Bob Moses and Victoria Gray Adams

"Civil Rights as Theological Drama"

The Conference on Lived Theology and Civil Courage

Friday, June 12th, 2003

Charles Marsh: Welcome to the afternoon session of the conference on Lived Theology and Civil Courage. I am so incredibly honored to have these two heroes of mine and many of yours here with us today, Victoria Gray Adams and Bob Moses. Susan Glisson, who is the director of the Center for Racial Reconciliation and Civic Renewal at the University of Mississippi, will give the introduction presently. Let me just try to set this up in a one minute kind of way. The novelist Richard Ford, a Mississippian himself, while he was born in Jackson, he lives in New Orleans now. Okay, well, he's in Montana and Paris more than he's in New Orleans, but he did have a house in Bourbon Street. He just sold it. His wife, Christine, is the city planner for the city of New Orleans. Richard wrote, "I think when you have built into your society a completely irreconcilable human conflict. Slavery and segregation, for instance, there are schism and torques and breakage all around you, both about race and not about race, drama, in other words. You know that the Civil Rights movement was saturated with religious language, everywhere you turned, Klan rallies, mass meetings in the mainline churches, all over the byways and highways of the South, God's name was invoked and God's power claimed. Theological drama of a most perplexing sort, and I am pleased today that Bob Moses and Victoria

Gray Adams are going to share with us their thoughts, not only about their own journeys and spiritual journeys in the movement, but about this drama itself.

Susan Glisson: It's afternoon, good afternoon. I had the pleasure of being in Decatur, Mississippi on Tuesday night for a homecoming celebration for Medgar Evers, that is his hometown and it's the first time his hometown has sought to honor his legacy there. And they invited his family back for a very special what ended up being a two and a half hour service, and Myrlie Evers was the last speaker. And I was conscious of sitting in the audience of the person who was introducing Mrs. Evers-Williams, doesn't she understand that she's the person standing between who everybody wants to hear from and won't she sit down? So, that's how I feel right now.

Many of you know the name Ella Baker. She said that Martin Luther King did not make the movement, the movement made Martin Luther King. Of course, that implies that there were a lot of folks who were active in creating that period of time, that change in the country, and we have two of the folks who are directly responsibly for a lot of the change in my new home state, Mississippi. So, I'm please to be able to introduce them and to come acknowledging that I stand on their shoulders and continue to be advised and taught by you. Victoria Gray Adams' personal motto is "Life shrinks or expands in direct proportion to the courage with which we live it." In early 1964, she was chosen as one of three national spokespersons along with Fannie Lou Hamer and Annie Divine for the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party. As a result of the MFDP, the Democratic State Party began integrating its ranks. And the United States political landscape was changed

forever. After MFDP had finished its most historic work, Victoria Gray Adams lived abroad in Bangkok, Thailand, and elsewhere, before settling in the state of Virginia. She is the mother of four children and has had a busy career working on community issues and within various organizations. She is the former vice-chairperson of the Petersburg Democratic Committee and _____. Although she has retired a number of times, from a variety of areas, Mrs. Gray Adams continues to serve, enable, teach and build local people.

Robert P, known as Bob, Moses resides in Cambridge, Mass, with his wife, Janet Moses, a pediatrician. They have four children. Mr. Moses was born and raised in Harlem, New York, and received his BA from Hamilton College in 1956. In 1957, he received a Masters' Degree in Philosophy from Harvard University and he taught middle school mathematics at the Horace Mann School in New York City from 1958-1961. I recall a phrase of when you saw the students in the first sit-in movements in 1960 in Greensboro, you said they looked how you felt and that feeling impelled you to come south, where you met Ella Baker, and she sent you to Mississippi. During your time there, Mr. Moses was a pivotal organizer in the Civil Rights movement as the field secretary for the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, known as SNCC, and he was the director of SNCC's Mississippi Project. He was widely credited as the architect of Freedom Summer in 1964, the effort to bring thousands of students into the state to register black voters, a driving force in the creation of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party, the result of the creation of a parallel institution in that effort. And from '69-1976, he worked

for the Ministry of Education in Tanzania in East Africa, where he was a teacher and chairperson for the math department in a school there.

He returned to the United States in 1976 to pursue doctoral studies and continue to pursue doctoral studies at Harvard. He's been a McArthur fellow, received numerous award, but I think the most exciting thing that I can tell you about right now is that he helped to create the Algebra Project, which is a project that uses experiential learning, it draws from the work of Dewey, _____, and a five step curricular process that Bob Moses helped innovate to help middle school students make the conceptual shift from arithmetic to algebra and to be prepared to take algebra in the eighth grade and thus a college preparatory math sequence in high school. I know you talk about math literacy and science literacy being the new civil rights issue for today. He is in Lanier High School in Jackson, Ms, four days a week, where he teaches the Algebra Project. It is my great honor to introduce the two of you.

