

Sharpton: Civil activism still needed

DAYTON, Ohio (AP) - The activism that brought progress to Blacks in the 1960s remains vital today, as evidenced by the recent tussle over the Voting Rights Act, Rev. Al Sharpton said Monday at the national convention of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference.

Activists' pressure led to last week's renewal of the 1965 law that opened polls to millions of Black Americans by outlawing racist voting practices, Sharpton said.

"Many are acting like the struggle is yesterday. Don't act like there are not civil rights issues today," he said.

"We come to re-up, so we can stay on the battlefields and keep doing in the 21st century what was done in the 20th century."

Sharpton, Martin Luther King III and SCLC President Charles Steele took part in a panel discussion titled "A Changing Movement: From the Streets to the Suites."

Blacks who have succeeded in the corporate world must not turn their backs on the civil rights activists and groups who helped open the doors for them, Sharpton said.

"They are the results of us," he said.

"When people think they are in the suites as an alternative to the streets, they will soon be back in the streets with us in a short matter of time."

Only some Blacks have been blessed enough to become corporate leaders, King said.

"The masses of people in



Martin Luther King III, left, and the Rev. Al Sharpton, right, talk with each other after they spoke at the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, Monday in Dayton.

our communities are, unfortunately — even in 2006 — still in the streets," King said.

"I believe this organization will always be an activist organization, which means that

we must never, ever abandon the streets."

Earlier, Steele said the group has opened conflict resolution centers in Dayton and Israel and has plans for more around the world.

The centers are designed to train citizens, police, teachers and community leaders how to solve disputes without violence.

"We have a plan for the Middle East we're going to be talking about," he said in advance of the convention, which runs through Wednesday.

The Atlanta-based organization — which Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. and two associates founded in 1957 — helped organize some of the defining moments of the Civil Rights Era, including the March on Washington in

1963 and the Selma-to-Montgomery voting rights march two years later.

Steele took over the presidency in November 2004 at the board's request after squabbling and questionable management left the group bankrupt.

The power struggle led to the resignations of Claud Young as board chairman and Rev. Fred Shuttlesworth of Cincinnati as president.

"We had serious problems," Steele recalled.

"The lights were off. The phone was off. We couldn't meet payroll."

The SCLC is now on solid financial footing and has raised \$2 million for a new headquarters in Atlanta.

Steele said they plan to start construction at the end of August.

SCLC to assume global peacekeeping role

By George E. Curry
Special to Sentinel-Voice

DAYTON, Ohio (NNPA) - With a conflict resolution center already established in Israel and a direct line of communication to Hamas, one of Israel's most ardent foes, SCLC President Charles W. Steele Jr. says Dr. Martin Luther King's old organization is poised to play a key role in defusing tensions around the world.

Steele, a former Alabama state senator, made that observation Sunday in his keynote address opening the Southern Christian Leadership Conference's 48th annual convention in Dayton.

"In a world of prejudice, violence, poverty and ignorance, the message of SCLC is to teach and apply Martin Luther King Jr.'s principles of non-violence and conflict resolution," Steele said. One of SCLC's goals, he said, is "to bring peace, security and hope to the afflicted people in the South, throughout America and around the world."

Steele said that mission was crystallized in a conversation he had in December 2004 with Prime Minister Ariel Sharon and his chief of staff.

"I was in Israel talking with the chief of staff and the prime minister and he [the chief of staff] said, 'You all can bring about world peace. You all have been through the Trans-Atlantic African slave trade and you got lynched, you were murdered, your women were raped and killed, but you didn't turn out

to be terrorists. You didn't strap yourselves with a bomb; you don't have any blood on your hands.'

"I said, 'What are you saying Mr. Chief of Staff to the Prime Minister?' He said, 'Charles, what I am saying is you can stop the war.'" Steele said representatives of Hamas have recently gotten in touch with him, urging SCLC to help diffuse tension in the Middle East. And Steele says he plans to do just that.

The U.S. Civil Rights Movement is held in high esteem by activists around the world. Many model their protests on the pattern created in the U.S. and have voiced enormous respect for African-American leaders.

In a speech frequently interrupted with applause and shouts of "Amen," Steele told delegates to the SCLC convention: "We have the vision. We're the only one in the world with the moral authority to bring about resolutions to problems and conflicts and the fact that people really don't understand how to get along."

He added, "We're the organization that Dr. King so often talked about. We're the organization that when people think of world peace, they think of Dr. King, Dr. Abernathy and other [SCLC] civil rights leaders."

When the crowd listening intently, Steele said: "I'm sorry to disappoint y'all, but President Bush can't do it. Condoleezza Rice can't do it. And I know I'm going to upset some Negroes now: Bill

Clinton can't do it."

The audience cheered wildly, many rising to their feet.

"It's going to take a moral authority to bring about world peace," Steele continued. "That's what SCLC is doing. We're the answer."

The answer to curbing violence in the United States and internationally, Steele said, is the establishment of SCLC Martin Luther King Jr. Conflict Resolution Centers. SCLC has established two centers, one in Dayton, Ohio, the home of Board Chairman Raleigh Trammell, and one in Dimona, Israel, the home of African Hebrew Israelites. A third center is expected to be opened in Ivrea, Italy, later this year. The goal is to establish 50 centers in the U.S. and 10 abroad by 2010, Steele said.

In the United States, the centers will focus on ending gang wars and teaching young people to settle differences without the use of violence. In 2002, more than 877,700 young people were injured in violent acts. One in 13 was hospitalized because of those injuries.

After several tumultuous years, SCLC seems to be regaining its footing. The organization seemed rudderless — some say irrelevant — earlier this decade as internal feuds took precedence over Black advancement. In 2003, Rev. Fred Shuttlesworth, one of SCLC's founders, quit as president because of squabbling. The following year, Martin Luther King III stepped down as president

after clashing with the board. And police were summoned to the acrimonious 2004 convention to maintain order.

This is the second convention for Steele, who was picked in November 2004 to restore stability to the organization. Step-by-step, he seems to be doing that, attracting more corporate sponsors to its national con-

vention and attracting long-time supporters.

Last year's convention marked the return of Shuttlesworth and Rev. Joseph Lowery, another former president who had left in disgust. This year, Martin King III, Al Sharpton and longtime SCLC supporter Dick Gregory appeared at the Dayton convention to demonstrate

their support. Two of King's nieces also attended, representing the next generation of leadership.

As part of restoring the King legacy, SCLC has entered a partnership with Mississippi Valley State University to offer a program in international studies that concentrates on nonviolent con-

(See SCLC, Page 10)

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