

“Transforming Jericho Road”: Rev. Dr. M. L. King Jr.’s Critique of Charity
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The United States observes only ten national holidays.¹ Three of those days celebrate individuals: Christopher Columbus Day honors a European who in our civil mythology discovered the Americas but in reality heralded the genocide of the land’s inhabitants. George Washington’s Birthday honors our first president, who personally enslaved hundreds of African men, women and children as laborers and signed legislation supporting the enslavement of millions more nationally.² And every third Monday in January, the nation honors the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.³ Born in Atlanta, Georgia in 1929 in the midst of strict legalized racial segregation and martyred by an assassins’ bullet in April 1968, King’s political and religious leadership in the social movements to dismantle racial segregation and voter disenfranchisement is widely remembered as heroic. But we too often remember only parts of this story.

Exactly one year before his 1968 assassination, King broke his public silence about his opposition to the escalating war in Vietnam that was claiming unfathomable numbers of lives, particularly the poor, in order to meet the political and economic needs of the rich. He denounced the war as inseparable from the perpetuation of racism and poverty, domestically and globally. King said that only a ‘revolution of values’ is capable of bringing change on the scale necessary to resolve three interrelated evils: racism, poverty and war. He saw that the nation had the material means to address all three but lacked the moral will to do so, despite the biblical, theological and civil sources that supported just such action. But today, nearly fifty years later, the King of the US civil tradition, the King of “King Day,” is used to support political and moral values that are far from the revolutionary ones he relentlessly sought to awaken.

In 1994 the US passed the “King Holiday and Service Act” transforming the King Holiday established in 1984 into a “National Day of Service” that encourages volunteerism and acts of charity. Students, employees, and community members spend that January Monday painting school walls, cleaning up trash along rivers, and serving lunches to the hungry, all under banners with carefully excerpted King quotations, “everyone can be great, because everyone can serve,” and “life’s most persistent and urgent question is, ‘What are you doing for others?’”⁴ King’s own words and legacy are used to sanctify these superficial responses to what are real crises of school funding, failing public infrastructure, irreparably polluted ecosystems and pervasive, deadly poverty. King’s fuller insights about the need for a human rights movement strongly critique charity and the way it is used to cover up deep inequality, maintain class relationships and

¹ New Year’s Day, King Day, Washington/President’s Day, Memorial Day, Independence Day, Labor Day, Columbus Day, Veterans Day Thanksgiving, Christmas. Many nations have greater numbers of observances (and days off work), with as many as 38 national holidays.

² Washington signed the Fugitive Slave Act of 1793. This holiday has unofficially become a joint celebration of all presidents, called President’s Day.

³ The holiday was signed into law by Ronald Reagan in 1984 with much resistance. It was not observed by all states until 2000.

⁴ “Martin Luther King, Jr. Day of Service,” Corporation for National and Community Service, accessed October 6, 2016, <http://www.nationalservice.gov/mlkday>.

circumvent real solutions to the enmeshed crises of racism, poverty and war. In the same speech in which he denounced the war a year before his assassination, King described what a “true revolution of values” would require:

On the one hand we are called to play the Good Samaritan on life's roadside; but that will be only an initial act. One day we must come to see that the whole Jericho road must be transformed so that men and women will not be constantly beaten and robbed as they make their journey on life's highway. 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. A true revolution of values will soon look uneasily on the glaring contrast of poverty and wealth...and say ‘This is not just.’⁵

King has been commissioned in death by corporations, the government, NGOs (non-governmental organizations, often called non-profits or charities within the US) and churches to be civil religion’s patron saint of community service, but he stated clearly and frequently during his life that our current forms of action to solve the urgent problems of society are insufficient and that charity is “haphazard and superficial.” He saw with increasing clarity that when compared to the structural character of poverty, charity and reformist solutions to poverty and misery only exacerbate the problem, and his distinction between flinging a coin to a beggar and transforming Jericho Road was a frequent, urgent refrain.

