

**SCLC Conference
January 12, 2007**

I want to begin by thanking the Southern Christian Leadership Conference for inviting me to be the Keynote Speaker at the 6th Annual SCLC Gala.

I would like to recognize Reverend E. Theophilus Caviness, President of the Cleveland Chapter of the SCLC for his commitment and hard work in Cleveland and beyond.

Also, I wanted to take a moment to pay respect to the memory of Coretta Scott King and Rosa Parks.

These two brave women were essential to the history of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, and embodied the ideology of the civil rights movement as a whole.

Their courage and honor will not be forgotten.

Using Power for a Purpose

When I ran for Mayor, I said Cleveland was at a crossroads. We are at a time in our history of great challenge and adversity.

But it is in times of challenge and adversity that we have the greatest opportunity for change.

The opportunity to shape our future, to make it what we want it to be, and to determine who will benefit from it.

There will always be a Cleveland, but what it looks like, how it functions, and who benefits from it will be determined at this time.

No major decisions or change occurs in good times when everyone gets along – it is in times of challenge and adversity, during the bad times, that important decisions are made and sustainable changes occur.

We must be part of determining what those changes are, guided by an overall purpose.

We know that change does not just occur spontaneously. To quote Dr. King from his 1961 Commencement Address at Lincoln University:

Even a superficial look at history shows that social progress never rolls in on the wheels of inevitability. It comes through the timeless effort and persistent work of dedicated individuals.

The Southern Christian Leadership Conference has worked to shatter the myth that change comes in time.

Born in a time of challenge, adversity and controversy, the SCLC has worked tirelessly and persistently to create meaningful change for African Americans.

Focused on the struggle for civil and basic human rights, the SCLC is a movement that is grounded in the philosophy of non-violence.

Born in a time of social segregation, economic inequality, political disenfranchisement, and the overall oppression of the will of a people, the SCLC did not run from challenges, but rather ran to them.

The SCLC did not bow to the constraints of adversity, but rather fought to overcome them.

The SCLC did not seek to avoid controversy, but rather to create it.

All in the struggle for civil and human rights while maintaining its commitment to non-violent confrontation.

But the question now is this:

Is the struggle over?

Let's take a look and see.

Looking at the condition of African Americans today, we see that real differences still exist.

By examining the data, it is not uncommon to see that our unemployment rate is higher than others.

In addition to looking at the unemployment rate, it is also important to consider the types of jobs individuals hold.

We represent substantially smaller proportions of the workers employed in professions commonly thought of to have higher pay.

Additionally, we tend to represent smaller proportions in key public employment capacities and in entrepreneurial-based small businesses.

Where you are likely to see proportions more closely in line with, or even exceeding, total population proportions tend to be lower paying.

This is not a judgment on the job, but merely points out that this occupation gap has real impact on the income earned by African Americans.

As would be expected, these occupational and income gaps lead to dramatic poverty rates among African Americans.

While the poverty gap has decreased sharply from 1960 , in 2005 estimates, the African Americans poverty rates was 24.9%.

Family poverty rates show a similar trend, as African American families are nearly four times more likely to live in poverty.

In addition and perhaps related to poverty, African Americans find themselves disproportionately represented in the criminal justice system, both as suspects and victims.

Even though African Americans account for approximately 12% of the total population, the proportion of total arrests that are African Americans has, since the 1960's, hovered around 27%.

While there has been a recent decline in the proportion of total prisoners who are African American, the percentage, in 2005, is nearly 40%.

In fact, in 2005, 8% of all African American males between the ages of 25 and 29 are in prison.

Key health indicators also show large gaps exist in healthcare and healthcare coverage.

While significant decreases have occurred in African American infant mortality rates since 1940, the rate in 2005 is still high.

And we still can expect to have a shorter life expectancy.

Perhaps even more disturbing has been the growth of HIV/AIDS in our community.

With regards to AIDS cases, African Americans represented nearly 50% of all AIDS cases diagnosed in 2005.

Currently, nearly 47% of the persons living with AIDS in the United States are African Americans.

One crucial point in healthcare measures is access to healthcare.

We are more likely not to visit a doctor, with 33.0% of us not visiting a doctor once in 2005.

Also, African American women are more likely to be in single, female-headed households.

Even though much progress has been made in terms of voter participation, we continue to turnout at lower rates.

Finally, education differences also continue to plague African Americans.

While not as large as in the past, African Americans are less likely to, both, complete high school and obtain a college degree.

Standards and quality of education vary around the nation, so measuring proficiency is also a key component of determining preparedness for life.

