

Civil rights groups tackle list of issues

Patricia Zapor/CNS

WASHINGTON — When a quarter of a million people from across the country came to march on Washington 40 years ago, their agenda was simple: make the American dream possible for everyone, or, more practically, guarantee civil rights for all.

Today, the march is viewed with idealistic nostalgia by those who are trying to re-create that earlier unity of purpose to attack a new generation's civil rights problems.

Back in 1963, the nation's first such gathering worried many national leaders, including the Kennedy White House, which initially opposed the march. After receiving assurances from the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. about the peaceful intentions of organizers, the administration encouraged white organizations and religious groups to participate.

Photos of the march on display at the Lincoln Memorial feature a priest, a rabbi and a Protestant minister praying together that hot August day.

The potential political clout of so many people — black, white, young, old, Protestant, Catholic, Jewish, Democrat, Republican and too-young-to-vote — peacefully pleading for change succeeded in unprecedented ways.

Within a year, the long-stalled Civil Rights Act became law. Within two years, the Voting Rights Act was signed by President Lyndon Johnson.

"These two pieces of legislation have transformed the landscape of American politics, as well as the quality of race relations in our society," reflected Martin Luther King III at one of several Aug. 28 anniversary events in Washington this year.



Martin Leuders/CNS

Members of the Georgetown University Gospel Choir and Metropolitan Baptist Music Ministry commemorate the 40th anniversary of the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr.'s "I Have a Dream" speech Aug. 28 at the Kennedy Center in Washington. The performance was part of the university's "Let Freedom Ring" initiative honoring the spirit and ideals of the civil rights leader.

The March on Washington and his father's "I Have a Dream" speech at the Lincoln Memorial awakened millions of Americans, he said, and prompted changes in attitudes that still reverberate around the world.

King said that for millions of Americans, the nationally broadcast events of that day marked "the first time they thought seriously about the possibility of interracial brotherhood."

"Today there are more than 9,000 African-American elected officials throughout the nation, compared to a mere 390 in 1963," King said. "And we now have African-American CEOs heading leading corporations like Time-Warner, Fannie Mae, American Express and Merrill Lynch. This was unimaginable back in 1963."

Despite such successes, the civil rights agenda is broader than ever in 2003.

Recently the anniversary of the March on Washington has been tied to varied events supported by King and the Southern Christian Leader-

ship Conference, of which he, like his father before him, is president. Three years ago, they focused on the death penalty in Texas. Four years ago it was racial profiling. Last year King and activist-comedian Dick Gregory launched a campaign to remove the name of J. Edgar Hoover from the FBI headquarters building because of revelations about Hoover's efforts to discredit the civil rights movement.

This year, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference is forming a coalition with religious and other rights groups to use the ballot box to attack a long list of issues. Among them, King listed: poverty, unemployment, wealth inequity, poor health care, racial disparity in law enforcement, incarceration rates, the death penalty, and foreign policy based upon fear rather than respect.

"Our goal is to give Martin Luther King a birthday present on Jan. 15, 2004," said the Rev. Walter Fauntroy, a former Washington congressional delegate and civil rights leader. "We want people to get registered and be ready to vote in the primary and general elections of 2004, as we did in 1964."

Rev. Fauntroy, a board member of the Southern Christian Leadership

Conference, said "major changes in policy must be made next year for the sake of the country."

A coalition of pro-immigrant organizations would tend to agree with Rev. Fauntroy. And they're borrowing a 1960s-era mobilization technique — a cross-country bus ride with an itinerary dotted with obvious tie-ins to earlier rights battles.

The Immigrant Workers Freedom Ride will bring busloads of people across the country to Washington and New York for activities focusing on immigration issues. Starting from nine cities, the buses will stop at the sites of some of the best-known civil rights-era events.

The bus from Las Vegas will stop at Central High School in Little Rock, Ark., scene of a famous desegregation standoff. Riders from Miami will visit Orangeburg, S.C., to commemorate students killed while trying to desegregate a bowling alley. Participants who start in Houston will walk across the Edmond Pettis Bridge in Selma, Ala., participate in a town hall meeting at the 16th Street Baptist Church in Montgomery, Ala., and visit Rev. King's grave in Atlanta.

This fall's "freedom riders," converging on Washington on Oct. 1 and New York on Oct. 4, will be hosted along the way at churches, state capitols and union halls. They hope to bring attention to current immigration policies and the situation in which contemporary immigrants live.

Their goal is to mobilize support for programs to protect worker rights of immigrants, to ease family reunification and make it easier for immigrants to legalize their status and eventually become citizens.

Sponsors and endorsers include hundreds of politicians, labor unions, religious orders, Catholic dioceses, parishes, bishops and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference.

Does it diminish the earlier civil rights movement to have a new one try to attach to Rev. King's coattails? His son doesn't think so.

"I believe in immigrants' rights," he said, adding that there are obvious double standards in how the U.S. government treats illegal entrants from different countries.

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COURT CO DEATH SEN

ST. LOUIS (Catholic Courier) — A Missouri Supreme Court judge has commuted a 1994 conviction for a man's death sentence without a hearing.

Catholic groups have petitioned the Missouri Supreme Court to commute the death sentence of a man who was convicted of murdering a woman in 1994. The man, James Earl Ray, was sentenced to death in 1961 for the murder of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. in 1968.

Simmons was sentenced to death in 1994 for the murder of a woman in 1993. The man, James Earl Ray, was sentenced to death in 1961 for the murder of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. in 1968.

GUNMAN G CHURCH SH

ROCKVILLE (CNS) — Peter Penza, a parishioner of the Holy Family Parish in Rockville, Md., was shot and killed by a gunman on the way to church on Sept. 2. The gunman was identified as a 50-year-old man named Troy Penza, who was also a parishioner of the Holy Family Parish.

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IRISH NUN R CLAIMS AGAI

DUBLIN, Ireland — A nun claims that the bodies of women who were in her care are being buried in an unmarked grave in a cemetery in Dublin. The nun, Sister Ann, says that the bodies were buried in a grave that was not marked as such.

Sister Ann, a provincial superior of the Sisters of Our Lady in Dublin, said that all deaths at the convent were recorded in a book, and that the bodies were buried in a grave that was not marked as such.

We believe that the bodies of women who were in her care are being buried in an unmarked grave in a cemetery in Dublin. The nun, Sister Ann, says that the bodies were buried in a grave that was not marked as such.