Responding to crisis with coins

We are quickly approaching the 50th anniversary of King’s assassination, and we find ourselves further away from the realization of our human rights and human dignity that King sought. The crisis of poverty, domestic and global, has reached record levels, even as we officially recover from the Great Recession of 2008, with expanding disparities of race and gender. One in five people in the United States currently qualifies for food stamps. Nine out of ten black children will qualify for food stamps at some point before they turn eighteen.⁶ If current trends continue 1 in 3 black men born in 2001 will go to jail or prison at some point in his lifetime.⁷ Half of the U.S. population is poor or low income and eight out of ten of us will experience poverty or prolonged job loss at some point in our lives, indicating not only the reach of poverty but the insecurity of our lives at all times, even for middle income families.⁸

⁵ Martin Luther King Jr., “A Time to Break the Silence” in *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther King Jr.* ed. James M. Washington; New York: HarperCollins, 1986), 231-244. This speech was given at The Riverside Church in New York City which stands beside Union Theological seminary.

⁶ Phil Izzo, “Nearly 1 in 6 Americans Receives Food Stamps,” *WSJ Blogs - Real Time Economics*, July 8, 2013, <http://blogs.wsj.com/economics/2013/07/08/nearly-1-in-6-americans-receive-food-stamps/>.

⁷ “8 Facts: U.S. Incarceration: Still a Very Unequal Nation,” *The Globalist*, August 10, 2014, <http://www.theglobalist.com/u-s-incarceration-still-a-very-unequal-nation/>. The Associated Press, “4 in 5 Americans Live in Danger of Falling into Poverty, Joblessness,” *NBC News*, July 28, 2013, http://usnews.nbcnews.com/_news/2013/07/28/19738595-ap-4-in-5-americans-live-in-danger-of-falling-into-poverty-joblessness.

⁸ The Associated Press, “Census Data: Half of U.S. Poor or Low Income,” *CBS News*, December 15, 2011, 75, http://www.cbsnews.com/8301-201_162-57343397/census-data-half-of-u.s-poor-or-low-income/.

At the same time the wealthiest families have commandeered an increasingly vast portion of our resources. In 2013 the top 3% of the US population owned 53% of wealth and the top 10% owned 75% of wealth.⁹ These rates are higher when we exclude the value of primary residences, leaving the bottom 80% of the population with just 7% of US financial wealth.¹⁰ The median non-home wealth of black families in 2007 was \$500.¹¹ Latinx household wealth fell by 66% between 2005 and 2009, the largest drop among all racial and ethnic groups, largely due to plummeting home values.¹² Looking at global wealth, if current trends continue, the richest 1% will possess more wealth than the remaining 99% of the world combined by 2017,¹³ leaving 3 billion people to live on less than \$2.50 per day. This devastating poverty comes with vulnerability to curable diseases and front line exposure to the effects of our rapidly growing environmental crisis. For many this is compounded further by the steady increase of war and violence,¹⁴ including a record 51 million refugees.¹⁵

The religious act of care for others, and particularly for the poor, has been an important part of Christianity across its history, a practice and ethic shared in some form by most of the world's religious traditions and philosophies. In addition to a strong emphasis on volunteer service in US civic and religious culture, Americans gave \$373.25 billion to over a million and a half registered charities in 2015, a number that has risen steadily over the last sixty years.¹⁶ But the interrelated crises we face cannot be resolved by volunteerism and acts of charity. Those practices are not capable of responding to poverty any more than they are able to respond to other structural human rights violations. There is no way to "serve others" out of systemic sexism or racism. Charity cannot end war, (although it is a tool of manipulation in the arsenal of international relations). Amalgamated individual acts of environmental responsibility cannot

⁹ Emmanuel Saez, *Striking It Richer: The Evolution of Top Incomes in the United States* (Berkeley, CA: University of California, January 25, 2015), <http://eml.berkeley.edu/~saez/saez-UStopincomes-2013.pdf>.

