"Call to a Prayer Pilgrimage for Freedom"

5 April 1957
Washington, D.C.

Delivering on the Southern Leaders Conference's promise to stage a march on the nation's capital, King, Randolph, and Wilkins convened a planning session at Washington's Metropolitan Baptist Church. Randolph, who initiated the 1941 March on Washington Movement, read this statement to the seventy-seven church, labor, and civic leaders in attendance and received their unanimous approval. King, Randolph, and Wilkins issued the statement at a press conference following the session. Having chosen the Lincoln Memorial as the site for their demonstration, the organizers borrow from the Gettysburg Address, asserting that the nation was "conceived in liberty and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal."

As we approach the third anniversary of the ruling of the United States Supreme Court against racially segregated public school systems, we invite all believers in the God-given concept of the brotherhood of man and in the American ideal of equality, to assemble, review the national scene, give thanks for the progress to date, and pray for the wiping out of the evils that still beset our nation.

The May 17, 1954, ruling against state-imposed segregation came about in orderly fashion, through the courts, from the lowest to the highest. Our appeal was based upon the Constitution of the United States of America. It was made after fifty-eight years of enduring the grossly unequal "separate-but-equal" doctrine laid down in 1896. It came after decades of patience and of reliance on morality and justice. It came slowly, step by step.

It came without violence, terror, or assassination. No bombs were thrown. No school shacks were burned down. No Jim Crow trains were dynamited. What was then the law of the land was not defied.

The Negro citizens of the land made the most of their circumstances. They got what education they could for their children. They "made out" with little or no public recreation. When they traveled they endured insult and physical assaults. They took such jobs as they could get at such wages as they were paid. They lived where they were herded. They were barred from the ballot boxes on election day. They abided by the kind of justice they received in the courts. They served their country in a Jim Crow army. They were victims of the bestial crime of lynching. However, this blanket of inequality and oppression did not completely smother the struggle for human rights. Time after time the challenge was met with stead-

1. On 2 April King, Randolph, and Wilkins sent telegrams to religious and civic leaders inviting them to attend the 5 April meeting.
2. Minutes, Conference on Prayer Pilgrimage for Freedom, 5 April 1957. Eisenhower's aides, concerned that a Washington protest would embarrass the president, attempted to influence the event's planning with the help of several black leaders. According to an administration memorandum, an attempt by "King and some others" to use the march to protest "the failure of the President to speak out" was thwarted at the 5 April meeting: "Congressman Powell, Clarence Mitchell of the NAACP and Reverend [W. H.] Jernigan successfully changed the entire character of this meeting into an occasion where there will be an observance of the anniversary of the school decision through prayer. The President, I am assured, will not be adversely affected" (Maxwell Rabb to Sherman Adams, 17 April 1957).
fastness and courage, even in the face of disheartening odds. The valiant freedom fighters for civil rights became inspiring heroes for our time.

The May 17 decision, then, was a New Emancipation. At last Negroes were to be recognized as citizens and the states were forbidden to set them off by law, solely because of race, in public education and elsewhere. In Montgomery the people caught the meaning of the hour and struck a mighty spiritual blow for human dignity.

On the public school question, nine states and the District of Columbia have either completed desegregation or have made a beginning. But eight states have defied the nation's highest court and have refused to begin in good faith, with all deliberate speed, to comply with its ruling. In these states privately organized groups have exerted economic pressure upon Negro citizens who have simply asked obedience to the Supreme Court. Men and women have been fired from their jobs. Merchants have been refused credit and goods. Farmers have been denied loans.

The governments of these states have joined the assault on democracy by moving to put the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People out of business. While the NAACP is the declared target of these actions, the true victims are the white and Negro citizens who are thereby restricted in the exercise of their right to freedom of speech, freedom of assembly and petition, and freedom to seek redress of grievances through the courts.

In view of the historic role the Association has played in the life of American Negroes, the attack upon it becomes a very special and particular one upon the constitutional rights of Negro citizens. Abridging the basic rights of citizens is in itself a high crime; but depriving them of the agency through which they have sought, in the courts, to secure these very rights is shameful compounding of the felony. It makes a mockery of citizenship.

The law enforcement agencies of these states have permitted violence to be visited upon individuals and institutions which oppose segregation. Ministers have been arrested, threatened and shot. Churches and homes have been bombed. School children have been threatened by mobs.

Accompanying all this has been a campaign of racial slander of the most vicious and reprehensible nature, typified by characterization of the Negro as inherently criminal and diseased, and as a mental incompetent.

This defiance, this legislative harassment, this economic pressure, this slander and violence have been encouraged by public officials, including Mayors, Governors, Attorneys General, and United States Senators.

At the Federal level the civil rights bill has been trimmed and delayed in the Congress by members from the states where defiance of the Supreme Court is state policy. The avowed purpose is either to whittle it down to nothing, or to kill it altogether.3

One hundred years ago, in the Dred Scott decision, it was held that the Constitution did not include Negroes in its protection of the rights of citizens. Even

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3. The proposed civil rights bill faced strong opposition from southern congressmen, who feared a provision that would allow federal judges to hold local officials in contempt for interfering with the registration of voters.
though a war was fought and the Constitution amended, some states today are seeking to wipe out history and to restore to force the Dred Scott decision of 1857.

In the words of Abraham Lincoln, this is a nation “conceived in liberty and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal.” We believe its people treasure the heritage of equality before the law. They uphold this principle because they know that every man, whatever his race, religion, or station, must be free if our nation is to remain strong.

We believe Americans are deeply religious and wish to order their lives and their country according to the great moral truths to be found in our common religious heritage.

As the Founding Americans prayed for strength and wisdom in the wilderness of a new land, as the slaves and their descendants prayed for emancipation and human dignity, as men of every color and clime in time of crisis have sought Divine guidance, so we now, in these troubled and momentous years, call upon all who love justice and dignity and liberty, who love their country, and who love mankind, to join in a Prayer Pilgrimage to Washington on May 17, 1957, where we shall renew our strength, communicate our unity, and rededicate our efforts, firmly but peaceably, to the attainment of freedom.

[signed]
A. Philip Randolph
President, Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, AFL-CIO

[signed] Martin L. King Jr.
Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr.
President, Southern Leaders Conference

[signed]
Roy Wilkins
Executive Secretary
National Association for the Advancement of Colored People

PDS. MLKP-MBU: Box 2.

From William Holmes Borders

6 April 1957
Atlanta, Ga.

The longtime pastor of Wheat Street Baptist Church, located on Atlanta's Auburn Avenue near Ebenezer Baptist Church, praises King's "leadership, imagination, consecration and insight." Borders, leader of Atlanta's Triple L Movement against segregated buses, also reminds King that ongoing local struggles will require attention after the Prayer Pilgrimage.1

1. On 10 January 1957 Borders and five black ministers, leaders of the Love, Law, and Liberation (Triple L) Movement, were arrested for violating Georgia's segregation laws after they boarded an Atlanta trolley and took seats usually reserved for whites. Borders, who enjoyed favorable relations with Atlanta's political leadership, had arranged the arrest with Mayor William B. Hartsfield, as both men...