Victoria Gray Adams: I'm going to do what the spirit says do, I'm going to do what the spirit says do, and what the spirit says do, I'm going to do, o Lord. I'm going to do what the spirit says do. I'm going to sing like if the spirit says sing. I'm going to sing if the spirit says sing. And if the spirit says sing, I'm going to sing o Lord, I'm going to sing when the spirit says sing. I'm going to pray if the spirit says pray. I'm going to pray if the spirit says pray. And if the spirit says pray, I'm going to pray, o Lord. I'm going to pray if the spirit says pray. I invite you to join me now. I'm going to march if the spirit says march. I'm going to march if the spirit says march. I'm going to march if the spirit

says march. And when the spirit says march, I'm going to march, o lord. I'm going to march if the spirit says march. Come on, you can sing. We're going to do what the spirit says do. We're going to do what the spirit says do. And what the spirit says do, we're going to do, o Lord. We're going to do what the spirit says do. Thank you. Thank you. That's what we're going to do. We're going to do what the spirit says do, and that kind of sets the tone, if you will, for my journey.

I'd like to say good afternoon, and I'd like to say thank you, where are you Dr. Marsh? I don't see very well when I'm looking at lots of faces and I don't see very well period, any more. Seeing less good all the time. I want to thank you for the opportunity and the invitation to share portions of my journey with you this afternoon and during the duration of this conference. I want to say thank you to my colleague back here, Dr. _____ Mayberry, who's joining us from Waynesboro and has come to give me a little moral support, and I really appreciate that.

What you just shared with me, and helped me with referencing the spirit, is kind of about who I understand myself to be. I think I'm a spiritual person. There are those who perceive of themselves to be humans who are having a spiritual experience, and then there are others of us who perceive of ourselves to be spirits having a human experience, and that's kind of the way that I understand myself. I also believe in keeping with that assumption, that truly, we are spirit people, and that life continues. And in light of that belief, I want to express at this time, acknowledge at this time, the presence of many others who have shared our journey from time to time along the way, but who have

completed their journey in this particular realm and have moved on tot the next one, but I believe that once we shed the physical bodies, that the spirit is then set free. And that it continues and I believe that oftentimes, at gatherings like this, those spirits are here with us. Enjoying, appreciating, and joining us in the celebration of our journey. With that having been said, we're going to do a little ritual now, and it's called a libation. How many people in here are familiar with libations? Okay, there are a few of us who are familiar with libations. Whenever there are gatherings like this, and I am invited to participate, I like doing a libation, because I like acknowledging and welcoming those who I believe are still with us in spirit. And we do that by using two specific elements.

(muffled)

Thank you again. I really appreciate that. And now we shall continue on. Dr. Marsh, I really appreciate the wording of the title for this segment of the program, Civil Rights Movement as Theological Drama. I've always thought of the Civil Rights movement, especially the southern arm of the movement, as the enfleshened church, or the enfleshened spiritual community, but your title adds a bit of class, so from now on, I shall have it. Thank you so very much.

As I revisit my journey in the Civil Rights movement, let me just share with you why I do this, why I come when I oftentimes really don't feel physically up to it, but when there's an opportunity to do so, I come. And one of the reasons that I do this is that in addition

to keeping the experience on the front burner of our American society, keeping the experience of the Civil Rights movement, especially of the 60's, alive, I also share my story in the hope that I will inspire, or that it will inspire, encourage, and lead you to put your faith into action because that is the way I see all of this. It's a walk of faith. And so, I don't share with you because I want to hear you say, "Oh, you are so brave and you had such courage." That's really not what it's all about. I share with you because I want you to be able to appreciate the fact that you don't have to be especially situated to begin to be a servant ministry, one who works on behalf of the community, in whatever ways that scene needed at any given moment. And really, another reason why it's not fun to share these experiences is because it's still very painful as we revisit and look back on our lives. But. For as long as I breathe, and have being, I must continue to do this. I dare not, I dare not allow myself to forget and become complacent, nor others, the sacrifices made by others on whose shoulders we stand and the beauty of their spirits. Medgar Evers, Vernon Dahmer, Viola Liuzzo, Cheney, Goodman, Schwerner, and countless others whose sacrifices went unnoticed because they were black and alone beyond their local communities. Consequently, I am before and among you this weekend to share my story and to honor Fannie Lou Hamer, Hazel Palmer, Virgil Roberton, Ella Baker, Annie Divine, my sisters and mentors on the journey, to remind some of you and to introduce to others of you, who we were and are and what it was that placed us on the path that sought and leads us to put the goal of attaining social justice at the center of our lives.

So, knowing that you are being invited to join the league of TWC, which I call the league of Those Who Care, I invite you know to come with me to a large rambling farmhouse in

Palmers' Crossing, a community of African Americans who live a few miles south of Hattiesburg, MS, on a cold winter November morning, about 1 AM, November the 5th, 1926. Which time, I am told, I made my entry into the human community, after a long and arduous night of labor. I'm told that about that time, Mac and Annie May Jackson were presented with a bouncing baby girl, who they named Victoria. I'm also told that Victoria was a very adventurous person, almost from the very beginning, displayed an oftentimes hazardous curiosity, concerning her environment. Being born in the home of my paternal grandparents seemed to have been a very good place for me to spend my formative years. My grandparents were deeply spiritual in their way of being and were a wonderful influence in teaching my brother, first cousin, and me the importance of being productive, dependable, and responsible family and community members. Two vital factors were involved in this process. The need for an independent spirit, and at the same time, and at the same time, interdependent involvement in our environment. Basic in those teachings were love and respect, for family, for church, and school. The church was, and is, for me, my extended family. The teachings of the church were second only to the teachings of the home. I remember still the mottos that hung on the walls of the one room facility that was known as and still is St. John, St. John in those days Methodist and Episcopal church, which has now evolved into St. John's United Methodist Church. I am convinced that those teachings, and all of the ways that they were taught, impacted my life. I remember that the first one that we had to remember was this motto that we had to repeat every Sunday morning. "What kind of a church will this church be if every member was just like me?" And you know, I can remember very well taking that very seriously. What kind of a church would this church be if every member was just like me?

