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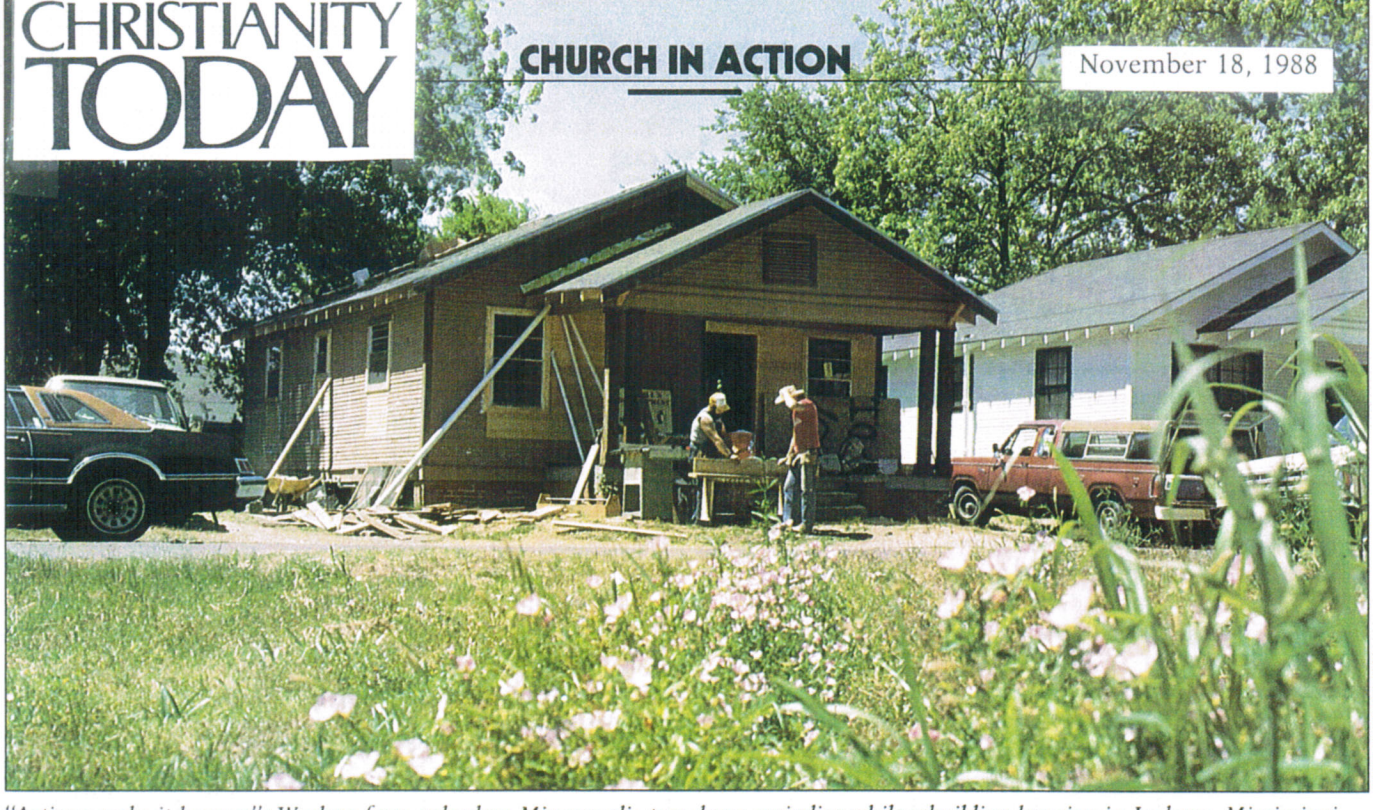


JOHN PRIN PHOTOS

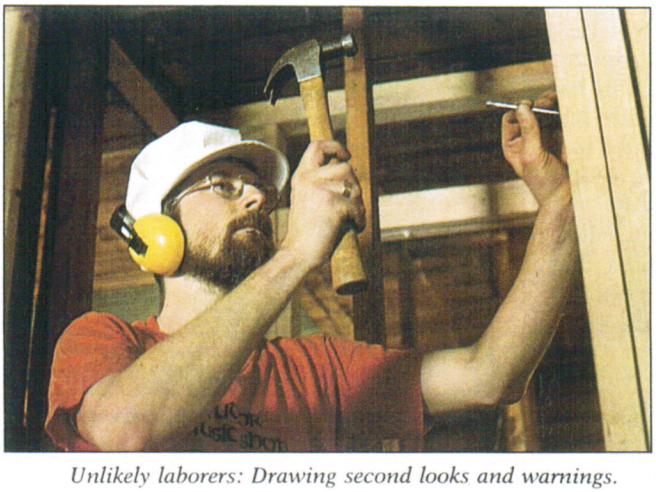
"Actions make it happen": Workers from suburban Minneapolis tear down prejudice while rebuilding housing in Jackson, Mississippi.

