

"Civil Rights" Then and Now

by Aldon Morris

The Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) was a dynamic driving force behind the historic civil rights movement of the 1950s and 60s and it remains an important force for change today. SCLC was founded by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and other civil rights leaders in 1957-58 following the famous 381-day Montgomery bus boycott. Dr. King served as SCLC's first president until he was assassinated on April 4, 1968. Ralph D. Abernathy who was SCLC's first treasurer and second-in-command during King's administration succeeded King as president. Abernathy served as SCLC's president until 1977 when the presidency was passed on to Dr. Joseph Lowery who had been a founding member of SCLC and had previously served as president of SCLC's board.

SCLC was crucial to the civil rights movement because 1) for eleven years it was headed by Dr. King, one of the most dynamic and influential leaders ever produced by black America 2) it was able to generate a mass movement because it was rooted in the mass-based black church 3) it effectively utilized mass civil disobedience known as non-violent direct action and 4) SCLC was able to bring about fundamental change between blacks and whites in America.

SCLC was fortunate to have Dr. King as its president. King's ability to articulate the aspirations of the oppressed and the wickedness of the oppression through eloquent oratory gave him an unequalled charismatic presence. Andrew Young put it best when he said that King was so "basically humble and unassuming, and yet he was so obviously talented. The man (King) would become transformed once he got behind a pulpit." The black masses flocked to hear King and the white media raced to record his words and deeds. A close aide of King, Reverend James Lawson, explained that "King gave the black community an advantage it has never had, and has not had since his death. Namely, that any time King went to a community, immediately the focus of the nation was on that community. He had the eyes of the world on where he went." Additionally, King practiced what he preached by going to jail, risking his life, writing informative books about the struggle, receiving the Nobel Peace Prize at 35, electrifying America with his "I have a Dream" speech in 1963 and working tirelessly to bring about change. SCLC prospered during those years because it had such a visible, talented and dedicated leader.

One of the great shortcomings of America is its over emphasis on the individual. King and SCLC could not have accomplished what they did had it not been for the efforts of the masses of ordinary black people and community leaders who functioned as the solid rock of the movement. The black church provided King and SCLC with the finance, music, spiritual courage, leaders and thousands of demonstrations that made the movement the dynamic force that collided head-on with racial segregation and inequality. Social movements are powerful only when they are able to mobilize the energies of the masses. Therefore, SCLC was powerful because it successfully mobilized the black church which housed thousands of people and resources. In essence, the SCLC was the political expression of the black church. During his life King was acutely aware that the civil rights movement was not a result of his efforts alone. King understood that there would not have been a civil rights movement had it not been for the work of ministerial leaders like Reverends Fred Shuttlesworth of Birmingham, Alabama, Charles Steele of Tallahassee, Florida, Kelly Smith of Nashville, Tennessee, T.J. Jemison of Baton Rouge, Louisiana, A.L. Davis of New Orleans, and Wyatt Walker of Petersburg, Virginia and the thousands of courageous everyday church people. King was the brilliant icing on the cake while SCLC was the collective cake itself that rose up for human justice.

SCLC was the vanguard of the movement because it championed a new strategy to overthrow segregation and racial equality known as nonviolent mass direct action. SCLC advocated and implemented nonviolent actions (boycotts, sit-ins, mass marches, mass arrests, etc.) in the streets so that the day-to-day activities of a community would be so disrupted that it would be compelled to face the issue of racial inequality and initiate change. SCLC came into existence because the year long Montgomery bus boycott proved that the black masses were themselves ready to engage in political activities to seize their liberation from the lynch rope, segregated schools and buses, and the entire system of Jim Crow that robbed them of their dignity and freedom.



The mass direct action of SCLC was a tactical breakthrough because it provided a concrete avenue through which every black and white person could fight to overthrow oppression. Because of this breakthrough the black masses came running to the movement by the thousands. For example, while over 3,000 filled the jails in Birmingham in 1963, thousands of others marched through the streets of that city conducting sit-ins at segregated establishments declaring their protest would not cease until Birmingham's pharaohs changed their laws and habits. Likewise in 1965 when King, SCLC, and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) called for a 50-mile march from Selma to Montgomery, Alabama over 50,000 answered the appeal. Thus, it was SCLC's mass direct action that began to disrupt and shatter the very foundation of American racism.