And then later, they moved that one to the side and they put another one up there that said, "Be ye doers of the word and not hearers only." And I can remember vividly that I really took those things seriously all the time, all of the time. So, what I'm saying is we don't know how, at what age, children really begin to understand and respond to the many ways of teaching within the community. It isn't only what we say, it's what kind of décor, it's what they see, as well as what do they hear and how does it impact their lives. I am convinced that all of those things played a very important role in forming the person that I am becoming. I really believe that.

Now, I want to fast-forward a little bit, because I know I only have X amount of time up here, to the early 60's. This infant Victoria has become an adult. She's now a wife and a mother and businesswoman. Even at that point, I was always taking risks, trying to do things that would make a difference. I can remember that during that time I did quite a bit of travel during this growing up time, and I even lived as, I pointed out, outside of the country, at that time, for four years in Europe. But, I came back to the states, I came back to Palmer's Crossing, with the idea of developing a business, I don't know where he is right now, I'm not going to say building a business, that would offer opportunities to the people in the community that would enable them to earn decent incomes and make a life for themselves without having to perform in demeaning environments and demeaning tasks in all to many cases. Not that there's anything wrong with any task that needs doing, but there's something wrong when you're restricted in what tasks you can do, so I wanted to offer alternatives. And you know, that business was unfolding very well at the time I'm about to share with you, which kind of earmarks the time that I really got

involved with the official movement, the civil rights movement, I was doing very well, I had a staff of about 15 people, and they were making decent, very decent money, for Hattiesburg, MS, in the early 60's, and then, one day I was sitting here at my desk, tending to my own business, and two young men walked into my office and introduced themselves as Curtis and Hollis, and explained to me why they were there. It seems that they had been invited, well, SNCC had been invited to send some workers to Hattiesburg, I believe, by Mr. Dahmer. Well, between the time that Mr. Dahmer invited them, requested their presence and the time that they got there, word had come down from some mysterious place that none of the churches were to allow them in. They did not want these people in Hattiesburg. And so these two young people were here from guess where – not from the North, not from college campuses here or here, but from McComb, Mississippi. I refer to them as home missionaries. So, there plight came to the attention of my brother and he suggested that they come and find me, that I may be able to help and it just so happened that I thought I could, I called our pastor and told the predicament of these two young people, and he said absolutely, let's say yes, I'm quite sure that the board will not object, but we'll say yes, pending the okay from the official board. And so we did, and I will always remember that first night when Curtis and Hollis made their pitch to the gathered body in Palmer's Crossing, where the Hattiesburg Movement was born, at St. John's Methodist Church, this one room facility that had all these nice mottos around the wall. After they had explained why they were there, explaining to us how we could do something about the many needs in our community, and finally, telling us what that was, it was simply a matter of going down to the courthouse and getting registered to vote, that if we became registered voters, then we would have the means of making

needed changes in our community and I thought that sounded pretty good and didn't sound like any really, you know, challenging thing to do. And so when they told us all the good parts and all the good things and what was necessary, finally they came to what I call the altar call, and they said, "Now, how many people will meet us at the courthouse in the morning?" and I thought every hand in the house was going to go up. And I …and then I looked around and maybe a half a dozen hands had gone up, of which mine was one, the pastor was one, and I promise you what I'm about to tell you is true. I heard a voice that said distinctly, 'Victoria, you're getting into something that's going to make a big difference in your life." In other words, the message was you may have stepped too far this time but you know, my hand was up and my word was out. And among the other three or four people whose hands were up were local school bus drivers, and so we all met down at the courthouse the next morning as promised. Well, by the afternoon, when the bus drivers went to pick up their buses, to pick up their children, they didn't have a job, and guess what, when the evening paper came out, it was spread all across the front pages, "Local Bus Drivers fired from their jobs." Why? Because they went down to the courthouse and tried to register to vote. And thus, I repeat, began my journey with the official civil rights movement.

Well, my first intention was simply to be supportive of these young men, you know, in whatever ways they needed me to. You know, I'd fix them a meal sometimes, or you know whatever was necessary. Mr. Dahmer furnished lodgings, but it was a long ways from Hattiesburg over to _____, so once they go over there in the morning, they weren't going to get back there for a while, so I'd fix a meal or whatever to help them get

through. Well, also, I started becoming their interpreter to the community, telling the community who they were, because the papers were telling all kinds of stories about who they were and why they were there, and people were afraid of them, and so that was the ways that I tried to support them, but what actually happened there was they would not accept what I was willing to offer. They just kept wanting me to do a little bit more, and a little bit more, and a little bit more, and they just kept coming at me until they finally encouraged me, coerced me into going down to Dorchester, GA, and taking the Citizen Education Training. And so, I let them talk me into it, and I went down and took the training, and the objective was once you took the training, you come back to your community, and you organized your own class, and you taught people the elements of citizenship, what it takes to become a first class citizen, and I kind of alluded to this the other day when I responded to someone who was up here, you gave to them, you made available to them, all of the information that they needed in order to understand what first class citizenship was all about and why it was important for every person to be registered to vote and to exercise that right to vote. What you find, of course, is that once people get that information it frees them up when they realize that they're not asking somebody for something that isn't already theirs, or should be, and it doesn't remove the fears. Let me refer back to the school bus drivers, what do you think happened after that happened? People who may have been willing to go down became very cautious to just flat no. No. But as we began to teach people what this thing, registered voters, what this thing, citizenship education, really was all about, then that enabled them to rise above their fear. Not to lose it, because believe me there were no less dangers, but to rise above their fears, and begin at first, little by little, to go down to the courthouse, and try to get registered to

