

# The Rev. Dr. Leon H. Sullivan: Master Builder For All Mankind

*Black America*

*Fashion giants for our time,  
By tens and hundreds and thousands raise them  
Let us purge the fears  
And submissions that blind us;  
Let us banish the ignorance  
That chains and impedes us.  
Let us seek, together,  
God's power to aid us.*

*Black America*

*Fashion giants for our time!*

—Leon Sullivan<sup>1</sup>

**I**N the minds of many Black Americans, the Rev. Dr. Leon Howard Sullivan is a giant for our time and by far the leading living proponent for justice and equity for all. What this man of God has done and continues to do has a positive effect—equalled by none—on the optimal, harmonious and equitable kind of change far beyond these shores.

## Sullivan: The Man

**L**IFE for Leon Howard Sullivan began on October 16, 1922 in Washington Court, an unpaved alley, in Charleston, West Virginia. Like so many Black grandchildren of that era, Leon was raised largely by his grandmother.

From an early age, Leon was gifted with brains, enthusiasm and an unusual amount of zeal. His grandmother also taught him about God and introduced him to the Bible. She taught Leon that God is all-powerful and that he helps those who help themselves. On Sunday nights his alley home was filled with the sound of music—songs of faith, songs about God and about hope and freedom.

Thanks to an athletic scholarship, 17-year-old Sullivan entered West Virginia

<sup>1</sup>From the poem "Giants For Our Time" written by Sullivan when he was 15 years old.



Rev. Dr. Leon Howard Sullivan

State College in 1939. It was also at this time that he met Moses Newsome, young pastor of the First Baptist Church in Charleston. Newsome became Sullivan's closest friend and teacher in his theological and biblical studies. The young pastor arranged for Sullivan's ordination and helped him obtain his first two appointments to the ministry.

In his sophomore year at West Virginia State, an event took place which was to seal Sullivan's lifetime mission. After an

illness of several months, his beloved grandmother died. Her parting words set the direction of his life's work.

"Leonie," she said, "help your people, and don't let this kind of thing [devastating poverty] happen to anybody else."

"I knew that I must be a minister of God," Sullivan promised, "to work for Him, to help people who were poor—people who were in the kind of condition Mama [his grandmother] was in."

After graduating from West Virginia State in 1943, Sullivan accepted Adam Clayton Powell Jr.'s invitation to come to New York City. He had heard Powell preach at the Baptist church in Montgomery, West Virginia. Sullivan was much impressed with the young pastor of Harlem's Abyssinian Baptist Church.

Armed with a scholarship to Union Theological Seminary and the promise of a job, Sullivan left the hills of West Virginia for the big city. With Powell's help, he landed a job as a coinbox collector with Bell Telephone Company of New York City. He later learned that he was the first Black in the United States to have that kind of job.

Sullivan was introduced to Harlem from the marble pulpit of Abyssinian Baptist Church. He assisted Powell in the ministry of the church and found his way into the streets and many of the hearts of Harlem's youth. Amid the glamour and excitement of life in New York, Sullivan sensed that he was losing his sense of proportion. He began to feel that he was losing touch with God.

In the meantime, Sullivan had met and married his "young, beautiful and clear-headed" wife, Grace. Together, they decided that his ministry required that they leave New York. The call to a small church in South Orange, New Jersey came as a godsend. He was able to commute to New York to continue his graduate work at Union Theological Seminary and Columbia University.

The South Orange experience also helped Sullivan find the direction for the rest of his life. He helped many South Orange youth find employment opportunities, scholarships and other educational assistance programs.

In 1950, Rev. Sullivan received the call to Zion Baptist Church, Philadelphia,

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## "Pulling Ourselves Up By Our Own Bootstraps"...A Series"