¹⁰ William Domhoff, "Wealth, Income, and Power," *Power in America*, February 2013, <http://www2.ucsc.edu/whorulesamerica/power/wealth.html>. This disparity remains when broken down by race and ethnicity. The wealthiest 25 percent of Hispanic and black households own 93% of the total wealth of each group. Rakesh Kochhar, Richard Fry, and Paul Taylor, "Hispanic Household Wealth Fell by 66% from 2005 to 2009," *Pew Research Center's Hispanic Trends Project*, July 26, 2011, <http://www.pewhispanic.org/2011/07/26/the-toll-of-the-great-recession/>.

¹¹ Edward Wolff, *Recent Trends in Household Wealth in the United States: Rising Debt and the Middle-Class Squeeze--an Update to 2007* (Annandale-on-Hudson, NY: Levy Economics Institute of Bard College, March 2010), http://www.levyinstitute.org/pubs/wp_589.pdf. The inflation-adjusted median net worth for black households was \$6,446 in 2011, down from \$7,150 in 1984. These values include primary residences, not only financial wealth. Drew Desilver, "Black Incomes Are Up, but Wealth Isn't," *Pew Research Center*, August 30, 2013, <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2013/08/30/black-incomes-are-up-but-wealth-isnt/>.

¹² Kochhar, Fry, and Taylor, "Hispanic Household Wealth Fell by 66% from 2005 to 2009."

¹³ Jon Slater, "Richest 1% Will Own More than All the Rest by 2016," *Oxfam Great Britain*, January 19, 2015, <http://www.oxfam.org.uk/blogs/2015/01/richest-1-per-cent-will-own-more-than-all-the-rest-by-2016>.

¹⁴ Mark Harrison and Nikolaus Wolf, "The Frequency of Wars," *Economic History Review* '65, no. 3 (July 22, 2011): 1055–1076.

¹⁵ Somini Sengupta, "U.N. Reports Sharp Increase in Refugees as Civil Wars Cripple Nations," *The New York Times*, June 20, 2014, <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/06/21/world/refugees-at-levels-not-seen-since-second-world-war.html>.

¹⁶ The Giving Institute, "2015 Was America's Most Generous Year Ever," *Giving USA*, June 13, 2016, <https://givingusa.org/giving-usa-2016/>. After religious institutions and schools, human services were the largest recipients of assistance.

solve the global environmental crisis. And neither can acts of charity, service or even large-scale benevolence really respond to the crisis of poverty, domestically or globally. In fact those actions are more likely to solidify inequality and class by reinforcing the idea that the poor lack agency and ability, normalizing poverty and inequalities, and channeling our energies away from more transformative forms of action. Because in charity the actor engages with the poor primarily as recipient, if the poor are directly engaged at all, it can give those who serve the impression that they are different from the poor and the poor are different from them, that the poor operate within a different and distinct social and economic world, when in fact our destinies are bound together.

The US public narrative, across the political spectrum, implicitly or explicitly sees changing the poor as the way to address poverty. Charity can play a strong role in rightist political thought, religious and secular, where the poor are blamed for their poverty and the “non-poor” are their benevolent saviors. In the decades since King’s death a steady and intentional public discourse criminalized and racialized poverty, making possible a system of mass incarceration that has devastated generations of poor families, particularly poor families of color. But liberal and progressive political and religious thought have their own forms of understanding conditions and cultures of poverty as the regrettable but true cause of poverty. They too suggest that scaled-up public or private programs must target the poor as the site of change. Rarely do our conversations about the causes of and solutions to poverty begin with our decision to organize our society--including the resources for basic human survival--around financial profit. Even large-scale NGOs and governmental agencies, sometimes using the language of systemic change, operate under charity assumptions about the causes of poverty and our limited ability to actually resolve these crises. Most NGOs are in the business of managing poverty rather than ending it. Often under the leadership of the wealthiest among us, global anti-poverty organizations create scales of poverty and declare that above two and a half dollars a day one is no longer poor. How little we must think of the human dignity of the poor to say that three dollars a day is enough? Some of these same NGOs encourage us to believe that poverty does not exist in so-called “rich countries” because others in the world are poorer. This lie can be maintained because charity solutions to poverty, small and large, place the poor in the position of defective recipient—pitiful or criminal--rather than capable agent. And King’s words and image are put in service of this lie.