vote. Well, to move the story along, I kept letting them entice me to do more and more and more, and pretty soon, believe it or not, I actually literally closed my business down. And entered into the civil rights movement full time. And I must have stayed in there, on that basis, for the next six or seven years, and during that time I had some of the most exciting experiences of my life. Central to that was the meeting of that community of young people called the student nonviolent coordinating committee.

In my estimation, the cutting edge of the civil rights movement was the student arm of the movement, they are the ones who enfleshened the social gospel. They came into the communities and they walked and they talked and they took the risks and they lived in the community and worked with the people. This was my first experience of seeing people literally in my community they have a saying putting their money where their mouth was. They actually were willing to go with you, they were willing to be with you, they were willing to take the risk to be with you, and they did. I remember once, I think we were on the march from that last march, the guy who was shot, the Meredith march, and we were coming down, it was on the last day, and we were on our way coming into Jackson and we were coming down this road and all of the sisters were sitting out under the trees in front of the church between services. And so, we were encouraging them to come and join us on this leg of the march, and some of us would leave the march and go up and talk with them. And so I went to talk with this group of ladies and they said, "well, we would love to come but we've got a church service coming up very shortly." And I said, 'Sweetheart, that is the church. That's it marching down the street there. Come on and join us." And that really is the way that I perceive these young people. I

had really, again, many wonderful experiences. I had been part of many, many organizations through the years, very impacting ones, ones that can make a difference, but I have not been a part of any organization or community that made a more, a deeper impact on my own life than it did working with the young people who were known as the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee. And you know, the things that I learned from those young people, I continue to use those very effectively, and very successfully, because here, I did see, I repeat, the enfleshened social gospel, I did see love, faith, in action. And so, as I said up here a minute or two ago, I've retired many times, but I've never been so tired that if there was a way to serve that I didn't pick up my tired body and what is getting to be my forgetful mind, and try to respond to this because they showed me what it meant to become that which you talk about.

And I'd like to back up for just a minute, and then I'll sit down. I remember one night at the Morning Star Baptist Church, this was right behind the First Freedom Day in Hattiesburg, and we realized that there had come lots of ministers from all over the country to support us on the First Freedom Day that took place I guess anywhere in the movement communities. And it was getting time for these people to return to their homes, and I was thinking, "what are we going to do now that these people are leaving, they can't stay, they really must go." And it came to my mine the writer of Isaiah, when he had been, what was it, purified with the fire, his tongue, and then he heard, you know, it goes something like, "In the year that King Josiah died, I saw the Lord." Okay, well, we were at a point right there in Hattiesburg where King Josiah was about to leave us, and yet we knew, I knew, we had to keep this momentum going, and so I thought of the

scripture when he said that he heard a voice, and it said, "who shall we send and who will go for us?" and I said, "Here am I, send me, I'll go." And as I sat there, and that thing played out in my head, I had to get up and tell the gathered body about it. I said this is what we who live in Hattiesburg, this is what we must understand that King Josiah has died and it's up to us to continue this, and I for one, am saying, "Here am I, I'll go, send me." And I invite you to do likewise. And then a little later, on another occasion, I remember I was on my way to a speaking engagement at Reverend Phillips church in D.C. and I wasn't at all sure what I was going to talk about that morning, and I had my *Upper Room* with me, that's a devotional booklet of the Methodist church, and there was this scripture where Jesus, I started to say stood, but I believe he sat down, among the gathered body, and unrolled the scroll and started to read, and he talked about – you know what he talked about – he'd come to release, to minister to, to visit, and then when he had finished that scripture, the really amazing thing was he rolled the scroll up and handed it back and said, "Today, the scripture is fulfilled." And once again, I understood that as an affirmation of what I must do. And so, those are some of the things that have guided my life, that have informed my life as I have continued to this journey. I invite you, as you've heard the spirit's brief sharing from my journey, to make you commitment if you haven't already, and I'd like for us to do this together, in honor of Fannie Lou Hamer and others who sang, "this little light of mine. I'm going to let it shine. This little light of mine. I'm going to let it shine. This little light of mine, I'm going to let it shine. Let it shine. Let it shine. Let it shine." Please stand up now, let's put a little more life in this than me.

Thank you, you said it, I didn't. Mr. Moses, the guru of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee and many, many others.

Bob Moses: That's not true, how are y'all doing? I should say a little to pick up that story because you know, Vernon Dahmer was assassinated in 1966, he had a shoot out when they fire bombed his home, and Curtis and Hollis were the first two to come forward in McComb in 1961 and we were all in jail together in the fall of 1961, and then when we got out, there was a meeting in Jackson, and Vernon Dahmer, who was the head of the NAACP in Hattiesburg, came up to the meeting and asked for some workers to come to his house, so Curtis and Hollis were really the first SNCC workers who moved from a particular site to actually start a site of their own. They were both eighteen at that time.

