

part 1 of a 3-part series

The Perkins Foundation, Voice of Calvary Ministries and more reflect on the genius and determination of Dr. John Perkins

By Ivory Phillips
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Although the Rev. Dr. John Perkins is known around the world in both religious and political circles, in order to really know and understand him, one has to become acquainted with Shivers, Mendenhall, New Hebron and other such communities in rural, central Mississippi. Better still, one has to become acquainted with such places as they existed in the 1930s – 60s. It is there that John Perkins' vision and his determined drive for human development began. It is there, among bootleggers, gamblers, and other dirt-poor laborers that his ideas germinated. Indeed, the



outlook of the world that resulted in his present-day theology was built upon his witnessing and understanding of the oppression that he, his family and neighbors faced.

Born in 1930, as he was growing up, most black people were very poor, owning very little. He recalls that his family was so poor

that his mother actually died of starvation and the lack of medical care when he was 7 months old. When he was able to go to work, he was paid only .15 cents a day, when he expected and should have gotten \$15 a day. He, and other black people who were sharecroppers, often migrated to "the Delta" to pick cotton, just to be able to sustain themselves across the fall and winter months. The plantations in the area were violent places, as were the juke joints where many black people often went for socialization. Bootleggers, gamblers and others who were there to make money and often engaged in disputes and

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leaders and state leaders sitting together to work out solutions to the problems in the area. He was quick to point out, however, that the atmosphere is such that politicians are too often criticized for talking with the enemy, those on the other side of the aisle. The depth of that condition is reflected in how many people do not know who or what to believe, as left- and right-wingers present their "truths".

As he looked at the history of black people, Perkins talked about the differences between what was being promoted by Booker T. Washington and W.E.B. DuBois. He not only talked about how some of what each said was true, but the importance of trying to understand the circumstances that may drive leaders or even individuals to take certain positions — positions that may be opposed even by the majority. Perkins indicated that in his own life, he never answers those who criticize him. Instead, he says that he tries to keep on doing what

he considers the right thing and that as the critics wail away, sooner or later, they will seem like fools arguing by themselves or they will cease.

Dr. Perkins is a very persuasive talker, because he brings to his positions such logic and such passion. It is just so obvious that he is concerned about helping the disadvantaged and prodding the powerful to conduct themselves in a moral manner when it comes to their wielding power in society. Perkins is deeply concerned, even if he is unconventional. (Of course, it may be that being conventional is what prevents many others from being as persuasive or effective.) As he talked, one of the things that he said, which makes sense, but often goes unnoticed, was that "revolutions often begin in prison, because prisoners have the time to think." This illustrated to the writer the depth to which he was/ is willing to go in order to assist the disadvantaged,

who are battling racism and economic oppression.

Here is a man who is an unusually committed person. He has spoken around the country and around the world. He has established the Christian Community Development Association, the John and Vera Mae Perkins Foundation, the Harambee Christian Family Center, and several other organizations. He has led the rehabilitation of numerous houses in Jackson and at one point the operation of a health clinic and thrift stores. Additionally, as a result of his message, there have been John Perkins Fellows Programs established at Northern Seminary, Seattle Pacific University, the University of Virginia, and Calvin College, holding out the probability of other such leaders being developed.

From Perkins' efforts, many other community development activities have emerged or been affected. For an example, Jackson's Habitat for Humanity has greatly expanded. Hope, as in Hope Credit Union, is

quite viable. Working Together Jackson is doing similar things. The health center merged with the health clinics began by Dr. Aaron Shirley, making it stronger. Dr. Perkins is not envious of any of this. He indicates that the goal of ministries or foundations such as these, which he started, is to work themselves out of existence. This, he said, should be their goal rather than the organizations being permanently tied to their founders or charismatic leaders.

Perkins feels that reconciliation is being advanced through the Christian Community Development Association and through other institutions that spring-up in imitation of it, when the traditional institutions were moving too slowly. He feels that evangelical Christian groups are being attracted due to the fact that what he has taught is so Bible-based and the fact that where he began is in the Bible-Belt.

