

Black America's view of the nuclear arms race

by Pamela Douglas
Pacific News Service

LOS ANGELES—"Triumph," intoned the preacher to the Black congregation in central Los Angeles, "is not what we think. How foolish, how grievously foolish it is, to think a triumph is bombing another nation into submission, is having the power to kill. . . . Triumph! Triumph! The only real triumph is life!"

This is surprising stuff for a Black community church. Until recently, issues of war and peace and nuclear weapons took a distant back seat to the more pressing concerns of this and other poor, Black congregations, such as losing the welfare payments.

But, says the Rev. Thomas Kilgore of Second Baptist Church, "Unless we can abate the threat of nuclear war, we can forget about everything else, 'cause won't be nobody here."

The anti-nuclear weapons sermon at Second Baptist is still atypical of political priorities in the Black community, but it is a certain sign that the nationwide campaign for a nuclear freeze is touching all sectors of society. Black church leaders, especially, are responding to the theme—a sign that the congregations are willing to listen.

Dr. Lucius Walker, executive director of the New York-based Inter-Religious Foundation, interprets the emergence of the issue in Black communities in terms that are partly economic, partly ethnic. "The Black community sees money being taken from the needs of desperately poor people in order to create weapons to destroy communities of other poor people around the world," he says. "Short of an all-out war, the only places a 'limited' war would be waged is in countries of color. I'm hearing a growing sense of that among people I work with, who are mostly community organizers and Black ministers."

Dr. Walker and other Black ministers, however, would like to orient the nuclear freeze movement toward a more general consensus for human needs. Says the Rev. Nigel Riley, a staff member of the Board of Glo-

bal Ministries of the United Methodist Church: "The liberal wing of most mainstream denominations is focusing on peace, which takes in nuclear disarmament. We're trying to use that to build a coalition among liberal forces. I do think the church needs to be challenging social and economic systems more. I believe they need to focus on challenging a system that would cut a poor family's sustenance."

Some Black social activists express little expectation that the gap between the basically white, middle-class anti-nuclear movement and the concerns of poor Blacks can be breached. "I don't run into anyone who's talking about the nuclear thing," said Dorothy Tillman, a longtime Chicago civil rights activist who is currently campaigning for better public schools. "We have an education crisis, a housing crisis, an unemployment crisis, so we don't talk about a nuclear crisis. We have a war of our own. We have a holocaust right here."

Tillman said she recently tried talking about these pressing problems to a group of people on a nationwide peace walk and got only glassy-eyed responses. "I told them 'You can't even understand what we are doing.' You know, it's very easy to deal with something (like nuclear war) that you can't deal with right now. It's harder to get in there at the ground level."

Tillman said she isn't trying to downplay the seriousness of nuclear

war, but emphasized that the problems of the Black community are far more immediate. "The grassroots people simply aren't talking about nuclear war. The community people are trying to survive. Our war is within our cities."

Some go even further in distancing themselves from the nuclear freeze movement. "There seems to be a racism involved with classical peace groups," said Mustaffa Randolph, vice president of the New York-based Black Veterans for Social Justice. "They don't want to recognize issues of American racism or U.S. intervention in Third World countries. They want to limit themselves to an environmental interpretation."

"The average Black person," he continues, "isn't thinking about a nuclear bomb. He's thinking about a cheese sandwich." Middle-class whites, he adds, "don't have to relate to what Blacks think about—the hunger, having no jobs, or no place to live. . . . That's why we're having problems unifying with them."

Randy Kehler, director of the National Clearing House of the Nuclear Weapons Freeze Campaign, acknowledges that few Blacks have gotten deeply involved in the issue. "The freeze campaign has not made a serious effort in minority communities to connect it to issues that are higher on poor people's agendas," he says. "We'd like to become a more multi-racial organization, but we're not now."

Interviews conducted with ordinary people in Black communities bear out the sense of ambivalence many feel toward the movement. "I'm not really that involved with the nuclear thing," said Gladys Smith, a part-time security guard and baby sitter in Harlem. "I really don't have time for it, between working, taking care of my kids, trying to better myself, some. But I support it. I really do."

Said Lidya Carter, a retired hospital worker in her late 60s, "I'm more worried about getting mugged or shot on the street than I am about nuclear weapons. Just the other day a friend of mine was stuck up in the elevator of the building we live in, in broad daylight. Frankly, these are the kinds of problems I'm really concerned about. The bomb seems a long way off from here."

