

Why We Stood

By Craig Washington

We stood against the “Re-Ignite The Legacy” march sponsored by New Birth Missionary Baptist Church and its leader Bishop Eddie Long because in this country, the day is dark, the climate is chilly, the waters are choppy, and we are never too sure if it’s because of our skin or our sexual orientation, or because we may be neither Christian nor closeted, that we stand in the bulls-eye of any pedagogue who chooses to “X away (our) right to life.” Because in the state I refuse to call home, Republicans rule and they are searching for poplar trees, tying rope knots and gathering kindle wood. Because in the city I have grown to love, mega church pastors like Long can convince thousands of black people that guys kissing poses imminent danger to communities besieged by poverty, violence, illiteracy, AIDS, substandard health care, and the highest drop out rates in the nation.

As an AIDS educator who helped bring the Black Church Week of Prayer for the Healing of AIDS to Atlanta in 1996, I then became familiar with New Birth’s Genesis ministry, which was designed to help straighten out poor repentant homosexuals by rescuing them from their sinful lifestyle. The planning committee realized that New Birth’s policy regarding homosexuals reflected the attitudes that had hindered AIDS prevention so we told them thanks but no thanks. So when my activist comrade Kevin Bynes first alerted me about the Re-Ignite The Legacy march and I clicked on the website I was not surprised. Its first objective, the “strategic policy direction” for a federal anti-gay marriage amendment was followed by a list of goals for social change so moderate only a conservative grinch would oppose them. Apparently the first point of order was to keep us uppity amoral homosexuals from getting hitched in order to make black neighborhoods safe and morally clean enough to enjoy adequate health care and education. This is how he claims he will continue Dr. King’s legacy.

What is old is new again. Long is not the first flashy preacher to sell snake oil labeled as holy water. If Long is following a dream it certainly isn’t Martin’s or Medgar’s or Malcolm’s, it’s more like Jerry and Pat’s with a dash of Father Divine’ flamboyance. For it was Moral Majority leader Rev. Jerry Falwell and televangelist exemplar Pat

Robertson, lead shepherds of the religious right who in the eighties solidified the Republicans largest voter bloc. And they did so by promising to brighten white Americans' future by restoring a black and white TV Land past where middle class nuclear families could live on safe streets with no Blacks, no Jews and no Gays. As Falwell used the anxieties generated by racism, Long manipulates the homophobic bigotry of black people to further his own aims. He has learned much more from Falwell and President Bush than he is willing to learn from King.

Long is not interested in preserving any other legacy than his own and that is not a legacy of peace, but of personal power. He designed this march in order to curry favor with Republicans and conservative Democrats and attract faith based initiative funds by stoking the smoldering embers of the smoke screen issue known as gay marriage. In order to legitimize his self appointment as heir apparent to "the King" he used the best pawn within his reach. Bernice King, daughter of the dreamer, is an outspoken NB member and a staunch opponent of gay rights. Her very public participation complicated and most likely precluded any formal denouncement from her mother Coretta Scott King, our most revered ally, and her brother Martin the third who heads the King Center. Long utilized such family divisions as deftly as his conservative cronies have exploited wedges between marginalized groups across the nation.

So do we who believe in freedom for all and not just those who look, live and love just like us? We who will not sit idly while this administration moves to found the United States of Christianity. My colleagues Kevin Bynes, Anthony McWilliams and I organized a counter march demonstration in two days that drew the support of several local organizations and the participation of about 50 protestors who confronted thousands of marchers as they streamed by the corner of Auburn and Jackson last Saturday morning. Using the motto "I Stand" as a mantra, we sang freedom songs and chants that highlighted the hypocrisy and upheld the values of inclusion that King championed. It was because of the efforts of the demonstrators and the countless others who encouraged and advised us, those who couldn't make it but made calls to others that could, that we taught our city and ourselves a few lessons. One was the declaration that lgbt (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered) people and people of color are all entitled to enjoy the fruits of the civil rights movement. We are thus obligated to do our best to bring this society to

the fullest realization of King's fabled dream. Key heterosexual allies have helped gays progress toward social justice and gay organizers must become more proactive in working with them, supporting their efforts just as they have stood up for those that are gay specific. Finally, this action demonstrated that we really can work together as black, gay, straight, lesbian, Latino, Asian, disabled, white, bisexual human beings perhaps not perfectly but effectively. We can use our differences to our advantage to help build a contemporary civil rights movement that is unified and diverse, that is based not on Christianity or any other religion, but our most fundamental principle as people of conscience and faith. Love.

Craig Washington is a writer/activist/educator.