I'm going to do a reading and I need to thank you for the chance to do this because I wouldn't have put it together otherwise, and it gave me a chance, your subject and the way you're approaching it, gave me a way to think about the movement I was a part of in a way to do this. I need to talk to you about the reading before I do it. There's a metaphor in the philosophy of science called the Neurath metaphor, and it was very important in the years between the war when philosophers of science were trying to put together a concept of how to build science, and Neurath said you can think of the scientific corpus as a boat, and this boat is in the middle of the ocean, and it needs to be rebuilt, but there's no place to dock it. So you have to rebuild it while it's out there in the middle of the ocean, and the metaphor was about the language of science, that the boat is

the language of science and the ocean is the ordinary, everyday language of people. And that the language of science is continually being rebuilt out of the everyday, ordinary language of people, but there's no special privilege placed that the scientist can go to sort of dock his boat to get his language in order. And so that struck me as I was dealing with your theological language because it seems to me you've got a boat out there in the middle of the ocean, and there's this language of everyday people, and somehow the language of everyday people has to connect with this theological language. So when I started to think about what to talk about, I decided to make an effort to use the language of the ocean, the everyday language of everyday people. And then, I got to thinking about, well, how could I make this real, and I decided to focus on three people in the movement: Ella Baker, Amzie Moore, and Fannie Lou Hamer. And to use them to illustrate three faculties that we all have, and to say how, for me, they took these faculties to a place where God is. So, that's the essence of what I'm doing. There are, however, five characters in this little reading, besides Ella and Amzie and Fannie Lou, there's Jane. And what I've done with Jane is taken five of her poems and interspersed them through the stories about Ella and Amzie and Fannie Lou, and Jane is a little like Ophelia in Hamlet for SNCC, and her poems touch the part of the movement that hurt. And so, she isn't in the history yet. We haven't figured out yet a way to tell the history of the movement and also tell Jane's story. So, I'll try as I read to indicate when I'm reading her poems, and then at the end, I have a poem that my fifth grade teacher taught me, Mrs. Dewey, and we said it at Ella's funeral. And so I'm going to ask you to, if you feel like it at that time, to say it with me.

Cotton grows in long rows, in longer rows than anything. And cotton is too heavy for a child to tote, take the children home. Ella, Amzie, and Fannie Lou. Thinking with our minds, acting from our willpower, fielding through our hearts. Fannie Lou with her heart, Amzie with his mind, Ella with her power of will. These three performers put these three faculties into play at a serious level. Spiritual traditions on all sides, centuries in and centuries out, urge us all to put thought, action, and feeling into play at the level where God also plays. This is not easy to do. The Bible tells us so, you know this story. Then there came these two women who were harlots who came to the king and stood before him, you know how the story goes on, and when the king said "Divide the living child in two, and give half to the one and half to the other." Then spake the woman, whose the living child was, unto the king, for her bowels yearned upon her son, and she said, O my lord, give her the living child and _____." And then all of Israel saw that the wisdom of the Lord was in King Solomon to do judgment. But it was the mother of the living son who put her faculties into serious play: humility, the virtue of her heart, extinguishes her sense of separation and her bowels yearn upon her son. Capacity to surrender the virtue of her willpower releases her personal self to the will of the other mother, wisdom, the virtue of her mind, manifest in her command, give her the living command and in no wise land. She plays at the level where God also plays. The doors are slamming now, and the little glass that's left are smashing on the freedom house floor, once more, once more, watch a weeping boy break a wailing wall and crawl away without a hand to hold, lie down, lie down, cover with the dark, Jesus Christ has cut his throat, there's nothing you can do. And just who is this woman, sitting on this bus, singing away fear, where is she playing? It was August 31st, 1962, and I was on a school

bus, leaving Ruleville, heading for Indianola, the county seat of Sunflower County. Amzie Moore had hooked up the bus for this first congregation of Mississippi Sharecroppers, domestic workers and day laborers to travel to the county seat to register to vote. The congregation was mostly middle-aged and older women and there was one woman who started to sing with the rolling of the bus and didn't stop until it stopped at the courthouse. The songs came rolling out of her heart, one after the other, back to back, from every country church that ever produced a choir, and every time she started a song, she looked at you as though you knew it and then sang it to you and through you since it really didn't matter that you didn't. It was her heart singing in all the minds of all the people on that bus to the county seat to register to vote for the first time in the life of the delta. Her heart planting in their minds her songs, one after the other, back to back, flooding out fear, the great mind-killer. Where was she playing? Humility, the virtue of her heart, extinguishes her sense of separation, and she reaches out with her songs, one after the other, right there Atlantic City, in August of 1964, just two years later, right there at the site of the national convention, to proclaim President Johnson the King of the Democratic Party. Right there on the boardwalk of Atlantic City. Fannie Lou Hamer. The revolutionary element remained in tact. They simply stood, she said, no sir, for emphasis, we didn't come for no two seats since all of us is tired. Who's that man poking around the post office all day, every Saturday? How come I don't see him there nary another day but Saturday? Oh him? That's just ol' Amzie. They got him fixed up on account that he meddles just a little too much in you know what I'm talking about. Sho' nuf? Sho' nuf. Well, he sho' nuf can poke around. I see him there every Saturday. Ella Baker and Jane Stembridge had sent me to Amzie in August of 1960, two years before

