



Shaped by Martin Luther King Jr.: A Clarion Cry for Justice

When I was a child, my family did not attend church, but the church had a tremendous influence in how I came to understand the world and social justice. As a very young child, I recall our family gathering around the television set to listen to a young preacher named Martin Luther King Jr. Surrounding him were always the stories about his recent arrests and about others chased by dogs and sprayed with fire hoses. Embedded in my memory was the picture of people denied the opportunity to eat in restaurants or drink from a common water fountain and stories of black children being denied the opportunity to attend public schools with other children and with little or no possibility of attending college.

Into these southern conditions, I saw Martin Luther King speaking out for justice and leading acts of civil disobedience. So when I sat in a church for the first time and saw a preacher in the pulpit, I imagined that social justice was what the preacher was supposed to do. Martin Luther King and the Civil Rights Movement shaped my understanding of the church.

My family was one of those African American families that participated in the great migration from the South to the North. It was many years before I realized how my parents' decision to move represented much more than a change in geography. Our relocation separated us from grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins, and a familiar neighborhood; it moved us into the isolation of the big city. It took many years for me to understand how we had participated in a movement that transformed America.

African Americans who moved north settled into developing industrial cities across the United States where black and white men and women worked side by side on assembly lines. In these cities, black and white people shopped at the same stores and ate in the same restaurants. Their children attended the same public schools, sat next to each other on buses, and worshiped in the same churches.

Imagine how stories of such experiences in northern cities traveled back to black communities in the South. Imagine how these stories from the city touched the imagination of relatives and neighborhoods back in the South. Not that discrimination and racism were absent in the North—far from it—but life without Jim Crow segregation provided the opportunity for blacks and whites to begin to learn to live together as equals.

This dynamic social climate gave birth to Reverend Martin Luther King Jr. and the Civil Rights movement. America was like a match waiting to be lit, and

Rosa Parks's refusal to give up her seat on a bus was the long-awaited spark. Ms. Parks was arrested for a simple act of disobedience, and the black community of Mobile, Alabama, organized to support her. Out of that commitment to organize emerged the voice and leadership of Martin Luther King. Reverend King, much like the prophet Moses, was a reluctant leader, one chosen by God to lead a people from oppression and dehumanization into a new world of opportunity and hope. African Americans could no longer tolerate the oppressive slavery and restraint imposed by the Jim Crow laws of the day, and Martin Luther King Jr.'s voice became their collective clarion outcry. It provided a new narrative by which African Americans could identify themselves, and America would never be the same.

The time was ripe for change. In just eight short years, that small bus protest gave rise to the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom, during which, on August 28, 1963, some 250,000 people gathered on the National Mall in Washington to hear King deliver his famous "I Have a Dream" speech from the steps of the Lincoln Memorial. That speech has lived on in the American consciousness because it captured the spirit of both Martin Luther King Jr. and the Civil Rights Movement. It is fitting that this issue of *Word & World* should focus on the theme of "Prophets and Politicians" in this fiftieth anniversary year of King's famous speech.

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