The Rehabbing of 807 Pascagoula

The sound of pounding hammers reverberated in the steamy, 95-degree air of Jackson, Mississippi's ghetto district. Residents peered out of their windows, puzzled by the sight of unfamiliar workers—*white* workers—sweating through the noonday heat to renovate the dilapidated house at 807 Pascagoula Street. Something was happening, to be sure—something more than a simple construction project. In some small way, perhaps, a past was being torn down and a future was being built.

The unlikely laborers had come from Minnesota, 1,500 miles to the north, to stay two weeks in Jackson. Hosted by Voice of Calvary (VOC), a 28-year-old ministry that serves the medical, housing, and spiritual needs of Jackson's poor, this work crew of 18 men, mostly upper-income professionals from Presbyterian churches in suburban Minneapolis/St. Paul, had paid their own way to Mississippi. And they had raised $10,000 to cover the cost of materials needed to rehab the one-story, six-room house on Pascagoula, the sixth of 14 similar homes VOC plans to renovate and sell to low-income families through its Adopt-A-Home program.

In spite of the tight work schedule, the volunteers found time for fun and games, with no less constructive results. In the vacant lot next to 807, several youngsters were throwing a basketball at a wobbly hoop on a worn-out backboard. Two men from the crew paused in their duties, got a ladder, unbolted the backboard, and started repairing it. Soon a dozen youngsters were eagerly looking on.



Unlikely laborers: Drawing second looks and warnings.

A four-by-eight-foot plywood sheet (intended for the renovated house) became a new backboard. While the Minnesotans held the ladder and passed tools up, neighborhood residents repositioned the hoop and bolted the backboard to its 10-foot post.

Marcus, a boy of 12, watched with ever-widening eyes. He wore a baseball cap with a colorful emblem that said, "If Only I Had a Job to Shove." As the backboard was bolted securely in place, he dribbled the basketball on the dusty "court" for a lay-up. Then he joined the many blacks and whites who were talking, joking, laughing, and celebrating—with uncommon togetherness—their common achievement.

What's the difference?

As the rebuilding of 807 Pascagoula Street continued, other activites took on new meaning, too. For the workers from "up north," even riding in the back of a pickup truck to and from the job site was fun—a welcomed diversion from their office routines back home. For the dozens of residents in Jackson's ghetto, a group of whites riding in a pickup driven by a black was reason to take a second look and smile.

Still, the reminders of the past and its hold on the future were never far away. One Minnesotan rode with his Mississippi foreman to the local lumber yard for supplies. After the truck was loaded, a white worker from the lumber yard approached him: "Just want you to

know how much we respect what y'all are doin', what a good thing it is. But," the local worker paused, "we don't want you gettin' no ideas it'll make a difference. Nothing will change. Y'all have a good day, hear?"

That evening, as they returned to their dormitory and cooked supper for themselves, the workers' conversation centered on their hopes to improve living conditions, for meaningful change.

"We wanted to believe that the results of our efforts would be lasting," said John DeJong, who is an insurance broker and served as one of two volunteer leaders for the group from Minnesota. "We had hoped interaction between races and a role reversal or two might just turn the tide. We wanted the same compassion Christ showed for the less fortunate to mean a strong witness to the world."

On the eve of the volunteers' departure, VOC's president, Lem Tucker, said: "Blacks have had half the good and twice the bad as their brothers. Change won't have occurred until there is a balance. No amount of wanting equality without acting to make it happen will bring about that balance. Your being here is the kind of action we need more of."

Tucker, who grew up in Virginia and returned to his parents' roots in Mississippi, explained that he was inspired by VOC's founder, John Perkins, whose activism forged ties between blacks and whites in the strife-torn 1960s. But housing progress alone might not be enough, Tucker added, "not unless the attitudes of those who resist equality also change."

Making a difference?: Ask the new owners.

Single souls

The volunteers expressed to Tucker their hopes that progress, even in small steps, would mean change. They had seen it happen, they said, referring to Marcus and the neighbors of the new owners at 807 Pascagoula. DeJong, who couldn't ignore the irony of meeting that evening in what was once a whites-only restaurant, insisted that "inch by inch, like a glacier, something is shaking."

"Like our Savior," said DeJong, who grew up in Colorado, away from overt forms of racial segregation, "we [volunteers] relocated from our vastly positive environment to reach hurting men and women and children one by one, by name, as individuals. Not as mass numbers, but as single souls."

Did the handful of volunteers dare to believe they were making a difference?

Their comments ran the gamut:

- "The problems are so much bigger, broader, and longer-ranged than I'd imagined."
- "The world says, 'Nothing will change.' The people we're close to say, 'Actions will make it happen.' Little by little, I think, is better than nothing at all."
- "Yeah, ask Marcus. Ask the new owners of 807 Pascagoula Street. Ask those who waved to us riding in the back of a pickup. Ask our own families who waved to us when we left home."
- "Ask him who said, 'Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me.' "

The difference? On the final day, while a volunteer was hanging plasterboard at 807 Pascagoula, four preschool kids asked him for water from the cooler. "They'll be grandparents one day. They're only four to six years old right now, but they drank from the same water supply and Styrofoam cups that we'd drunk from. Would any of their grandparents have dared do the same?" □

By John Prin, a freelance writer in Minneapolis, Minnesota.