

## POINT OF VIEW

## Our View

## Clergy's power questionable

There once was a time when ministers held sway over the African-American community.

Hearken back to colonial times, when religious leaders defied the white power structure of America and secretly educated loyal denizens of their churches.

They engineered movements to repatriate slaves by organizing freedom runs, and once free, these worked to save money to buy freedom for those left behind.

Those bravehearts risked life and limb to empower their congregations. Several planned slave rebellions, though many were undermined because turncoats alerted "master." Others, including the Rev. Nat Turner, turned to retaliatory violence, believing their cause of salvation to be God-blessed.

Scan the 136 years since slaves were emancipated and you'll find that the church has been an faithful bedrock of the community.

Be it fighting on the front lines to secure the Negro's right to represent the United States in war, pushing to eradicate the virulent practice of lynching, trying to topple Jim Crow laws, angling for civil and human rights, stumping for workplace equality or battling for community salvation, clergy folk were there.

Now, let's look at Las Vegas, more specifically West Las Vegas, home to a seemingly endless number of churches—estimates range between 50 and 200 in the area.

Ministers at several of these churches decided to march in response to the recent gang-related violence that has gripped the community. At least 10 people have died since Feb. 15, with innocents among the body count, and various others have been shot.

Stopping the violence is of peculiar interest to the ministers, many of whom know the victims or their families, having pastored to many of them in the past. Hence, the march.

The march turned out to be little more than a gathering. A scant few—100 or so—turned out, leaving observers to wonder why more of the 40,000 members touted in a pamphlet failed to show. The event did little more than rehash previous community empowerment efforts and announce, publicly, that the church wants the violence stopped.

What's it say about churches that they seem to have so little sway in the black community? Sure, there are some dynamic congregations, trailblazing paths in the areas of senior housing, economic development and entrepreneurship. But it seems there are too many on-the-cusp sanctuaries, so worried about paying the rent and keeping the lights on that they ignore life outside.

It speaks to the need to restore relevance for religion, for clergy to abandon holier-than-thou musings and walk with the masses.

It's not that people are any less religious than, say, 40 years ago, but church leaders have failed to transcend the pulpit, like Martin Luther King, Jr. did. King put his life on the line for the cause of justice. His spirit emboldened followers to subject themselves to beatings, jailings, indignities, even death.

How much more influence could churches wield if they worked to solve the problems of poverty, drugs, family dysfunction and unemployment, the very things that foment the criminal culture? It's clear something must be done, or pastors will continue presiding over the funerals of people who died before their time.



## Birmingham: The bend toward justice

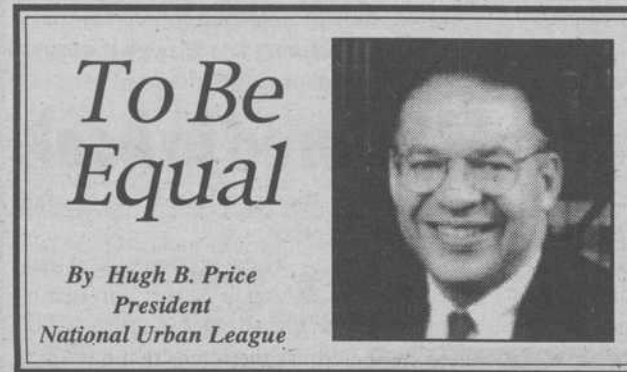
## Special to Sentinel-Voice

Speaking in March 1968 before Local 1199, the powerful Service Employees International Union, of health-care workers in New York City, Martin Luther King, Jr. declared at one point, using one of the many great phrases and insights that fill his speeches, that "arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice."

Black Americans have long had graphic evidence that the arc of the moral universe—the time it takes American society to right great wrongs, to redress injustice—can be long indeed. They have had to be and have been very patient in their hope that ultimately justice will prevail will prevail, and in their determination to see that it does.

Nothing more poignantly illustrates that reality than the pursuit of the still-unsolved racist murders of the civil rights era of the 1950s and 1960s. Since 1989 prosecutors in the Deep South have re-examined 19 killings of blacks by whites that occurred during those years. Thus far, there have been seven convictions, one mistrial, and one acquittal.

And nothing more poignantly symbolizes the bittersweet temper of finally seeing justice done in these cases than the Birmingham Church Bombing case of September 15, 1963. The blast at the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church, a key staging ground for the civil rights demonstrations earlier that year that were a watershed for the entire civil rights movement, occurred on a Sunday morn-



## To Be Equal

By Hugh B. Price  
President  
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ing as Sunday school was being held. It killed four adolescent girls, and injured 22 other people in the church.

Last week, Thomas E. Blanton, Jr., 62, was convicted of murder for the bombing by a Birmingham jury, the second of four original suspects to be convicted for the crime. He had been free for nearly 38 years after the bombing and for 24 years after state prosecutors had concluded they didn't have enough evidence to charge him.

After the verdict was read, Doug Jones, the United States Attorney for Birmingham, who prosecuted the case, walked to the courtroom gallery and exchanged long, emotional hugs with Chris and Maxine McNair, whose daughter, Denise, was the youngest of those killed.

But, as the *New York Times* report put it, "an eerie quiet hung in the courtroom for several minutes, as if everyone present was afraid to shatter the solemnity."

The McNairs, who have rarely spoken about their daughter's death, declined to comment of the verdict.

Part of the pain must be in the knowing that not only are there savages who will do such things, but knowing that

those who do were, apparently, deliberately protected by some law officials for years.

That belief, which has long been widespread in the civil rights community, provoked after the trial was over an extraordinary oped piece in the *Times* about the role of the Federal Bureau of Investigation in the early years of the case.

The article was written by Bill Baxley, the former Alabama attorney general who in 1971 courageously reopened the investigation into the bombing. It was Mr. Baxley's prosecution of Robert "Dynamite Bob" Chambliss, the leader of the murderers, which resulted in his conviction in 1977 and life sentence (Chambliss, still

unrepentant, died in prison in 1985).

Mr. Baxley, in a bitter tone, declared that at that time the agency's high command deliberately "held back" secretly made tape recordings of the suspects which in his view proved their involvement in the bombing.

"After we were repeatedly stonewalled," Baxley writes, "my faith in the integrity of the F.B.I. dissipated. What had at first seemed an innocent bureaucratic shuffle was revealed to be a charade... I do know that rank-and-file FBI agents working with us were conscientious and championed our causes. The disgust I feel for those in higher places who did nothing."

That stonewalling has meant that several of those suspected for participating in the crime will never be brought to justice, and the long wait for justice remains a bitter thing for many to contemplate.

Still, it is worth noting that those determined to see justice done, in Birmingham and elsewhere in the South, now (See Birmingham, Page 19)

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