



## NEDDIE WINTERS, PRESIDENT

Neddie Winters is currently both the executive director and president of Mission Mississippi. His involvement with the healing of race relations began before the actual birth of the organization. In 1992, a few of Neddie's friends came to him and requested that he pray with them about their recent endeavors in racial reconciliation. As Neddie prayed with them, he felt God pulling him towards a personal involvement with their movement. It only took one year for Neddie to become fully involved.

He started with a twenty-year commitment to Mission Mississippi, but even after twenty years, he is still firmly engaged. Neddie doesn't see his commitment as a burden, but rather sees his opportunity to serve as something that God has allowed him to do. "When you go to jail," Neddie said, "you serve your time and then you've got to go. I must be doing something right that God would keep me here."

Mission Mississippi is grounded in two major concepts: (1) the centrality of Jesus Christ and (2) the importance of sincere, interpersonal relationships. Both of these are integral to Neddie's story. You see, Neddie became a Christian as a young man. He pastored a church for years before becoming the executive director of Mission Mississippi. During the overlap, Neddie brought the mission to his church. He had several speakers from Mission Mississippi speak at his primarily African American church on a regular basis. A white speaker, Dan Hall, and a black speaker, Dolphus Weary, were two notable speakers. "The reaction to both was good," Neddie said. He points out that Dan could offer perspectives that an African American could not. A common response to Dan was "I've never heard white folks say that!" Dolphus, on the other hand, had his

own special insight and put a refreshing spin and a Christian perspective on the tough issues that he addressed.

Mr. Winters has since left his position as pastor but is still an active part of the church. Today he attends Jackson First, an Assembly of God congregation. He brings in speakers from Mission Mississippi there as well, and also teaches a class on “Building Relationships Mission Mississippi-Style” as a Connect Group. Jackson First strives for ethnic diversity within its congregation; Mr. Winters believes that his class and other involvement has helped to form this mindset. Jackson First also financially supports Mission Mississippi and hosts a prayer breakfast annually. Neddie stays strong despite people and especially Christians having a hard time understanding racial reconciliation. He simply asks Christians to live out the Gospel through “gracism”, and nothing more.

The other major tenant on which Mission Mississippi is built is the importance of forming meaningful relationships with people of other races. Neddie admits that his work with Mission Mississippi has changed some of his attitudes and opened his heart. “I’ve especially changed some of my pre-conceived notions about white folks,” he said. Growing up on a plantation made him wary of white males. Now some of his best friends are white. “It sounds cliché,” Mr. Winters admits, “but it’s true.”

The history of Mission Mississippi is full of moments that have changed Neddie. In the very event that kickstarted the movement, two men, Pat (who is white) and Tom (who is black), spoke about their friendship. Neddie was touched that a black man and a white man could “live and die for one another.” During a very special Day of Dialogue, a pastor who was involved came to Neddie afterwards and apologized to him, explaining that he went into the event very apathetic, but that God had shown him his wrong attitude. “God had revealed to him that he didn’t get it,” Neddie explains when he retells the story. As a panelist at a Mission Mississippi event, Benjamin Watson of the New Orleans Saints advocated a Christian and spiritual response to the Black Lives Matter movement and the Ferguson riots. Neddie heard Mr. Watson explain that the sin of racism must be dealt with on a spiritual level and found his perspective thought-provoking.

There are many more examples like these in the history of the movement. Seeing these stories firsthand has shown Neddie what it takes and what it looks like to form powerful, genuine, healing relationships across racial lines. He’s seen that power work out in his own life, and to this day fosters many strong relationships with families that he might not have got as close to otherwise. Having seen this power, Neddie works to see barriers broken and relationships strengthened, and to see blacks and whites come together in Christ’s love. He says that his heart is now more open to God and others in a way that it wasn’t before. “This isn’t Neddie Winters, the president of Mission Mississippi,” he adds. “It’s Neddie as a human being.”