that bus ride took place. We were looking for movement people from Mississippi to come to the first SNCC run conference for the sit-in movement. When that Till boy was murdered in Mississippi in Tallahatchie County in 1954, platoons of reporters established their field headquarters at Amzie's house at 614 Chrisman Street in Cleveland because Amzie knew how to poke around. Cleveland, the only city in Bolivar County, was just ten miles west of (muffled), so it wasn't hard for Amzie to hook up that bus that took us all to Indianola in 1962, but it also wasn't hard for Amzie to hook up his brick home for reporters in 1964. Amzie was a marked man in the Delta after World War II, but Amzie was the King Solomon of the Delta. There was no wiser person in all the flooded plain of the Mississippi Delta, but then again he had a lot of the mother of the living son in him, too. Fighting as he did for the life of his children, for the cotton that sho' nuf too heavy for a child to tote. Amzie had to grow his wisdom, though, had to accumulate it a little at a time. If you hung around him long enough, if you knew how to pay attention, you could accumulate some, too. Amzie, the Delta is life the beach of the river, from Memphis to Yazoo, from Greenville to Greenwood, kind of like a beachhead all covered over with sugar and sand, all mixed up so you couldn't tell them apart from looking. Amzie set apart looking, how to tell apart which was which, poked around the delta in his big ol' Packard like an ant crawling on the beach, separating out each grain of sugar from each grain of sand. You see, he had to pick a path through the Delta's unexploded ordinances, slavery and the civil war, wisdom, the virtue of his mind, a deluge of wise, small ant-like peace-wise acts. Amzie looks at me and says, "Ready? Let's go." This time I am ready and we go. What I'm learning is not to announce or telegraph my comings or my goings. It was Aaron of course, Aaron Henry. I had been to see Aaron

before I went to see Amzie, pass through Clarksdale, but Amzie saw the sugar. He rounded up some youth, and hauled them in his Packard, to the first South-wide sit-in movement SNCC sponsored conference and told the young people what their energy could do in Mississippi and just how to do it. And thus it was in August, 1962, two years later, I was sitting with that great congregation of sharecroppers on that bus that Amzie hooked up, watching that woman sing her song.

We were in Mississippi because we believed that we could help the people change their lives. They were starving. We stayed a while, and while we were there, we found out something about love and hate. We found out something about being crazy, and came up on daisies. These poems were written in the dark just to keep it away, or to welcome it, to refuse to be crazy, or to go ahead with it, to say something about the lonesome people sleeping around me, something simple about transcendence, about grace, holding hands, daisies, children, food and daisies for every one of the children. Jane Stembridge was the go-to person for that first SNCC person, the one she decided in the end not to go to. She couldn't stomach the decision about (muffled). Jane was a student at Union Theological Seminary when the sit-ins broke out on February 1st, 1960, then two months later in April, she drove to (muffled) university, where Ella was pulling off the movement youth conference of the century, the one that gave birth to SNCC. When the conference was over, Jane of the South had agreed to be SNCC's first executive secretary. So, there she was, sitting at the SNCC desk, in the SCLC office, when I arrived in July of 1960 to do

volunteer work for King. I had never heard of Ella Baker, but Ella thought that a decision about Byer should not paralyze the movement, and if the UAW wouldn't fund the conference if Byer was the keynote, it was okay to move along. Jane couldn't know it then, but the UAW would be back in synch with Byer after his march on Washington in 1963 and both Byer and the UAW would be out of synch with SNCC and the MFDP at Atlantic City in 1964. Fannie Lou said, "We all is tired." So Ella was probably right on back then in 1960. But though Jane missed Amzie, she did file a field report for him, and for that matter, any other movement person interested in field reports. Field report, Mississippi, 1961. Pieces of cotton are caught in the weeds on the edge of the highway from Greenwood to (muffled). I was in the car on the edge of the highway on way from Greenwood to Greenville when we were caught and dumped like pieces of cotton in the weeds. Jimmy Travis was the driver, until he slumped over on me with that piece of a bullet in his neck. Randolph Blackwell was on the other side of me when that car went off the edge of the highway and we plunked down like pieces of cotton caught in the weeds. We had run into some unexploded ordinance from slavery and the Civil War. Their grease guns splayed thirteen bullet holes along the side of the car, just under the blown out windows. Glass was everywhere, but only Jimmy took a hit. Jimmy Boy, don't cry. Please don't cry. I'll play a song for you, a song about the wind, a great wind moving in a high hill grass, a soft wind moving in the south. Jimmy Boy, don't cry. Please don't cry. I'll give my drum to you, my drum, I made of wind, a great wind, moving in a high hill grass, a strong wind, moving in the south, Jimmy Boy, don't cry. Please don't cry. I'll walk along with you. We'll walk to cedar wind, the green wind. Playing in the high hill grass, the clean wind, moving in the streets of the city. Jimmy

