



sclc / the president's corner

Charles Steele, Jr. Returns as SCLC President & CEO

BY MAYNARD EATON, SCLC National Communications Director

It's round two for Charles Steele, Jr. at the urging of its Chairman Dr. Bernard LaFayette, the SCLC Board has voted to reboot and reload the supercomputer-like presidency of Charles Steele, Jr., an astute Alabama businessman and iconic politician who built SCLC's National Headquarters building during his past stint as SCLC President from 2004 to 2009.

"Dr. Steele has returned as President because of a very important need at this point which is fundraising and fund development. That's a primary responsibility of the President, and he has excellent skills and contacts in that arena to help us maintain our financial stability," says Dr. LaFayette.

Dr. C.T. Vivian, a recent U.S. Presidential Medal of Honor recipient, will now be a roving Ambassador and Vice President of SCLC.

"When Dr. Vivian became President we needed that kind of historical leadership and the respect that he demanded, but also the integrity that he represents as a proponent of nonviolence," adds LaFayette. "We applaud his stellar service."

In the following interview President Steele talks with SCLC Communications Director Maynard Eaton about his penchant for international travel and his passion for the poor.

MAYNARD EATON: In 2004 you were brought here to save SCLC as President and CEO. Most recently, during the past year as CEO, you have been raising money to help stabilize SCLC. Why are you coming back?

CHARLES STEELE: To stabilize it again! SCLC is something that is very difficult to bring about the continuation of what the very intent was from the beginning with Dr. King and his co-founders. It's about stabilizing, and moving us forward. There are many people that didn't understand and don't understand the flexibility SCLC has in terms of mobilization. SCLC is more than marching and giving great speeches. It's a collaborative effort with the programmatic intent to take care of those less fortunate than we are. Our mission from the start was to make sure that poor people and po' folks were being recognized.

EATON: So, basically now you are back to do what Dr. King told our Chairman Dr. Bernard LaFayette to institutionalize and internationalize SCLC? The Chairman is institutionalizing SCLC, and your role as president again is to...?

STEELE: Internationalize it. We have a one, two punch! He and I have been around the world together. When I was President and CEO in '05, on the airplane going to Israel, he mentioned to me that Dr. King wanted to internationalize and institutionalize SCLC. So what I do globally is to bring about the formulation of internationalizing SCLC. I told [Dr. LaFayette] what God had told me about taking the SCLC infrastructure around the world to educate and to promote what we as African-Americans and Negroes and black folks implemented and were successful in doing. That brought about the attention of people all over the world, including Nelson Mandela, who said, 'I'm so proud and motivated by Negroes in America and what they have accomplished and what they have supremely sacrificed.'

EATON: In January you traveled to Germany, last year you were in Russia and other foreign countries. In this issue of 'SCLC Magazine' we are discussing racial problems in Brazil. Do you see SCLC as an international brand; an international symbol of justice and opportunity?

STEELE: Yes, I do. SCLC is more prevalent now than ever before around the world. People of color in America feel that we have maxed out, but when I went to Moscow and spoke to the former president Mikhail Gorbachev, the first question he asked me was, 'Steele have we fulfilled "The Dream"?' I very swiftly responded, 'Mr. President, no. We are just getting started.' That's when we were able to talk with



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Gorbachev for three hours about our goals. We agreed that we were going to work together on human rights, civil rights, the environment and economic development.

EATON: You traveled to Germany as well. Are these alliances symbolic or substantive?

STEELE: They're substantive. They are not just a photo opportunity, I have it in writing. President Gorbachev has pledged and committed to be the Chairman of SCLC's International Corporate Roundtable Board.

EATON: You have been commissioned, again, as President of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference; the chair and title once held by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. How does that make you feel?

STEELE: Yes, it's my second time around. I am the first President to actually go a second term. I feel elated. I feel blessed. I feel anointed by God and the SCLC Board starting with our Chairman who said, 'Now is the time for you to come back again.'

EATON: Joining you is your wife, Cathelean, who has been SCLC's only First Lady for a decade. So this is truly a family affair is it not?

STEELE: Yes it is, and I couldn't do it without my wife. C.T. Vivian always reminds me, 'Don't forget your wife because she has been there with you.' She's a working First Lady. She has a program

called 'Justice for Girls' that has excited and motivated many, many other people.

EATON: Where do we go from here? After years of conflict, consternation and controversy—where SCLC almost imploded—you are back, but is SCLC back from the brink?

