

Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

I choose to identify with the underprivileged. I choose to identify with the poor. I choose to give my life for the hungry. I choose to give my life for those who have been left out. ... This is the way I'm going. If it means suffering a little bit, I'm going that way. ... If it means dying for them, I'm going that way.
—Martin Luther King, Jr.¹

Christian scripture warns of false prophets—leaders who impress but fail to produce “good fruit.” Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was no false prophet; he both talked the talk and walked the walk. His words and work, message and ministry endure as models of theoretical clarity and deep faith, embodied in meaningful and effective action. His faith and clarity supported a commitment which allowed him to stay the course despite mounting death threats against him. In the final sermon before he was assassinated, King exemplifies this courage, refusing to step away from the righteousness and necessity of his work despite the likelihood of his death:

Like anybody, I would like to live a long life. Longevity has its place. But I'm not concerned about that now. I just want to do God's will. And He's allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I've looked over. And I've seen the promised land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people, will get to the promised land. And I'm happy, tonight. I'm not worried about anything. I'm not fearing any man. Mine eyes have seen

¹ Vincent Harding, *Martin Luther King: The Inconvenient Hero* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1995), 58

the glory of the coming of the Lord.²

This legacy of clarity, commitment, faith and courage is a necessary and invaluable resource for thinking about social justice movements today.

In important ways, in the last years of his life King anticipated many of the economic, political, religious, and ethical problems of the present times. In the journey from the Montgomery Bus Boycott to planning the Poor People's Campaign, he became more than just a black civil rights leader (for 1950s and 60s America), but a bearer of a still-relevant vision, set of values and mission for the entire nation and globe. Today he stands as a model of leadership and commitment for all who are righteously concerned about the crying injustice and inhumanity of abandonment in the face of abundance, of poverty in the midst of plenty.

His historic "Beyond Vietnam" speech at Riverside Church reflected this broad vision and leadership. In his address he raised fundamental critiques of the Vietnam War, condemning it as an "enemy of the poor." While poor blacks and poor whites were set against each other at home, he noted, they were brought together in a brutal unity to massacre the poor in Vietnam—a "cruel manipulation of the poor." He described his prophetic stand against the war as part of a larger vision—a political movement against racism, militarism and economic injustice:

...we as a nation must undergo a radical revolution of values. We must rapidly begin the shift from a "thing-oriented" society to a "person-oriented" society. When machines and computers, profit motives and property rights are considered more important than people, the giant triplets of racism, materialism, and militarism are incapable of being conquered...³

In such statements King expressed a social vision that demanded both personal and social transformation, refusing any easy dichotomy between individual virtue and the character of our national life. Compassion was necessary, but needed to find expression socially: "True compassion is more than flinging a coin to a beggar; it is not haphazard and superficial. It comes to see that an edifice which produces beggars needs restructuring." Instead, "A true revolution of values will soon look uneasily on the glaring contrast

2 Martin Luther King, Jr., "I See the Promised Land," in *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, ed. James M. Washington (New York: Harper Collins, 1986), 286.

3 Martin Luther King, Jr., "A Time to Break Silence," in *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, ed. James M. Washington (New York: Harper Collins, 1986), 240-241.

of poverty and wealth.”⁴ King rejected both cynicism and sectarianism, arguing that more just foreign and domestic policies were both possible and necessary. The alternative was a road to “spiritual death.”

This broader vision and analysis is expressed in his strategic turn from a civil rights to human rights framework. He laid this out in an address to the SCLC staff in May of 1967, which deserves to be quoted at length:

We have moved from the era of civil rights to the era of human rights, an era where we are called upon to raise certain basic questions about the whole society. We have been in a reform movement ... But after Selma and the voting rights bill, we moved into a new era, which must be the era of revolution. We must recognize that we can't solve our problem now until there is a radical redistribution of economic and political power...this means a revolution of values and other things. We must see now that the evils of racism, economic exploitation and militarism are all tied together...you can't really get rid of one without getting rid of the others...the whole structure of American life must be changed. America is a hypocritical nation and [we] must put [our] own house in order.⁵

This analysis suggests the necessity of building a broad-based movement in order to make plausible any significant “redistribution of economic and political power.” The practical implication of this stance required the uniting of poor whites with poor people of color on the basis of what they have in common: their poverty and powerlessness.