Boy, don't cry. Please don't cry. A great wind moving in a high hill grass, a strong wind moving in the south, a youth wind to dislodge the tectonic plates that shored the country up, in the aftermath of its slavery, its civil war, its Reconstruction. To Ella, these young people had the courage where we failed, so she would work for them. Ella was, as Bernice says, a woman with a voice, and she must be heard, at times, she can be quite difficult; she bows to no man's word. Martin King (muffled), James Farmer, (muffled), talked to each other about Ella. Talk to Ella about the youth wind. It didn't matter. Ella created a space in which the energy of the youth wind moving in the south could coalesce and give birth. Hers was a lesson about organizing, true, but hers was also a lesson about power, about willpower, and its virtue, the capacity to surrender. Ella was a brilliant role model for this capacity to the youth of SNCC, she was always walking the walk at the moment she was talking the talk about this capacity. She had explored its more subtle manifestations, but no matter how large the experiences in which she devoted her personal self, she never failed to distinguish the two. In 1946, I was in the 5th grade at P.S. 90 in Harlem at 148th Street between at that time 7th and 8th Avenues. One of my teachers was Mrs. Stewart. She taught us to breathe from our stomachs and to recite a poem about Abu Ben Adhem. When Ella passed, a cadre of former SNCC workers gathered around her casket at Abyssinian Baptist Church in Harlem. I remembered that poem that Mrs. Stewart taught me in the 5th grade, and over the years, I had come to recognize Ella as a member of Ben Adhem's tribe. The cadre said it with me them. Please, if you feel it, say it with me now.

Abu Ben Adhem, may his tribe increase

Awoke one night from a deep dream of peace,

And saw within in the moonlight of his room,

An angel writing in a book of gold.

“What writest thou?”, Ben Adhem said.

The vision slowly raised its head,

And with one look of sweet accord

Answered, “The name of those who love the Lord.”

“And is mine one?”

“Nay, not so.”

“I pray the, thou, put me down as one who loves his fellow man.”

The angel wrote and vanished

The next night it appeared again,

With a great awakening light, to read the names which love of God had blessed

And lo, Ben Adhem’s name led all the rest.

Thanks.

Bob Moses and Victoria Gray Adams

"The Civil Rights Movement as Theological Drama"

Q&A Session

The Conference on Lived Theology and Civil Courage

Friday, June 13th, 2003

Victoria: Concentrating on the problems. Concentrate on what you want your community to look like. And so our vision for our community is to create a shalom, a place of shalom, in co-operation with all the people who live, work, and play in that geographical area. And that is one approach that is working for us in Petersburg, Virginia.

Question: I grew up also in East Harlem. I grew up on Dick Gregory's book *Nigger*, I grew up on *Soul on Ice*, *Man Child in the Promised Land*, *Down These Mean Streets*, and the whole Civil Rights Movement and movement and it's legacy, and what is your opinion on, I'm trying to get my seventeen year old, now he's my youngest, to read some of these books, to be very frank, he's not very interested. What is the strategy, if there is one, to try to transfer some of this drama and rich history, into our contemporary youth culture, which are more about TuPac and Biggie and Fat Joe and Eminen?

Responder: I think there's not much difference in what TuPac said and what Dick Gregory said. They were speaking at a different time in history, and they both were speaking about what was going on and happening at that time. When Dick Gregory wrote *Nigger*, that upset a lot of people on both sides ___, in particular black folks. But what he was seeking to say is that we cannot let anyone else define us, and I think as a result of that kind of a thing, we move from Nigger to Afro-American to Black to African-American and something is about to born again, I won't tell you what that is. And so, what I see, though, the main thing is we've got to take TuPac, Eminen, and all these people seriously -- seriously, but in a playful sense because I don't think we can become too serious because they do – that is deadly, and so I think what they are saying, though, is speaking about what is happening. This young lady back here raised the question about where's the Civil Rights Movement, and what is happening in history and what about the prisoners, people being incarcerated, and what we are saying about that, and I think that the point is that Civil Rights has taken us as far as Civil Rights can take us. It's like, we was talking about the boat. If you are going into the Pacific Ocean, once you get to the edge of the ocean, you've got to change your means of transportation if you go into the ocean by automobile. And so I think, now, we've got to put down Civil Rights and get to what I think that Mark is talking about here, it has a theological background, but get to community, and that means practicing community, so I think that's where it is today.

Responder: There always seems to be problems all over the place. And people are pointing fingers at each other. This one did it, this one did it, it's the fault of this one, it's

the fault of this one. Black and white, together. But I am thinking that all these people who let the government machinally rule a people who go to our churches and until the time that Christianity actually becomes a real type of religion here, where the pulpit will be used educate everybody in the church, no matter black or white, that we are all equal and that a man's skin is of no more significance than the color of his eyes. Until the pulpit is used almost every Sunday, this thing is not going to change. When a black boy is taken to court, and what they see is the color, but not what he's done, when a traffic police stops a person and just sees color but not the offense, all these people go to our churches. It is up to the pulpit now to be used to foster reconciliation. To educate us that we are all equal. That we are all equal.

I was in a ship in Ivory Coast, my ship was in Ivory Coast, I come from Ghana in West Africa. And I was sailing before I became a minister. My ship was in Ivory Coast and somebody collapsed, a black man in the dock collapsed, and was taken to the hospital, and they had to give him blood, there's supposed to be blood for transfusion. And almost all the black people, they didn't have any match. It was a white guy who was in the hospital whose blood matched the blood of this black guy. From that day, it taught me a lesson. That this is only color. Please, let us continue, and if we don't do it, let us use the pulpit every Sunday to speak about this, to talk about this. This is all what Christ is about. Equality. Thank you.