Although Perkins has

sometimes been identified with national Republican leaders, his position is that he refrains from partisan politics in order to be able to work with all who are willing to help as co-workers, investors, or otherwise. In that sense, he has praise for the likes of Bill Gates and investment bankers, just as he considers Councilman Kenneth Stokes a strong friend and advocate. Perkins wants to be recognized as "pro-black" and one who is dead-set on helping those who are disadvantaged, especially when it is based upon a racist system.

The writer was most recently impressed by an article that appeared in *AMERICA* magazine entitled "Reclaiming Jesus: A Confession of Faith in a Time of Crisis," which was signed by Dr. Perkins, along with nearly two dozen other leading clergymen and women. Among other things, the document rejects racism, white supremacy,

white nationalism, misogyny, language, and policies that mistreat or ignore society's most vulnerable, the practice and pattern of lying that is increasingly invading our political and civic life, moves toward autocratic leadership and authoritarian rule, and rejects "America first" as a theological heresy. Although the document is non-partisan and is the product of a group, it is clearly in line with what Perkins has been about for all of his adult life.

When one looks at Perkins' life, it is easy to see why he has been awarded honorary doctorate degrees by 16 different institutions of higher learning. It is easy to understand why he has more than a dozen prestigious awards. These are not things about which he would boast, but they are things that testify to his contributions to Mississippi and the world. They are reasons why more Jacksonians should get to know him. They are reasons why the writer is proud to call him, "friend."

part 2 of a 3-part series

PART 2

Dr. John Perkins, an uncommon genius and unusually committed leader

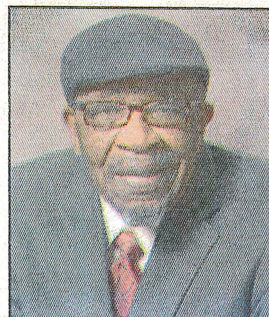
By Ivory Phillips
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Dr. Perkins is known the world over in both evangelical and religiously-influenced political circles, but is not much publicized on the local. He is very widely published, but not quoted that often by local black ministers. These are somewhat puzzling truths

to this writer. As a matter of fact, it is this situation that led to the writing of this series of articles.

Although he has been acquainted with Perkins since the early 1980s, it was quite an eye-opening experience for the writer to sit and interview/talk with him one on one. It became

apparent that the depth of his interests was far beyond the set of questions that the writer had in mind. Consequently, after a few minutes the writer decided that the wiser course was to simply listen to Dr. Perkins as his mind delved into his various concerns. This decision led us to the presentation last week of



his Lawrence and Simpson counties background; his experiences in California; and his work with Mendenhall and Jackson ministries.

It was also apparent early in the interview that Dr. Perkins was concerned about people's meaning or understanding of democracy. For him, democracy necessarily means

embracing and advancing a multiracial, multicultural society. It means being concerned about organizing the city, state, and country in such a way that the least among us is enabled to develop and provide for themselves with dignity. This, he said, requires city

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fight that led to homicides.

Perkins up-rooted and fled these kinds of conditions for what he felt would be a better life in California. Once he arrived, although he had managed to get only a third-grade education while in Simpson County, in California, he was able to secure a job as the foreman over a crew of ditch-diggers. From there he developed other construction and managerial skills that would enable him to advance economically both then and when he would eventually return to Mississippi.

Through it all, he kept in his memory, the family and neighbors that he had left in Mississippi. The more he thought about them, because of the kinds of bonds he had developed in his rural, southern environment, the more determined he was to return and use what he had learned in order to affect societal changes. Among other things, Perkins reasoned that black people had been so thoroughly exploited because they generally owned none of the means of production except their labor. White people owned the land, they owned the capital, and they were the managers. Black people needed something in addition to their labor upon which to

build wealth and even decent daily lives. He also realized that even black people who did not live on plantations and were able to get federal assistance for housing, only were able to get loans for small Jim Walter homes. Patterns, or a system of racism, had them segregated and oppressed. He was determined to help promote skills development and community development for underprivileged people. It is in that context that Mendenhall Ministries was born.

