

SCLC breaks ground for new digs

By Maynard Eaton
Special to Sentinel-Voice
ATLANTA (NNPA) - The Southern Christian Leadership Conference, the venerable civil rights group, was co-founded by Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and other Black ministers in 1957. Now nearly 50 years later, SCLC, which was struggling for its very survival just a few years ago, is celebrating its renaissance with the planned construction of a \$3 million international headquarters on Auburn Avenue.

"It establishes us as an institution," says SCLC's charismatic president and CEO Charles Steele. "Here at SCLC, we're about building an institution. This symbolizes where we are going internationally. We're developing an institution that will live forever."



Shovels in hand and hardhats on their heads, various dignitaries gather for the groundbreaking of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference's new headquarters.

"This is the beginning of a new day and a new way in the words of Charles Steele," adds Atlanta State Rep. Tyrone Brooks, a former SCLC staff member. "We're supposed to be on Auburn Avenue; that's Martin Luther

King Jr.'s street. That's where he and Ralph Abernathy brought SCLC in 1957. We could not be on any other street," Brooks said.

The new SCLC headquarters, which will open in July 2007 when the group hosts its centennial anniversary, will be a 12,500-square-foot, two-story building that will house SCLC offices and a group of retail shops and eateries. The building is debt-

free; the money has already been raised by Steele.

"The first job and priority of a CEO is to deal with the money," said Steele, who took over SCLC two years ago. "Everybody can't raise money, but He [God] gave me that gift. We've been anointed and appointed to raise hell and to raise money. I have gained new money with new relationships and new friends. People and corporations who had never given to SCLC before have been sold on the concept and the imagery of which we are going." When Steele came on board, SCLC was financially strapped. Now it boasts a \$1.5 million annual budget, and Steele has not missed a payroll.

"I never thought [SCLC] was dead," said former SCLC president and co-founder Rev. Joseph Lowery. "It was going through some transitional pains. They've come through it. I think Charles Steele was a good man for the transition. SCLC will continue to be a moral, independent voice in the struggle for justice and equity."

"The White media tried to make people believe that we were on our deathbed; that the internal disagreements were going to cause us to go out of business," adds Brooks. "We've always known that SCLC would be around, but it does mean that in the perception of the public that we are back. Perception becomes reality. [Steele] is shrewd enough to be able to tap into those business entities and corporate leaders to the extent that they can't say no to him."

SCLC has also changed course. It's now an international group that has opened campuses in Israel and launched a program at Mississippi Valley State University.

"We're not a localized organization anymore," Steele said. "Atlanta is an international city, we have an international concern. It's all global. We have 50 students enrolled at Mississippi Valley State University being taught in the Kingian theory, which we call 'conflict management, conflict resolution.'"

Maynard Eaton writes for the Atlanta Voice.

NAACP chapters call for improved schools

By Cash Michaels
Special to Sentinel-Voice

GOLDSBORO, N.C. (NNPA) - The former chancellor of North Carolina Central University challenged every NAACP branch in North Carolina to become proactive in their respective school systems to ensure that Black children are receiving the best education possible.

Civil Rights attorney Julius Chambers, who helped win landmark U.S. Supreme Court decisions in 1970s mandating school desegregation and busing to achieve racial balance, told several hundred NAACP leaders and community activists gathered for the annual North Carolina convention that the state of education for Black children is dire. Chambers emphasized that bold action is needed now by African-American parents and leaders — or else another generation will be lost.

The gathering was called CRISIS in Education Town Hall Meeting.

Along with NC NAACP President William Barber, Democratic State Sen. Larry

Shaw, and several other civil rights and legal activists, the conference focused on how best to leverage the landmark 1997 State Supreme Court Leandro decision, which declared that every student in North Carolina has a constitutional right to a "sound, basic education."

That meant that schools in poorer counties and school districts were now required to do whatever was necessary to ensure that their students were receiving what was constitutionally required.

However, almost 10 years after the Leandro decision, civil rights groups like the NC NAACP charge that Black and other students of color are being denied their constitutional rights when they're assigned to high-poverty, low-performing schools with high numbers of inexperienced and uncertified teachers.

The result — high failure rates, dropout rates and poor academic performance among students attending these schools.

Chambers, who led NCCU as chancellor during the 1990s, is now director of the Uni-
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