Despite this grassroots alienation from the nuclear issue, more Black leaders, from ministers to politicians, believe Black participation in the movement is not only desirable, but imperative. "If we don't inject ourselves, these devastations which cut the human needs budget while spending on the military will continue to be ignored," says a spokesman for Congressman Ron Dellums (D.-Ca.). "Blacks are just beginning to awaken to their power in influencing foreign policy, military and economic decisions, and we know not that we have no choice but to change this government's priorities."

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Map of Portland depicts effects of one megaton nuclear blast with ground zero being the Burnsides Bridge. Circle 1: all life and buildings pulverized. Circle 2: lung hemorrhage, third degree burns. Circle 3: brick and frame houses destroyed, ear drum rupture. Circle 4: spontaneous ignition clothing and combustibles, firestorms likely, 50 per cent dead.

Marijuana initiative succeeding

Organizers of the Oregon Marijuana Initiative (OMI), a group of private citizens working to legalize the personal use of marijuana in Oregon, estimate that they have already gathered five to ten thousand signatures on their ballot-access petitions. To get the initiative on the November 2, 1982, ballot, 55,000 valid signatures are needed by July 2. Marijuana law reform groups from ten counties attended a statewide meeting in Eugene on January 9th. They formed a coalition supporting OMI and they plan to sponsor other marijuana law reforms and educational projects. Members of the coalition recently spoke to the special session of the legislature regarding possible revenue by legalizing marijuana.

To promote rational discussion of the marijuana laws, OMI has representatives available for interviews or discussions. Call John Sajo at 775-9250 or 233-1295.

Juvenile Council has openings

The Multnomah County Juvenile Court Advisory Council is currently accepting applications for openings. Potential candidates should have a strong interest in youth and the juvenile justice system, must reside or work in Multnomah County, be willing to attend two meetings per month, and be able to commit themselves to at least one three-year term.

Interested parties should send a personal letter indicating interest with a resume of background by April 30, 1982 to: Multnomah Juvenile Court, JUVENILE COURT ADVISORY COUNCIL, 1401 N.E. 68th Avenue, Portland, OR 97213.

READ THE FOOD SECTION EACH WEEK FOR NEW IDEAS IN THE KITCHEN

I have a dream.

I have a dream that one day out in the red hills of Georgia the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slaveowners will be able to sit down together at the table of brotherhood.

I have a dream that one day even the state of Mississippi a state sweltering with the heat of oppression will be transformed into an oasis of freedom and justice.

I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by their character.

I have a dream today.

I have a dream that one day every valley shall be exalted, every hill shall be made low, every mountain and every ridge shall be made low, the rough places will be made plain, and the crooked places will be made straight, and the glory of the Lord shall be revealed and all flesh see it together.

This is our hope. This is the faith that I go back to the South with. With this faith we will be able to hew out of the mountain of despair a stone of hope. With this faith we will be able to work together, to pray together, to struggle together, to go to jail together, to climb up for freedom together, knowing that we will be free one day.

This will be the day when all of God's children will be able to sing with new meaning: My country 'tis of thee, Sweet land of liberty, Of thee I sing; Land where my fathers died, Land of the Pilgrims' pride, From every mountainside, Let freedom ring.

And if America is to be a great nation, this must become true: "So, let freedom ring from the mighty mountains of New York.

Let freedom ring from the heightening Alleghenies of Pennsylvania.

Let freedom ring from the snow-capped Rockies of Colorado.

Let freedom ring from the curvaceous slopes of California.

But not only that; let freedom ring from the Stone Mountain of Georgia.

Let freedom ring from Lookout Mountain of Tennessee.

Let freedom ring from every hill and mole hill of Mississippi and every mountainside.

When we let freedom ring, when we let it ring from every town and every hamlet, from every state and every city, we will be able to speed up that day when all of God's children, black men and white men, Jews and Gentiles, Protestants and Catholics, will be able to join hands and sing in the words of the old spiritual: Free at last, free at last, Thank God Almighty, we are free at last.

Building a future. Dream by dream.

It all starts with a dream. To be a lawyer. A doctor. A Golden Gloves champion. To own your own business. And it starts with the people who have those dreams. Who are working to make those dreams real. You'll be seeing their stories in the months to come. Because they end up building a future... a good, solid future... for all of us. Dream by dream.



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