Beyond the “initial act”

King did not say that there is no role for the meeting of immediate needs of others, at home and abroad. The question raised by King concerns the relationship between the meeting of needs and the process of bringing about real social and economic transformation. Using the parable of the Good Samaritan, King calls the effort to clothe and tend the injured as an “initial act” that contributes to our ability to transform the whole of Jericho Road, the structures that “beat and rob” us as we struggle to live within a society where basic necessities are sold for profit and we have no right to the means of life God intends to be provided. In August 1967, less than a year before he was killed, King encouraged those gathered for the Southern Christian Leadership Conference’s (SCLC) annual convention that their leadership must turn their strategic focus to “restructuring” the “edifice which produces beggars.” He stated publicly what he had said

privately many times before: the contradiction of poverty in the midst of material prosperity is raising questions about the capitalist economy. He implored the religious and community leaders who had played leading roles in the civil rights movement to begin the work of building a movement to address poverty.

There are forty million poor people here. And one day we must ask the question, ‘Why are there forty million poor people in America?’ And when you begin to ask that question, you are raising questions about the economic system, about a broader distribution of wealth. When you ask that question, you begin to question the capitalistic economy. And I’m simply saying that more and more, we’ve got to begin to ask questions about the whole society. We are called upon to help the discouraged beggars in life’s marketplace. But one day we must come to see that an edifice, which produces beggars needs restructuring. It means that questions must be raised. And you see, my friends, when you deal with this you begin to ask the question, ‘Who owns the oil?’ (Yes) You begin to ask the question, ‘Who owns the iron ore?’ (Yes) You begin to ask the question, ‘Why is it that people have to pay water bills in a world that’s two-thirds water?’ (All right) These are the words that must be said.¹⁷

In a lecture series for the Canadian Broadcasting System less than a year before his death he linked the poverty in the US to global inequality. He said that the poor in poor countries are poor because “individual capitalists of the West (invest) huge sums of money in Asia, Africa and South America, only to take the profits out with no concern for the social betterment of the countries” and that it is the alliance of the rich in the US with the landed gentry of poor nations that makes political and economic colonialism possible.¹⁸

Through naming the injustice of current political and economic systems, King challenges all people of good will and conscience to transform the whole of society. Foundational to all of King's theological and political conceptions is a conviction of the dignity and worth of all human beings and God's reality as personal. It is rooted in his religious upbringing (biblically confirmed, historically formed and personally experienced), academic training (both social gospel and personalism), and movement-organizing experience (effective spiritually and tactically). In his last book, *Where Do We Go from Here? Chaos or Community*, King articulates why human dignity points to the evil of poverty.

The real reason that we must use our resources to outlaw poverty goes beyond material concerns to the quality of our mind and spirit. Deeply woven into the fiber of our religious tradition is the conviction that men are made in the image of God, and that they are souls of infinite metaphysical value. If we accept this as a profound moral fact, we cannot be content to see men hungry, to see men victimized with ill-health, when we have the means to help them. In the final

¹⁷ Martin Luther King, Jr. “‘Where Do We Go From Here?’ Delivered at the 11th Annual SCLC Convention,” King Encyclopedia at Stanford, August 16, 1967.
http://kingencyclopedia.stanford.edu/encyclopedia/documentsentry/where_do_we_go_from_here_delivered_at_the_11th_annual_sclc_convention.1.html.