On the one hand, this stance placed him at odds with those civil rights leaders who chose to remain silent about the injustice of the war in Vietnam and satisfied with stopping at civil rights and voting rights legislation that mainly benefited the black upper classes. King clearly recognized the social and class limitations of the legislative gains abolishing legalized Jim Crow segregation, realizing that it did no good to have the right to sit in a restaurant if you could not afford to eat there. He stated, “What good is it to be able to sit at a lunch counter if you can't afford the price of a hamburger?”⁶ Still today we see that the ‘white only’ sign in the restaurant window has been replaced by a new sign, that is, the menu with its itemized costs of meals. No matter what color your skin, there's no

4 Ibid., 241

5 Martin Luther King, Jr ‘To Chart Our Course for the Future’, address to the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, South Carolina, 1967, 2-3 (King Library and Archives, King Center, Atlanta).

6 “Leadership Conference Steps Up Anti-Poverty Efforts,” in *Civil Rights Monitor* Vol. 17 No.1 Winter 2007, www.civilrights.org/monitor/winter2007/art13p1.html

need to go into the restaurant if you can't afford the price of the food.

On the other hand, King's stance placed him at odds with many elements of the civil rights movement transitioning into a rigid Black Nationalist point of view.

One unfortunate thing about [the slogan] Black Power is that it gives priority to race precisely at a time when the impact of automation and other forces have made the economic question fundamental for blacks and whites alike. In this context a slogan 'Power for Poor People' would be much more appropriate than the slogan 'Black Power.'⁷

King recognized that for the load of poverty to be lifted, the thinking and behavior of a critical mass of the American people would have to be changed. To accomplish this change a "new and unsettling force" had to be formed. In late 1967, he described this force as a multi-racial "nonviolent army of the poor, a freedom church of the poor." In other words, the poor would have to be organized to take action together around their immediate and basic needs, thereby becoming a powerful social and political force capable of changing the terms of how poverty is understood, dispelling the myths and stereotypes upholding the mass complacency that leaves the root causes of poverty intact.

The dispossessed of this nation—the poor, both white and Negro—live in a cruelly unjust society. They must organize...against the injustice, not against the lives of the persons who are their fellow citizens, but against the structures through which the society is refusing to take means which have been called for, and which are at hand, to lift the load of poverty. There are millions of poor people in this country who have very little, or even nothing, to lose. If they can be helped to take action together, they will do so with a freedom and a power that will be a new and unsettling force in our complacent national life.⁸

King proceeded to translate this analysis into activity. He got from behind the pulpit and hit the pavement, launching the organizing drive of the Poor People's Campaign. He brought people together, across racial and regional lines to plan for the march to Washington. He aligned with the struggle of the poor and black sanitation workers in Memphis, Tennessee. Their struggle for dignity, King suggested, was a dramatization of the issues taken up by the Poor People's Campaign—a fight by capable, hard workers against dehu-

7 Martin Luther King, Jr., "Where Do We Go From Here: Chaos or Community," in *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, ed. James M. Washington (New York: Harper Collins, 1986), 586.

8 Ibid, 650-651

manization, discrimination and poverty wages in the richest country in the world.

Once this organizing campaign took to the streets, the representatives of the “power and principalities” launched a series of countermoves to preempt what they perceived to be a legitimate social and political threat. Elements from every level of government conspired to have him killed. King’s international prestige combined with his real potential of bringing together three major currents at that time: (1) the proven southern-wide networks of civil rights organizations, (2) the national anti-war movement, and (3) the new energy of militant poor youth of the northern cities ghetto uprisings. Such a threat had to be stopped. This was clearly confirmed by the proceedings and conclusion of the 1999 trial on King’s assassination in Memphis, largely ignored by the media. For more information see trial transcripts on the King Center web site, http://www.thekingcenter.org/KingCenter/Transcript_circuit_court.aspx and read the book by the King family’s attorney, William F. Pepper’s, *An Act of State: The Execution of Martin Luther King*.