STEELE: SCLC will survive. This is the organization that freed the world.

EATON: Your mission, as I understand it, is to once again give hope to poor people?

STEELE: It's a Poor People's Campaign that Dr. King started in 1968. In fact, he died doing it. Now there is such a disparity in incomes and economic opportunity we need to do it again. Our mission from the start was to 'redeem the soul of America through nonviolence' and to represent those who are less fortunate. It takes courage to step out and talk about helping poor folks. People with money and power have a tendency to be fearful of organizations like SCLC—But we are not scared Negroes!

EATON: So the mission started by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. is now being continued and enhanced by Charles Steele, Jr.?

STEELE: As President and CEO I would like to say yes, but it's not about Charles Steele. It is about the brand! It is the brand of SCLC with Dr. Martin Luther King and others. sclc

Charles Steele, Jr. in Berlin on the Steps of Martin Luther King, Jr., 1964-2014

Charles Steele, Jr. SCLC President and CEO, recently returned from a visit to Berlin and Hamburg in Germany for discussions on civil rights projects with young people and to organize a memorial site for Martin Luther King Jr., who visited the formerly divided German capital Berlin 50 years ago.

On Martin Luther King Day 2014, Charles Steele delivered a speech in the protestant Berlin Sophien Church in former East Berlin, where Martin Luther King himself preached 50 years ago in front of 3,000 people.

In his prayer in 1964 King encouraged the increasingly isolated people in the divided city of Berlin in public speeches with the words: "Where people break down the walls of hostility that separate them from their brethren, there it is that Christ completes his ministry of reconciliation. No man-made barrier could erase the fact that God's children live on both sides of the Wall," he made clear. This will be mentioned in the Martin Luther King Memorial, which is on the way to be built in Berlin.

Visiting the Stasi Archives:

Charles Steele was invited by the former East German civil rights leader Roland Jahn, who is now the Federal Commissioner for the "Stasi Records Agency", which is safekeeping and securing the archival holdings of the former East German secret police and intelligence organization of the communist German Democratic Republic, called "Stasi". One of the Stasi Records Agency's most important tasks is to provide people access to files that concern them. The former East German Ministry of State Security (MSS) was the secret police force, secret intelligence service and organization for criminal investigations, primarily in political criminal cases. It was set up under the direct guidance of the Soviet secret police. The MSS had its own detention centres and own armed forces.

Charles Steele was overwhelmed to get to know the history of this "Ministry of Repression", as Roland Jahn explained it to him. The former German civil rights activist gave an impression, how important Martin Luther King's efforts, declaring that civil rights are essential to democracy and that segregation must stop, have been for the East German civil rights movement too. This East German civil rights movement put an end to the Berlin wall and the East German dictatorship 30 years ago. "People learned from Martin Luther King, how to fight peacefully for their rights," Roland Jahn said. "All this shows, that people can change history—if they want," Charles Steele answered.

More about this historical site: http://www.bstu.bund.de/EN/Home/home_node.html and for more about Martin Luther King, Jr.'s visit to Berlin in 1964: <http://einestages.spiegel.de/external/show-topicalbumbackground/a4946/113/10/f.html>. sclc



Charles Steele, Jr. and attorney Charles Isaac Brooks outside the Sophies Lutheran Church in Berlin where Dr. King spoke 50 years ago



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Wed., Nov. 20, 2013, U.S. President Obama places the U.S. Presidential Medal of Freedom on the Rev. C.T. Vivian, SCLC National President, while in the East Room of the White House. Photo by Adelle M. Banks, RNS

C.T. Vivian Adds the Presidential Medal of Freedom to a Lifetime of Activism

BY ADELLE M. BANKS
Religious News Service (RNS)

WASHINGTON—At age 89, the Rev. C.T. Vivian appears to be nowhere near any semblance of retirement.

The civil rights veteran started his social justice work in the 1940s, nonviolently protesting segregated lunch counters in Peoria, Ill., well before the ‘Rev. Martin Luther King Jr.’ started his. He became part of King’s executive staff at the Southern Christian Leadership Conference in Atlanta in the 1960s.

Now, as one of the last surviving members of a generation of civil rights icons, he has returned as SCLC president amid other projects, from chairing a bank to mentoring youth.

On Wed., Nov. 20, 2013, Vivian joined 15 others—including former president Bill Clinton and media mogul Oprah Winfrey—in being awarded the U.S. Presidential Medal of Freedom, the highest civilian honor bestowed by the president.