¹⁸ Martin Luther King, *The Trumpet of Conscience* (New York: Harper & Row, 1968), 32.

analysis, the rich must not ignore the poor because both rich and poor are tied together.¹⁹

Throughout his last year of life King regularly uses Jesus' parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:29-37),²⁰ including in his first public denouncement of the Vietnam War, where he said "we are called to play the Good Samaritan on life's roadside; but that will be only an initial act. One day we must come to see that the whole Jericho road must be transformed." There is no long-form exegesis from King on this passage, but as he often does, he appeals to his audience's familiarity with biblical scripture, building on a presumed level of biblical literacy. The Good Samaritan is a central text for biblical Christian ethics. The story follows "the great commandment," drawn from the Hebrew Bible, answering how one finds eternal life: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your strength, with all your mind,²¹ and your neighbor as yourself."²² When a lawyer asks Jesus to explain the category of "neighbor," Jesus answers with the parable of the Good Samaritan. In this story two leaders identified with Jesus' Judaism, a priest and a Levite, pass by a dying man on the road.²³ It is the unlikely Samaritan who rescues the stranger. The story takes place in the midst of the ethnic and religious divisions that characterized the Roman Empire, where Jesus' Jewish audience would have been encouraged to see Samaritans as ungodly foreigners or even enemies, making it a lesson not only about caregiving, but about prejudice, difference and expanding who we understand to be our neighbor. The political, economic and religious elites of the Roman Empire fostered and encouraged these lines of division in order to maintain stability across a large geography of near universal poverty, dividing the base of predominantly poor people against each other and forestalling the possibility of unity against the imperial elites.

King identifies that to limit the significance of this story to simply caring for the man injured on the side of Jericho Road without seeing the story's moral and political critique of systemic inequality and dispossession is to misunderstand Jesus' own call for a revolution of values. And to isolate the story and its lessons from Jesus' elaboration of the "great commandment" hinders our ability to see the centrality of moral and political critique in the mission of Jesus as Christ. We can discern from King's regular use of the parable a unique understanding of the mission and significance of Jesus as Christ. Helping those who have been beaten and robbed on life's

¹⁹ Martin Luther King, Jr., *Where Do We Go from Here: Chaos or Community?* (New York: Harper & Row, 1967). 191.

²⁰ In addition to the "Beyond Vietnam" speech, also known as "A Time to Break Silence," cited above, King's uses the Good Samaritan parable in *Where Do We Go from Here?* (his final book), "Where Do We Go from Here?" (his final SCLC Convention speech, August 1967), "To Minister to the Valley" (a speech at the Ministers Training Program held in Miami, FL, February 1968), and "Been to the Mountaintop," (his final speech the night before his assassination).

²¹ A citation of Deuteronomy 6:5

²² A citation of Leviticus 19:18

²³ At the time of Jesus' earthly ministry, the land of Samaria was situated between the regions of Galilee in the north of Israel and Judea in the South. In many cases, Jews traveling between Galilee and Judea would take the longer, six-day journey along the Jordan River valley rather than the shorter and more direct route through Samaria, in order to avoid having to interact with Samaritans.

roadside is an initial act in the larger effort to transform the entire structure of our lives, morally and materially.

This theo-ethical connection between how we care for one another and how we transform social structures can also be seen in King's use of the term "beloved community."²⁴ For King the concept was both social and theological, realized and realizable history as the kingdom of God. It depends upon the divine indwelling that characterizes all human beings and makes possible a regenerated society where the spirit and value of every person is cherished. Self and other are cared for and care for one another, with no one valued more than another. There is a temptation to interpret a "beloved community" as a romanticized localism, where our realism limits us to thinking that justice and care are possible only interpersonally and communally, rather than as a society. There is also a temptation to interpret the "beloved community" structurally as a reformist—even purportedly colorblind—integrationism, the kind that King warned was "integrating into a burning house."²⁵ Too often King's phrases like "'whiteness' and 'blackness' pass away as determinants in a relationship," are taken as an invitation to avert the work of the abolition of racism with 'colorblindness.' But King uses the term "beloved community" neither in the sense that justice is possible only in local communities nor that racial justice is merely colorblindness in an otherwise dysfunctional, dehumanizing and poverty-producing system. King used "beloved community" when he described how the character and content of the social movement to transform society is directly related to the character and content of the society transformed. This is why the in-breaking of beloved community took the form of mass nonviolent action.²⁶ It was both a means and a destination, transforming both the individuals who took part and the larger society. Social evil is responded to with love, violence with nonviolence. Love and care for one another are what make systemic change possible and that systemic change in turn makes real the justice that agape love requires.

