labor the rest of their lives to pay off a debt that somehow never decreased. Because his father was able to avoid debt, the family was able to move off the plantation and gain more control over their lives.

I spoke with a white pastor, originally from a northern state, who had served as a minister to a white church in the Delta for four years. He talked about the social expectation that all whites uphold racial division. Following Katrina, he and his wife opened their swimming pool to African American refugees from New Orleans. He came under harsh criticism from white neighbors and his church for allowing African Americans to swim in a white person's pool. Another white pastor I spoke with, who grew up in the Delta but left as an adult, described the white mentality of the region as being that of an aristocracy that expects to be served by African Americans and poor whites, a world view that is resistant to change. His experience was that whites fear African Americans, especially their being in political office, and that it is their fear that perpetuates racism. I attempted to schedule interviews with the pastors of the white Methodist and Baptist churches in Shaw to strengthen this research, but my calls were not returned.

Due to the pervasiveness of racial division, its purpose of maintaining white advantage at the expense of African Americans, resulting mistrust, and divergent goals, sustainable community development requires racial reconciliation, not only in Shaw, but the entire Delta. Even though predominately white communities are doing better than their African American counterparts, the lack of an educated workforce, the inadequate school systems, and rampant poverty, all resulting from intentional racial division, has a negative impact on the developmental prospects for the entire region. Racial reconciliation would necessitate a change in the social structures of the Delta, but with time would result in improvements in education, quality of life, and allow the influx of new ideas and the application of them, all necessary for sustainable development.

Delta Hands for Hope is itself a radical change in the Delta. The intentional racial reconciliation that defines and guides its programs and interactions with the people of Shaw is actively dismantling the psychological damage inflicted by systemic discrimination. Young people are being shown their worth, discovering another way of living other than that of the Delta. Most importantly, they are learning to have a vision for their life and how to plan to achieve it. Racial division and generational poverty has had a negative impact on parenting skills, and understanding how to invest ownership into a person's own life. Parents trust Lane and DHH, and there is no lack of young people wanting to participate. I was told over and over that the biggest challenge is in helping parents understand the importance of their involvement, and taking ownership in the work of DHH in the lives of their children. Progress is slow but growing in that area, which is a part of breaking the culture of generational poverty. Lane is developing a program for sex education that takes into consideration the reality of the high rate of teenage sexual activity and pregnancy in the Delta. DHH programs are designed to address the realities of life facing the people of Shaw, to empower them in making the best possible choices, but not to judge or insist on conformity to certain religious belief. Further research should be conducted in the future to follow-up on the progress of the young people currently involved in DHH programs.

As an "alternative spring break" the Center for Community and Civic Engagement of the University of Southern Mississippi (USM) provided an opportunity for students to spend their spring break in Shaw doing community service. University Baptist Church in Hattiesburg coordinated the trip with DHH. DHH lined up the community projects. Following the trip, I interviewed the USM Program Coordinator

who had led the student group. He commented on seeing all the fields being prepared for

crops and wondering why some land could not be donated to Shaw to grow fresh produce

instead of leaving the city as a food desert. From his observations, he felt that DHH is a

force for reconciliation in the Delta. He felt reconciliation in the Delta would include

those with advantages being able to let go of a little of that advantage so that others could

also have something, a need that applies not only to Shaw and the Delta, he noted, but

also the entire state.

Every community project that DHH does, or helps to facilitate, whether summer

feeding programs or coordinating the projects for USM students' community service, is a

step toward sustainable development. DHH recognizes that addressing the culture of

generational poverty is as necessary to that development as job training, academic

tutoring, or opening a grocery store. Because it has been willing to listen to the people of

Shaw and is a facilitator for the community, rather than a rescuer of it, DHH is helping

residents develop the skills necessary to sustain their town's future development on their

own. As DHH continues to demonstrate its consistency and trustworthiness, more

residents are moving from observing to participating. In talking with a former summer

intern for DHH, he commented that although some people may still be on the outside,

watching, there has been a widespread growth of acceptance and trust over the past two

years. He saw DHH as helping to bring the community together, as trying to be the

heartbeat of the community. He contrasted this with a small church he had worked in that

provided free lunch in a poor part of its city. The church had very limited interaction with

the individuals it fed and had no presence in the neighborhood apart from serving lunch.

Delta Hands for Hope is a model, I have concluded, for successful and sustainable

development because racial reconciliation is interwoven in its structure, world-view,

faith, and programs. The methods of DHH are not only applicable to Delta communities,

but to any community in the quagmire of racial division.

Illustration 9. This banner created by the handprints of individual youth in DHH programs is a powerful
contrast to the message of racial division in the Delta and the despair of generational poverty.

Like many other low-income communities, the city of Shaw needs a well-funded

school system, an educated and trained workforce, updated infrastructure, a grocery store,

and jobs. It is also struggling to overcome the barriers presented by racial division and

generational poverty. But needs and barriers are not the identity of the residents of Shaw.

DHH has taken the time to know Shaw, a place with strong community leaders that have

hope and vision, and recognize that the residents are themselves tremendous resources for

sustainable development. As DHH, Jason, Lane, and the board members know, the

people of Shaw are good and have much to offer. Their greatest need is a friend to walk

with them, lending a hand as needed. Delta Hands for Hope is that friend.

Beyond the answers to my research questions, I also discovered a personal love of listening to people and learning to understand more deeply social problems and contexts through their experiences. I have lived throughout the state, including in two Delta counties, and have seen communities over and over hit a wall in trying to move their communities forward. It has troubled me as to why, now I recognize that each one hit the "invisible" wall of unresolved racial division. No matter how well designed and executed a program is, or how much money is invested, I have learned that sustainable development will continue to be elusive without racial reconciliation. Research was a new territory for me to explore, but in doing so, I discovered the joy of conducting research, and a desire to continue research on racial division. A gift I take with me from the people of Shaw, DHH, and this research, is that listening to and valuing others, building relationships based on mutual respect, being inclusive rather than exclusive, are together powerful agents of hope and change. Truly, the people of Mississippi, all of them, are its greatest asset.

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