In a number of respects the Poor People’s Campaign of 1968 anticipated the challenges of our times. We are in a time of acute economic crisis, both in the United States and globally. The acuteness of the crisis has revealed its unique chronic aspects as expressed in the impoverishment of increasing segments of the middle income strata, the so-called “middle class.” Alongside rising hunger, homelessness and economic inequality we find hints of a growing protest movement at the grassroots level. At the same time, the current economic crisis has seriously questioned the prevailing ideological and theological orthodoxies, which have defined the limits of the “realistically” possible for at least the last forty years. The global financial collapse has shown that economic arrangements are contingent and fallible, and that we can legitimately imagine new and different ways to structure economic institutions. But without a movement issuing from the bottom demanding a more just set of arrangements, it is unlikely that the current crisis will be resolved in a direction qualitatively different than that of the past two decades, which saw a historically unprecedented redistribution of wealth upward. An accounting of the lessons of King’s Poor People’s Campaign and a study of their application to the contemporary struggles of the dislocated and dispossessed is thus both timely and necessary.

Almost all discourse about King has focused on his leadership of the Civil Rights Movement, his theological critiques of Jim Crow, his oratory skills and even his shortcomings in gender politics. Little has been said about his commitment to ending poverty and even less about his vision for a Poor People’s Campaign as a historic effort of the poor to unite across racial, gender, ethnic, religious and geographic lines. Little has been said about how, in devising the strategy and tactics of that Campaign, he drew on the historical lessons provided by similar efforts of previous campaigns, such as the struggles in the 1930s of the Southern Tenant Farmers Union, an organization of the poor cotton pickers united

across color lines, and of the unemployed white and black veterans united in the famous Bonus March on Washington D.C. Nothing has been said about how this pivotal aspect of the Poor People's Campaign was a counter to the age-old 'divide and conquer' strategy applied as far back as the old slave plantation days. The slaveocracy utilized the poor whites to hold down the black slaves, while utilizing the wealth and power derived from the exploitation of the black slaves to entice and manipulate poor whites. For more information on these plantation politics see W.E.B. Du Bois's *Black Reconstruction*.

Concerned about the lack of careful and systematic study of the Poor People's Campaign—both its goals and the reasons for its demise—the Poverty Initiative at Union Theological Seminary decided in 2008 to concentrate much of its energies on a yearlong study and historical analysis of King's last years. This project brought together leaders from different poor communities who agreed to join this effort mostly because they felt that networking with other community and religious leaders would greatly strengthen their struggles and organizations. This joint exploration led to the Poverty Initiative's decision to commemorate the 40th anniversary of the Poor People's Campaign with the development of a Poverty Scholars Program. With these leaders, the Poverty Initiative began by identifying and connecting with local organizing work in impoverished communities and holding strategic dialogues. Learning from the crippling effects of King's assassination, it becomes clear that there is a need to develop many "Martin Luther Kings." Such leaders are not developed naturally—they must be systematically educated and trained.

The Poverty Scholars Program has become the cornerstone of the Poverty Initiative, reflecting its mission to raise up "generations of religious and community leaders committed to building a movement, led by the poor, to end poverty," —a mission inspired by the historical and strategic conclusions King arrived at about the poor united across color lines being "a new and unsettling force." One of the products of the strategic dialogues, immersion trips and classes sponsored by the Poverty Initiative was the compilation of the text before you. It hopes to help facilitate larger in-depth discussions and debates about this important period in history. Its purpose is to draw the kind of lessons that would help guide us in our work on accomplishing what is most needed in this country today—the reigniting of the Poor People's Campaign and finishing the unfinished business of King. The first part of the book includes chapters on the history of the Poor People's Campaign of 1968, the role of religion and the Bible, and the importance of Art and Culture in the struggle to end poverty, along with an interview of Bertha Burres (Queen of the Mule Train). The second part of the book consists of essays submitted by those from what we call the modern day Sanitation Workers' struggles—organizations fighting for the same basic needs and demands for which the Poor People's Campaign fought.