By the time that Perkins had moved what had been referred to as Mendenhall Ministries to West Jackson, the operation included a community development component referred to as Voice of Calvary Ministries and a companion worship component called Voice of Calvary Fellowship. The entire operation was built upon Perkins' ideas, promoting a three-pronged strategy of Racial Reconciliation, Relocation and Redistribution.

Perkins had been utilizing these ideas or principles since his return from California in 1960. He had concluded that Christianity must be "lived out," especially among the needy and oppressed rather than merely talked about on Sundays and ignored the rest

of the week. Starting out by working with junior and senior high schools within a 50-mile radius of Mendenhall, Perkins had garnered a following of most appreciative residents. Based upon this, he led a boycott against racist white businesses in the area. This, too, was successful. As a matter of fact, the efforts were so effective until Perkins was arrested and severely beaten by white police officers in the Brandon jail. This was followed up by threats and other acts of violence. The beating and the violence that surrounded the ministry efforts are detailed in a book, *The Preacher And The Klansman*, which first ran as a series of articles in the *Clarion Ledger* newspaper.

Given this push of violent racist activity and the pull of being able to attract more people to the ministry, especially students, Perkins made the move to West Jackson, near Jackson State University in 1972. In this new location, he organized People Development Incorporated, Christian Community Development Association, and Christian Health Fellowship. Through their work, they were demonstrating the three Rs – Racial Reconciliation, Relocation, and Redistribution,

while uplifting poor, working-class people and revitalizing their houses and community.

As a result of this preaching and Christian example, a fairly large contingent of white individuals and families became affiliated with Voice of Calvary – most from other states, but some from the Jackson area. Likewise, local black residents became increasingly attracted to Voice of Calvary. The working together and worshipping together was an example of the kind of foundation that Perkins felt was necessary for there to be real racial reconciliation. This was the case, because it also meant that there would be discussions of racism and the history of the racial segregation and oppression experienced by black people in this country. It would mean that more white people would become acquainted with the monumental moral and spiritual problem of racism, that underlay much of the condition of underprivileged black people.

Beyond the reconciliation that would be occurring from the working, worshipping and discussing together, Voice of Calvary stressed the idea of relocation, that is, that white people needed to move into the neighborhoods where working-

class black people lived so that they could understand and actually "feel" what black people experience on a daily basis. The black poor and oppressed would no longer be isolated; out of sight and out of mind. Relocation would also help transform these white residents into stronger advocates for the kinds of political, economic, and social changes that black people needed and for which they had been struggling for years.

The third part of the John Perkins/Voice of Calvary strategy was the redistribution of wealth. This component was more difficult for many reasons, but especially because it would require the surrendering of much on the part of even sympathetic white people. It also would require statewide and even a national effort in order to be meaningfully achieved.

Nevertheless, despite what was sometimes slow progress, Perkins was able to attract some local white followers and many from other locations. Meanwhile, he went on speaking tours around this country and the world. He simultaneously wrote a virtual library of books in spreading his message and explaining his vision. Among those books were:

- *A Quiet Revolution*

- *Let Justice Roll Down*
- *With Justice For All*
- *A Time To Heal*
- *Welcoming Justice*
- *Beyond Charity*
- *Restoring At-Risk Communities*
- *Do All Lives Matter*
- *Parting Words To The Church On Race And Love*
- *He Calls Me Friend*

Many of these books were co-authored, but Perkins' philosophy, theology and strategic thinking are clearly prominent throughout. The writings spell out his vision, his ministry and foundation, his life's work.

Over the next several weeks, we will discuss more details of his thinking, as it relates to broad political, economic and human issues. We will discuss other organizing efforts, others who labored along with and/or supported his work, his awards and recognitions. Despite the fact that many contemporary Jacksonians may be unfamiliar with the ministry and the foundation, we intend to show that the work of Rev. Dr. John Perkins demonstrates that he is an uncommon genius and an unusually committed, selfless individual, who has toiled in and for central Mississippi for over 60 years.