What made SCLC powerful during the heyday of the civil rights movement was that its method of mass nonviolent direct action worked. It worked because the disruption it caused forced the white power structure to work out solutions with black people. It also worked because during the 1960s black people in literally thousands of cities both North and South began to use nonviolent methods in their quest for freedom. Because of this historic tactical breakthrough perfected by SCLC, the federal government was left with no other viable alternative but to pass the 1964 Civil Rights Act that outlawed racial segregation and the 1965 Voting Rights Act which seized the vote for Southern blacks. SCLC was on the cutting edge of the Civil rights movements in the 1950s and 1960s.

Today SCLC is still fighting for human equality and peace. It continues to utilize the method of nonviolent direct action. Nevertheless it has been difficult for the organization to overcome major setbacks and adequately combat the sophisticated economic and racial inequality prevalent today. SCLC suffered a serious setback when it lost King as its leader. Those who have succeeded King have been talented and dedicated presidents but they do not possess the charisma and visibility that King brought to SCLC. Thus, the organization and its activities are not nearly as visible as they were during the 1960s. Moreover, as strange as it may seem, SCLC and other social change organizations function in a racist atmosphere today that is more complex than it was 25 years ago. During the 1960s SCLC was an offensive organization that aggressively fought the blatant system of racial segregation and oppression. Today a good part of SCLC's efforts are defensive in that they are designed to prevent the conservative Reagan Administration from dismantling the 1964 Civil Rights Act, Affirmative Action, and the 1965 Voting Rights Act. To keep these gains of the 1960s, SCLC, like the old days, has had to mobilize people to make their wishes known by marching and demonstrating in the streets.

But SCLC has been offensive also. It has been very active in organizing demonstrations and boycotts against U.S. Corporations operating in racist South Africa. Indeed, SCLC and its president, Reverend Dr. Joseph Lowery, have provided an eloquent voice against the racist regime of South Africa. SCLC, along with other organizations, played a key role in the demonstrations and negotiations that resulted in Dr. King's birthday becoming a national holiday. SCLC is also very actively fighting for the economic and political rights of the poor. In this regard it is constantly organizing voter registration drives and confronting the private and governmental sectors, challenging them to feed the hungry. SCLC continues to fight against lynchings and questionable deaths which still occur and it confronts the racist activities of the Ku Klux Klan which has experienced a resurgence during the Reagan Administration.

Today the SCLC is more involved in international affairs than it was during the 1960s. The organization has grown sophisticated enough to realize that the "black problem" is an international problem. Thus SCLC has held talks with leaders around the world such as President Ortega of Nicaragua and Yasser Arafat of the Palestine Liberation Organization. Lowery has also visited Ethiopia in efforts to provide food and assistance to that country. SCLC has also established a women's division called SCLC/WOMEN. This is a positive and much needed step because in the past SCLC has not utilized the talents and energies of women nearly to the extent that is possible. SCLC/WOMEN is going some very important work in the drive for freedom. Nevertheless SCLC still needs to bring women directly into high level leadership positions so that their insights can be more systematically utilized in the fight for liberation.

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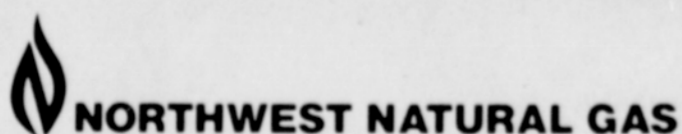
Dr. Darrell Millner
Director
Black Studies
Program
Portland State
University

In 1969, one of the first Black Studies programs in the United States was started at Portland State University. The program quickly estab-

lished its academic credibility and now offers 36 hours of undergraduate course work plus graduate study. The permanent faculty of the Black Studies program will hold Ph.D. degrees in their respective fields.

Dr. Darrell Millner, who has been associated with the program since 1974, is an outstanding example of a dedicated educator who also has a strong commitment to community service. In addition to his teaching, he has served as chairman of the Recruitment and Selection Committee for the Black Studies Center, as a director of the National Council of Black Studies Center, and a director of the Oregon Black History Corporation. He has a comprehensive personal collection of memorabilia of Black history in the State of Oregon. Dr. Millner has published many articles on Black history and the Black experience. He acts as a consultant for Portland Public Schools in their multi-cultural curriculum project. He was active in the Albina voter registration drive and serves as a member of the Board of Directors of the Martin Luther King Scholarship Fund.

We salute Dr. Millner, his associates and the students of
Portland State University's Black Studies Program.



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