“The Rev. C.T. Vivian was a stalwart activist on the march toward racial equality. Whether at a lunch counter, on

from the vice president

a Freedom Ride, or behind the bars of a prison cell, he was unafraid to take bold action in the face of fierce resistance,” according to the White House citation read before President Obama draped the red, white and blue medal around the neck of Cordy Tindell ‘C.T.’ Vivian.

In an interview, Vivian said he has collected “stacks” of awards over the years, but he hopes this one will help draw attention to the causes to which he has devoted his life.

“People will listen that wouldn’t otherwise listen and that’s what’s important,” he said. “If it doesn’t help you help somebody, then it might as well not be there.”

After the White House ceremony, he added: “It’s like the laying on of hands ... when the nation says that you have served well.”

From his first “direct nonviolent action” in 1947, Vivian has been dedicated to nonviolence. “We hardly talk about it anymore,” he said, “but until we talk about it we can’t change the world.”

In Nashville, Tenn., Vivian worked closely with the Rev. James Lawson, a Methodist minister who trained him and others to resist people who opposed their desegregation efforts. Their work eventually led to the removal of “colored” and “white” signs above public drinking fountains.

“It was because of the effectiveness of our movement, and C.T. was one of our key pastors and key people,” said Lawson, who now lives in Los Angeles.

Vivian, then a pastor and editor for a Baptist Sunday School publisher, also was one of the first Freedom Riders to travel by bus in 1961 to Jackson, Miss., where he was arrested and beaten.

The incident that brought him international news coverage came in 1965 during a confrontation in front of a Selma, Ala., courthouse when Sheriff Jim Clark blocked civil rights activists’ attempts to register to vote. Vivian, who was struck and bloodied, did not back down, telling Clark: “If we’re wrong, why don’t you arrest us?”

“Many people did not have that kind of courage,” said the Rev. Gerald Durley, pastor emeritus of Providence Missionary Baptist Church in Atlanta, where Vivian worships. “There were many with courage, but not the kind of courage that C.T. Vivian demonstrated.”

Vivian now serves as the director of the Urban Theological Institute at Atlanta’s Interdenominational Theological Center, a consortium of African-American seminaries, and as board chairman of Capitol City Bank, a minority-owned bank with

branches in eight locations in Georgia. Through his C.T. Vivian Leadership Institute, he fosters innovative leadership and career development for at-risk youth and college graduates.

“Dr. Vivian on numerous occasions has stated that he wants to have a ministry that deals with people where they are now versus dealing with the pie in the sky,” said George Andrews, the bank’s founder and former president.

But Vivian, who served for more than two decades on the staff of his Atlanta church, also has a reputation as a great preacher.

Joshua DuBois, the former special assistant to Obama, recalled being on the campaign trail in 2007 when Obama

noticed Vivian sitting in the audience at Brown Chapel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Selma.

“He pointed him out and said, ‘Oh my goodness, there’s C.T. Vivian,’” DuBois said of Obama. “That’s the man that Dr. King called the greatest preacher that ever lived.”

In February, Vivian and Durley are scheduled to visit a multicultural school outside Los Angeles, to discuss leadership development, the same

skills he uses to mentor teenage boys in Atlanta every Saturday.

“I think that there are very few people who are 89 who are still out there moving at the speed of C.T. Vivian,” Durley said.

President Obama agreed Wednesday: “At 89 years old, Reverend Vivian is still out there, still in the action, pushing us closer to our founding ideals.”

The Rev. Bernard Lafayette, chairman of the SCLC, was Vivian’s cellmate when they were jailed during the Freedom Rides. They stayed up “half the night” encouraging each other by sharing puns.

“The most important thing that I learned from C.T. Vivian and Jim Lawson is that you can do something about the problem rather than just talk about how bad it was,” said Lafayette, who was schooled in the art of preaching by Vivian in the late ‘60s.

Lawson called Wednesday’s White House honor “a good step,” following on the heels of fellow civil rights activist Joseph Lowery receiving the same medal in 2009, the erection of the King Memorial on the National Mall and the placement of Rosa Parks’ statue in the U.S. Capitol.

“I think that the country makes a mistake in primarily medaling soldiers and not medaling citizens who reflect the best of the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution,” Lawson said. “And C.T., I think, happens to be one of the finest.” sclc



Circa 1960's, at the Alabama state line, Mississippi State troopers boarded the Greyhound bus to escort the Freedom Riders to Jackson, Miss.