Love and justice work together in this transformation, and the right relationship between the two cannot be realized apart from power. The redemptive suffering of nonviolent resistance to evil was not a shying away from power but a consciousness and creative response to how power operates, particularly state power. Political and economic power are essential for the realization of the forms of justice that make agape love possible, and agape love is essential in building a movement capable of accessing political and economic power. Nonviolence was an effective means, theologically and politically, for the relatively powerless to outmaneuver those with more power.²⁷

²⁴ Gary Dorrien points out that King was introduced to this phrase at Boston University by his personalist teachers. It was originated with American philosopher Josiah Royce. *Social Ethics in the Making*, 395.

²⁵ Harry Belafonte and Michael Shnayerson, *My Song: A Memoir* (Alfred A. Knopf, 2011), 329.

²⁶ King used the term in describing the significance of nonviolence in organizing campaigns that realigned power, including campaigns against segregation in the Southern US and the campaigns against British imperialism in India. See *Strength to Love* and "Sermon on Gandhi," both in Martin Luther King, Jr., *The Radical King*, ed. Cornel West (Boston, Massachusetts: Beacon Press, 2015).

²⁷ Rasmussen, "Life Worthy of Life: The Social Ecologies of Bonhoeffer and King," 67. After his study in India he said he was "more convinced than ever before that nonviolent resistance is the most potent weapon available to oppressed people in their struggle for freedom." Quoted in *ibid*.

The “new and unsettling force”

As the application of the civil and voting rights laws of the mid-1960s unfolded in the second half of the 1960s, King increasingly articulated that the poverty faced by African Americans was not limited to their exclusion from an otherwise healthy economic and political system, and so his public critique of the economy sharpened.

Capitalism was built on the exploitation and suffering of black slaves and continues to thrive on the exploitation of the poor, both black and white, both here and abroad. If Negroes and poor whites do not participate in the free flow of wealth within our economy, they will forever be poor, giving their energies, their talents and their limited funds to the consumer market, but reaping few benefits in return. The way to end poverty is to end the exploitation of the poor.²⁸

By early 1967 he was convinced that the gains of integration and voting rights were being undermined by the intertwined threats of racism, poverty, and militarism. To meet its own goals, the civil rights movement would need to shift its target to the elimination of pervasive poverty that was impacting not only poor blacks, but the poor of all races, at home and abroad, including poor whites.²⁹ Speaking at a SCLC staff retreat in May 1967 King said,

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 a reform movement... But after Selma and the voting rights bill we moved into a new era, which must be an 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... The whole structure of American life must be changed.³⁰

In response they would need to build a broad social movement to end poverty through the leadership of those who had no stake in the perpetuation of poverty. King said “the dispossessed, the poor both white and Negro” are the “only real revolutionary” because they have “little or nothing to lose.” The task of the era of human rights would be to unite them so they could become “a new and unsettling force.”³¹ So in December 1967 King announced a plan to bring poor people from across the country for a new march on Washington, D.C., calling it the Poor People's Campaign. Uniting across racial, ethnic and geographic lines, the poor themselves would take initial steps towards becoming a social force capable of disrupting the national consciousness and demanding a response to the plight of the poor that would put the nation on a new course socially, economically and politically. At a March 1968 gathering in Atlanta of a nascent network of cross-racial community and religious leaders who had begun to organize together for the first time, King said,

²⁸ Martin Luther King, Jr., “The Three Evils of Society,” National Conference for New Politics, Chicago, IL, 1967. (Martin Luther King, Jr. Papers, Center for Nonviolent Social Change, Atlanta, GA, Box 122).

²⁹ Garrow, *Bearing the Cross*, 581.

³⁰ Martin Luther King, “To Charter Our Course for the Future,” (Frogmore, SC, May 22, 1967).

³¹ King, *Trumpet of Conscience*, 60.