Moderator: The model of SNCC is participatory conversation, participatory democracy, so the panel would like to encourage all of us to talk to each other, not sort of look to the

panel for answers but that the answers are among all of us, so let's try to have a conversation in the last few minutes that we have.

Pete: This will be the only time I do this. I'd like to abuse my position as holder of the mike and ask a question, and this is a question to the panel as my elders and repositories of wisdom. We heard a lot yesterday about the situation that we're in today, and the conversation went on last night with Gene Rivers and some of us about how different the world is now, forty years on, from Freedom Summer. The world is, in this conversation, a much more complex place. The Cold War is over, there isn't the single issue of voter registration, and so, the challenge was new strategies need to arise. I was wondering if the panel could reflect, and then the rest of us could reflect on that. In your experience, do you feel the world is a very different place, or the challenges facing Christian activists today, is the world so much more complex and are the solutions, perhaps, needing to be revised? If you could respond to that, please.

Victoria: Well, in the spirit of our conference and particularly the text *Theology for the Social Gospel*, it seems to me that the world may be a very different place and the challenges may be quite complex, but I think if we take seriously what that social gospel is really all about, that it is sufficient for whatever time and whatever place because it's about committing ourselves to the betterment of the human, and communities beyond the human community, and the primary principles are the same. Love, that you live, and the other facets of that. Personally, I know it sounds very simple, but that's the way I see it,

you know, if I can really believe that if I can model what the social gospel teaches, then it will be effective in any time, any place, any age, I believe that.

Aurelius Wilson: I just had a thought – Aurelius Wilson, Howard University – I just, I was so moved by my brother's comment here, and we may be getting a little confessional here, but it's more powerful than sterile intellectual stuff anyway, I think, and I think in response to Pete's question, the journey that he summarized seems to me to be the necessary journey for true transformation. My comment is really an invitation to him, if he can, I don't know on short notice, but if he could mine that a little bit more on what took him from an initial inculturation of denigration of the other, and black people being the extreme other in this society, all the way to when appropriate, the capacity to submit to that other, and to acknowledge brilliance embodied in that other. Legislatively, we can talk about various strategies and political plays, so to speak, and the resources that come to bear in coercively shaping society but with the theological impetus being present in this conference, the more lasting type of change that we still have to aspire toward is the kind of thing that this brother described, and I'm wondering if he can maybe, maybe he can't, but if he could maybe give us a little bit more of what that – what were the things that perhaps brought you from A, B, to C, that led you to submit one perspective and embrace another which, to me, seems far more lasting, far more genuine, than anything we could do with our coercive resources.

Respondant: I don't think the emphasis should be on me. When the Berlin Wall came down in 1989, people in the East German churches were gathering to sing "We Shall Overcome."

Ed King: Amen to all of that. I'm Ed King, brother and sister to these folks, and this has been beautiful and wonderful. A few things. There were times we in the movement would say "Wow, how can we be here at this moment?" And then we would remember and be thankful that we were, and you've been at one of these moments. We also talked of beloved community, and we never thought we, or maybe our great grand-children if we had them, would live to see that but we absolutely believed it, and we said "Nevertheless, or Hallelujah, tonight, we will hold hands and love each other because we will live in the kingdom now and the eschatological." And we also could say, "How could it be us, at this moment?" and have a sense of awe, and a sense of the absurdity of it all, and that God is somehow able to use all of that, and there was a joy in there, and a lot of laughter, so I want to give you a story of the absurd, at the moment, at the place, and maybe some joy.

Victoria and I were on the National Committee of the Democratic Party from 1964 to '68. We would be invited in, the regular white Mississippians wouldn't attend, and we could participate, but always by invitation. In 1967, or '68, at a big meeting in Washington, Victoria had sickness in her family and had to go home, and right after she left, at personal invitation came to me and Victoria from the White House to come to a reception for Democratic Party leaders, but my good friend Kwame Ture, Stokley, and others, had

raised cries of Black Separatism, and "don't fool around with the leftovers of the Democratic party where the MFDP was", and I had to say no to the only invitation I've ever had to the White House because some of my ex-buddies in SNCC in the movement who now were into this separatist thing would have sworn that Lyndon Johnson and Ladybird waited until Victoria left and then invited the white southerner, Ed King. Absurd, enjoy, and hope I haven't trivialized.

Moderator: We can take one more question or comment.

Respondant: I still want to come back to the student's question because I think that's the real important one and that is, at least with Bob Moses gave to me that we now, we don't have the answers, and the problems of urban youth culture, urban, society, is not simply in the United States, it's a global phenomenon. But we can, I think we – meaning middle aged people like myself – begin to create spaces for you with creative ideas and visions to come together and talk. If I learned anything today, and you will come up with how to organize around those issues, and yeah, young people do want a sense of relevancy, they may not right now see, you know, Claude Brown or Dick Gregory but when we can tie it into TuPac, when we can, and others, Mos Def and all those other hip-hop artists, some positive, not-so-positive, but when can understand and listen to their both their goodness and their despair, then I think we start creating space for them. We don't have the answers, but I see this as a sign of, that we're creating space to come together.

Moderator: It's been a wonderful afternoon. Thank you both very much for your life's work.