The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) gives us a measure of proficiency across grade levels and subject matter.

In terms of 4th grade reading, 58% of African American children were below basic levels, while on the 4th grade math examinations, 40% were below basic levels.

On the 8th grade reading examination, 48% of African American children were below basic levels, while 58% were below basic levels on the 8th grade math examination.

So what do all of these statistics tell us?

In short, African Americans are more likely to be unemployed, and when we are employed, are more likely to be employed in lower paying jobs.

Additionally, we see lower levels of educational attainment in our community, and lower levels of academic proficiency in our children.

This combination leads to cycles of higher poverty, and directly impacts other quality of life measure. African Americans continue to be disproportionately reflected in the criminal justice system, are more likely to fall victim to preventable health issues, such as infant mortality and HIV/AIDS, and are less likely to actively participate in the pursuit of the political power.

This is not to say that progress has not been made in some areas.

But as you can see, we are still behind.

In some areas, we are better off than before, but we are still struggling.

In other areas, we do not share in a meaningful way the advantages of the greater society.

The solution to these disparities lies in our ability as individuals and society to make the necessary changes to ensure a better outcome.

To remember that the struggle is not over even through some of us are better off.

The measure of whether or not we have been successful in our struggle is whether the least of us are better as a result of what we do.

By this, I do not mean welfare or charity, but rather bringing everyone, the poor, the disenfranchised, the socially and politically weak, into the fullness of our society.

Discrimination today is no longer simply a matter of race; it is now class and economic status.

When discrimination is based on class and economic status, it implies that someone can move out of discrimination just by improving themselves through education, career path, entrepreneurship, and politics.

But when you add the history of race and racism to class and economic status, there appears to be no way out.

But as Dr. King said in *Strength to Love*:

The ultimate measure of a man is not where he stands in moments of comfort and convenience, but where he stands at times of challenge and controversy.

This is our challenge, to find a way out and improve the lives of the least of us.

We have the power. Our future will be determined by how we use the power.

To, once again, quote Dr. King from his speech to the SCLC Convention in August of 1967:

Now, power properly understood is nothing but the ability to achieve purpose. It is the strength required to bring about social, political, and economic changes.

What is of critical importance is our ability to access power, and use that power in the appropriate way socially, politically, and economically. Doing this will impact change in a way that will improve the standard of living and quality of life for the least of us as well as for society overall.

If we choose to use that power solely for our personal benefit, then we have demeaned the sacrifice of those who came before us, and have stolen from those for whom the sacrifice was made.

We are faced with the question of how we use this power.

First – We need to create wealth within our communities.

- To own and operate businesses
- To provide goods and services to ourselves and others
- And to be able to employ our own
- To create jobs and investment opportunities by promoting a regional economy that actively promotes and ensures our participation at all levels

Second – we must use the power of position

- Many of us have been fortunate to reach positions of authority and power in government, business, and institutions.
- We have to remember that we did not get here on our own, so we must use our position's to achieve the purpose.
- We must be executives in organizations
- We must lead the boards we are on to have a better understanding of the needs of our communities
- Our professionals must use their positions to improve quality of life – to impact wealth, health, legal, education, and other social disparities that exist.

Third – We must use the power of politics

- We must continue to be active in politics
- We must cultivate greater political power
- We must continue to organize at the grassroots level, in our neighborhoods with a common goal in mind
- We must work with organizations like the SCLC so that people in our communities have the resources and the knowledge that they need to make informed decisions and participate in the political process

But the power of economic wealth, of being in the right position and of being political are all contingent upon the power of opportunity.

The key to opportunity is education.

Our survival is directly related to citizens, businesses, organizations and institutions fulfilling their duty to ensure educational excellence for our children.

When we do this, we will be helping generation after generation gain access to the power of economic wealth, the power of position, and the power of politics.

A high quality education is the key:

To creating wealth

To creating a labor force that can compete nationally and internationally

To opening the door to positions of power and to better preparing us to use power appropriately when we arrive.

We do stand at the crossroads. Our future is at stake.

I hold myself to these standards.

If I fall short, I expect you to let me know and to hold me accountable, because we must have the courage to take up the challenge and seize the opportunity.

The Southern Christian Leadership Conference has shown its courage and ability to organize and seize the opportunity that has made a real difference in the past.

It is time we understand that “social progress never rolls in on the wheels of inevitability.” And it does “come through the timeless effort and persistent work of dedicated individuals.

We ultimately will be measured by where we stand at times of challenge and controversy.

So again, let us take up the challenge, stay focused on the purpose, and use power appropriately to ensure that our society and the least of us will be better off.