We are assembled here together today with common problems. Bringing together ethnic groups that maybe have not been together in this type of meeting in the past... It has been one of my dreams that we would come together and realize our common problems... Power for poor people will really mean having the ability, the togetherness, the assertiveness, and the aggressiveness to make the power structure of this nation say yes when they may be desirous to say no. And it is my hope that we will get together, and be together, and really stand up to gain power for poor people- Black people, Mexican-Americans, American-Indians, Puerto Ricans, Appalachian Whites, all working together to solve the problem of poverty.³²

King pushed the campaign to focus its demands broadly on “jobs or income” and saw a guaranteed annual income for all as within reach politically and economically. He believed that when put forward by the organized poor, the demand to end poverty was one that could appeal to broad sections of the US. And because the cost of its implementation would be incompatible with the current war spending, the demand to end poverty would in effect require the end of the Vietnam War, a possibility that he hoped would bring the anti-war movement into a unified effort with the poor. He believed that the movement building process and the implementation of universal jobs or income would move forward materially the civil rights legislations. He also believed that the process of cross-racial movement building among the poor would create experiences that would move forward the work of abolishing racism. He relentlessly endeavored to convey this strategic assessment to those around him, but even his closest partners struggled to understand the significance of the Poor People’s Campaign. And then, on April 4, 1968, less than a month before the campaign was to begin, King was assassinated.

Just three weeks after his death, with the leadership of the campaign still reeling from their loss, nine caravans of poor people from across the country traveled to Washington with delegations that included Pacific Northwest Native Americans, Appalachian whites, Western farmworkers, and a mule and wagon procession from Marks, Mississippi. When they arrived in the capital they constructed a tent encampment pointedly named Resurrection City on the National Mall between the Lincoln Memorial and Washington Monument housing over 3,000 residents for six weeks. It was a self-governing city led by its occupants and volunteers who organized the provision of housing, meals, health care, child care, clothing, security, city governance and entertainment. Days were filled with protests on the steps of various government agencies and in the offices of elected officials. Evenings were filled with cross-cultural exchange, music and new friendships. But the campaign quickly dissolved. It rained thirty of the forty days of the encampment and Resurrection City flooded with mud. The vision for a Poor People’s University to develop the leadership and unity of the campaign’s participants was neglected. And the effort never reached the mass civil disobedience and nationwide boycotts that were part of the original plan to create a crisis that would force Congress to take action.

The absence of King’s ability to convene and unify was keenly felt, and it was immediately apparent that there was no lasting cohesion around the strategic understanding of how a

³² Sidney Lumet and Joseph L. Mankiewicz, “King: A Filmed Record... Montgomery to Memphis,” 1970.

campaign for “jobs or income” led by the poor was the right tactic for moving forward a broader movement against the enmeshed evils of war, racism and poverty.³³ And while the content of King’s leadership was lost, those who took his place clung to the form of his leadership, with almost all decision-making pivoting on a small group of disunified, prominent male clergy from the SCLC. The racially, ethnically and geographically diverse leadership that organized the campaign participants to come to Washington was potentially a revolutionary new network, but they had never worked together and had little time to develop shared tactics, much less cultivate united strategic thinking and cohesion.

In understanding the campaign’s demise, it is important to recognize that they had taken up issues that brought new and stronger opposition. The civil rights movement had targeted particular forms of legalized racism in the southern United States and was able to find support from liberal institutions and a politically and militarily powerful federal government (initially reluctant but ultimately helpful). In the Poor People’s Campaign, those very allies became targets and therefore opponents. The media, another important figure in the successes of the civil rights movement, found itself in conflict with both the constituents and goals of the Poor People’s Campaign, including through the dissemination of misinformation created by the FBI, who’s extra-judicial Counterintelligence Program (COINTELPRO) utilized the media and other tactics to discredit, disrupt and immobilize the campaign.³⁴

But the idea of the Poor People’s Campaign and its Resurrection City was King’s effort to working out new forms of movement building that suited the enormity of the problems they faced and the opposition determined to maintain the existing structures. King’s insisted on a multi-racial leadership of the poor as the social force capable of breaking the isolation that maintained poverty. He saw that leaders from the ranks of the poor would need to be developed, not just mobilized to support established leaders or particular legislation. And he saw that when organizing the poor, the meeting of immediate needs could help build and sustain the leadership necessary for a broad social movement.