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PART 3 – John Perkins Foundation, legacy in the capable hands of three co-presidents – Deborah, Elizabeth and Priscilla

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Having been raised with a knowledge of the John Perkins philosophy and principles for reconciliation and development, it is not surprising that they have embraced the idea of being co-presidents of the John and Vera Mae Perkins Foundation.

Nevertheless, each of the three daughters – Deborah, Elizabeth, and Priscilla – makes it clear that she took the step of involvement in the foundation as a result of being led by the Spirit. In other words, each has felt a calling and is there not just because she grew up in the Perkins household.

As youngsters, they understood and saw the logic of racial reconciliation, relocation, and re-distribution. As youngsters they heard their mother and father teaching those three Rs; they saw the ideas modelled. They lived through the threats and the horrific beating of John Perkins at the hands of

law enforcement officers in Rankin County. Whether it was Mendenhall, Jackson, or Pasadena, they understand what it means to be children of John and Vera Mae Perkins. The trio grew up as the youngest of eight – Spencer the oldest and Wayne the youngest are both deceased. The other
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three living siblings are Joanie, Phillip, and Derick. Being the younger of the children, they spent more time with their mother and learned from the older children.

As they matured, each learned and became involved sufficiently until the decision was made that they would be co-presidents of the foundation that had come into existence in 1983. This decision was made not in anticipation of Dr. Perkins' departure, but in order to provide a smooth transition as his age advances and his energy diminishes; he is approaching 90. The co-presidents administer the foundation under a board of directors, which meets annually, and with a supporting staff.

With a budget of \$650,000, they lead and/or engage in a full-fledged set of activities. These activities include: the Micah Missions, Youth Programs, Dr. John Perkins Bible Study, Housing, the Shalom Community at Wheaton College, and the John Perkins Fellows at Calvin College. They are also intimately involved with the John Perkins Centers at Seattle Pacific University and the University of Virginia - Charlottesville. In addition, John Perkins is almost constantly on speaking tours. In short, the foundation is a beehive of activities, locally and nationally. This year, on October 16, John and Vera Mae Perkins will celebrate their 60th in ministries, a true milestone.

With so much to do and so many responsibilities, it is easy to see why there are three co-presidents. The daughters declare /acknowledge that they are not attempting to fill John Perkins' shoes; they say that the shoes cannot be filled. They are intent on seeing that all responsibilities are taken care of and that the Perkins legacy is preserved. With

that in mind, they have a clear division of labor.

Deborah Perkins is responsible for overseeing the houses owned by the foundation. This includes their leasing and maintenance. It also involves being a functional part of various neighborhood associations, churches, colleges, government initiatives, and corporate partnerships dealing with housing, healthcare, and infrastructure within its target area that is bounded by Lynch Street, Prentiss Street, Robinson Road, and Ellis Avenue. She is also responsible for finances and bookkeeping.

Elizabeth Perkins is responsible for local outreach, which involves the Micah Missions and Youth programs. This necessarily includes local programs, tours and pilgrimages, as well as teaching and scheduling speakers. (Three of the current primary speakers are Ronald Potter, Phil Reed, and Dolphus Weary.)

Priscilla Perkins is responsible for development or fund-raising and branding for the foundation. She is also the primary travel companion of Dr. Perkins.

John Perkins obviously is responsible for the weekly Bible Study. This he has done since the beginning of the ministries in Mendenhall.

Together, the co-presidents run the organization, which is seriously devoted to justice and development, utilizing the three Rs. They respect one another's skills and gifts, and they put their head together when necessary for decisions that may require join or supportive actions. After talking extensively with the daughters, it is clear that the foundation and the legacy of John and Vera Mae Perkins are in capable hands, continuing to serve in Jackson and around the country.