

God's Hope for America Bus Tour - Southern Discomfort

Michael Balcomb
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I've just begun my third week of riding the #GodsHopeforAmerica pilgrimage bus, visiting all 55 Holy Grounds established by our True Father, Rev. Sun Myung Moon, when he first visited the United States a half-century ago in 1965.

For much of the last week, we've been moving through America's deep South, starting in Jackson, MS, and visiting in turn New Orleans, LA, Mobile and Bayou La Batre, AL, Tampa and Miami, FL, before arriving here in Georgia. It has been both a meaningful and occasionally disturbing experience.

America in 1965 certainly had an ugly side. It was the year in which the river of protests against the draft, the Johnson administration and the expanding Vietnam War swelled beyond the banks of college campuses to fill the nation with disunity and confusion.

The evils of institutional racism and the ongoing struggle for civil rights were in the headlines daily. Nine days after Rev. Moon's February 12 arrival, controversial black activist Malcolm X was gunned down in Harlem at the age of 39. In August, a week of race riots broke out in the Watts neighborhood of Los Angeles. It seems probable that Rev. Moon, one of the most inquisitive and intuitive men I have ever met, would have been keenly aware of all these developments.

He planted a holy ground in Mobile, Alabama, on March 6th 1965. The very next day, March 7th, became known as "Bloody Sunday" in Alabama, when just a couple of hours up the road in Selma, voting rights protesters attempting to cross the Edmund Pettis Bridge and march to on the state capital of Montgomery were brutally beaten and gassed in full view of the media.

Two days later on March 9, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. himself joined the marchers for the second, symbolic march for "Turnaround Tuesday," and one week later and even larger group, protected by over 2,000 US soldiers and the Alabama National Guard, actually made it to Montgomery on the third attempt.

It's fairly well known that Father Moon said in a 1976 interview that Dr. King was the American leader he admired the most. As our pilgrimage bus moved easily through Alabama last week, I found myself wondering what might have happened if the drivers of his 1965 Plymouth Fury, had chosen Selma instead of Mobile for the Alabama Holy Ground, and delayed it by just one day?

What if Dr. King and Dr. Moon had met face-to-face right there and then, on the battleground for civil rights? Might the articulate and mercurial Dr. King have begun a new spiritual career as the one called to 'make straight in the desert a highway' for the Lord? Might Rev. Moon have strengthened the moral and ideological center of the civil rights movement and added the focus on marriage and family that Dr. King could not himself provide? History didn't go that way, and within four years King himself was dead, killed by an assassin's bullet, also at the age of 39.

Yesterday our pilgrimage stopped briefly at the Martin Luther King Jr. Center in downtown Atlanta to pay our respects. We laid a wreath close to the tomb he now shares with Coretta Scott King, who

remained a lonely widow until her death in 2006. We took time to kneel in the pews of the Ebenezer Baptist Church, where Dr. King started his preaching career under the proud and watchful eye of his father before he was swept up into the civil rights movement, and into immortality.

The timeless serenity of the King Center with its fountain, reflecting pool and eternal flame is in stark contrast to the Lorraine Motel in downtown Memphis, where King fell. When our God's Hope for America pilgrimage visited the Lorraine two weeks ago, we found the current site of the National Civil Rights museum deliberately frozen in time. The bathroom window in a nearby boarding house from which the fatal shot was fired still sits ajar, as if it had just happened. Dr. King's cars are parked below the second floor room where he spent his last hours on earth.

In Atlanta, thought, time has moved on. The Ebenezer church is no longer used for worship, but a brand new and larger facility has opened just across the street. There is a gift shop, of course, and it is also possible to visit the MLK birth house and an extensive collection of his writing and his artifacts.

An interesting and poignant personal insight into Dr. King and his family was given by our volunteer tour guide, the Rev. Samuel Mosteller, who today serves as the Georgia President of the SCLC, the organization Dr. King himself once headed.

Mosteller explained that Coretta Scott King had instructed the trustees not to make Dr. King into an inaccessible saint by airbrushing over some of his human weaknesses and foibles. Thus, Dr. King's cigarettes and lighter, and his flask, are on display together with his Bible and his speech notes.

Later that evening, I had the opportunity to sit with Mrs. Naomi Ruth Barber King, the dignified and gracious widow of Dr. King's brother A.D. King. She kindly presented me with an autographed copy of her book, "Two Brothers who Dared to Dream," and observed how important the unconditional support of friends and family was to Dr. King and all the leaders of the civil rights struggle.

Earlier that day, the God's Hope for America pilgrimage was formally welcomed into the Georgia Capitol by State Senator Donzella James, and a distinguished group of government, civil and religious leaders. All of them appreciated Rev. and Mrs. Moon's lasting impact on racial and religious relations in Atlanta over the past two decades, whilst acknowledging that there is still so much to do.

Even today, Senator James is still only the second African-American woman elected to Georgia's upper house; and evidence of lingering prejudice is even more evident in Savannah, where the Georgia Holy Ground first established by Rev. Moon is located.

Our visit to Savannah the day before was quite dramatic. As we crossed the Georgia line from Florida, our bus team had just started watching the Oscar winning movie "Twelve Years a Slave," which depicts in brutal and graphic clarity the appalling treatment of black Americans. We had in fact been encouraged to watch the movie by several of our Atlanta delegation, including Senator James, but at one particularly harrowing scene, one participant could bear it no longer and screamed "Enough!" We stopped the movie and spent the rest of the trip in an awkward and uneasy silence, wondering how to heal the rift that had suddenly sprung up right on the bus.

By the grace of God, the answer presented itself as soon as we arrived at the Savannah holy ground, located in a beautiful downtown park. Many of us found ourselves weeping as we wrestled in prayer with the spiritual weight of Georgia's past, so closely connected with the long history of slavery.

We don't have a church in Savannah, but a healthy congregation assembled nonetheless. The bus contributed three dozen, but God told me he needed a minimum on 60 people to accept our offering. Right as we started singing hymns and holy songs, people started showing up. A family of seven on their way to a vacation in Disneyland; another family of four going to a military graduation in Fort Benning. Others from Jacksonville, FL, from Spartanburg, SC, and from Macon and Atlanta.

Still, I could only count 59 people in the circle! I so desperately wanted to reach the goal that I surreptitiously counted everyone a second, a third time, and even a fourth time. Try as I might, I could still only count 59, so I began my prayer with real repentance and failure.

Suddenly, I felt a light breeze on my cheek and True Father was right there, praying and crying with us.

"Of course you made the goal," he told me with a big grin, "you just forgot to count me!"