We will be recruiting three thousand of the poorest citizens from ten different urban and rural areas to initiate and lead a sustained, massive, direct-action movement in Washington. Those who choose to join this initial three thousand, this nonviolent army, this “freedom church” of the poor, will work with us for three months to develop nonviolent action skills. Then we will move on Washington, determined to stay there until the legislative and executive branches of the government take serious and adequate action on jobs and income... If you are, let’s say, from rural Mississippi, and have never had medical attention, and your children are undernourished and unhealthy, you can take those little children into the Washington hospitals and stay with them there until the medical workers cope with their needs, and in showing it your children you will have

³³ See, for example, questions 36 and 37 in Harry Belafonte, “Eyes on the Prize: Interview with Harry Belafonte,” May 15, 1989, Henry Hampton Collection, Washington University Libraries, Film and Media Archive, <http://digital.wustl.edu/e/eii/eiiweb/bel5427.0417.013harrybelafonte.html>.

³⁴ Gerald McKnight, *The Last Crusade: Martin Luther King, Jr., the FBI, and the Poor People’s Campaign* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1998).

shown this country a sight that will make it stop in its busy tracks and think hard about what it has done.³⁵

Malnourished children immediately need medical attention and nutritious food, but Resurrection City was not a charity and its residents were not passive recipients. Here the meeting of immediate needs, what King called the “initial act” of helping those beaten and robbed on Jericho Road, is not “flinging a coin to a beggar” but is part of a political process that makes possible the transformation of the entire Jericho Road.

The Poor People’s Campaign is a critique of the idea that the solution to poverty is a few people amassing vast sums of money and donating some of it programs that address the symptoms of poverty. It is a critique of the idea that the best the rest of us can do are service projects, supporting NGOs and voting for the expansion of services for the poor. So although it failed to achieve its purpose in 1968, the idea of a Poor People’s Campaign proposes that instead of the rich saving the poor, the poor are the saviors of the world. King called them the “new freedom church of the poor” capable of healing the body and soul of a sick nation. This term ‘freedom church’ recalls the spirit of the movement to abolish slavery and the leadership in that movement of those who were themselves enslaved, including through the establishment of ‘freedom churches.’ They were the people of God united in the name of God, who through the abolitionist movement played a leading role in radically transforming the political, economic, social and religious structures of a society established by and structured around slave labor. In what would be his last speech to the annual SCLC convention King preached, “A nation that will exploit economically, will have to have foreign investments...and will have to use its military might to protect them. All of these problems are tied together. What I am saying today is...’America, you must be born again!’”³⁶ The charge of the ‘new freedom church of the poor,’ like the one that preceded it a century before, was to save the body and soul of the nation through their claiming of their own human dignity and the human right to the means of life, liberty, and happiness.

Fifty years later we stand convicted by the same charge. As a nation and world we remain gripped by the enmeshed evils of poverty, racism, war and environmental devastation, where the “Jericho Road” of our day confines the vast majority of the earth’s inhabitants to dispossession and misery, and yet we respond by flinging coins at crisis. Citing Jesus’ Great Commandment to love God and our neighbor and the Good Samaritan parable that explains it, King condemned the religious and political authorities for their complicity in the impoverishment of the people and for thinking charity is enough. He raised questions about a system where people have to buy their very necessities and where people’s care is not a universal right rooted in the recognition of universal human dignity. And he proposed that structural transformation at the hands of the dispossessed is the true solution to poverty and violence, including the “initial acts” that strengthen ourselves and others for the journey.

³⁵ King, *Trumpet*, 60-61.

³⁶ King, “Where Do We Go from Here?”