

Poverty Scholars Program Strategic Dialogue #2
Re-Igniting the Poor People's Campaign:
Finishing the Unfinished Business of Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King
November 6th – 9th, 2008

Saturday, November 8th 2:30 – 4:30PM
Stories from Tutwiler and Marks Mississippi: The Mule Train, 1968 Poor People's
Campaign, and Mississippi Delta Today
John Wessel-McCoy Opening Remarks and Intro

By way of introducing our very special guests today, I would like to state the mission of the Poverty Initiative: "We are dedicated to raising up generations of religious and community leaders committed to building a movement to end poverty led by the poor." Movements are not built out of thin air. They do not fall from the sky. We may put our faith in God, but God calls us to be the instruments of peace and justice.

The communities of Tutwiler and Marks, MS are about twenty miles apart. Both are small towns in the Mississippi Delta. They are small towns in the middle of the wide stretching flat farm land of the Delta where cotton is still grown – but now very few are needed to grow it. Tutwiler is the home and the final resting place of blues legend, Sonny Boy Williamson, and it was at the Tutwiler train depot that W.C. Handy is said to have "invented the blues" as we know it. I'll let the folks from Tutwiler tell that story, if they like. Marks is home to the pioneering Black country singer, Charley Pride. But the great music that the Delta has produced is a topic for another time. Though these towns are close in proximity to each other, the Poverty Initiative came to know these remarkable women here today – Mary Ann, Lucinda, Maureen from Tutwiler and Bertha, Betty and Connie from Marks (and by extension Birmingham, AL) – out of different relationships.

We came to know the community in Tutwiler thanks to Union Seminary's very own Professor Janet Walton. Both Janet and Professor Mary Boys, another Union professor, belong to the Sisters of the Holy Names of Jesus and Mary. And it is this order of sisters who, over the past twenty five years, have dedicated themselves to the community of Tutwiler – first through a medical clinic, later through the Tutwiler Community Education Center. We are indebted to Janet for introducing the Poverty Initiative to the great people of Tutwiler. Today we will hear from Mary Ann, Lucinda and Maureen how the quilt program developed out of the Tutwiler Community Education Center. We will also here more about life in Tutwiler, the challenges that the community faces, and how the community works together to face these challenges. Later this evening, we will gather again at James Chapel to honor the incredible work that the women in Tutwiler do through their quilt-making.

Our friends from Marks, MS are here with us today because, first of all, Bertha Burres a.k.a. "The Queen of the Mule Train" is a living witness to how Martin Luther King was transformed and inspired by his accidental visit to Marks. It was the poverty of Marks that solidified in Dr. King's mind and heart the necessity for a poor people's movement. The "Queen of the Mule Train" is here today to tell us how the Mule Train was organized. How it was pulled off. She can do this because she helped to organize it, and she with her six small children made that long, hard trip to Washington, DC. Before there was a Poverty Initiative, Willie Baptist, Liz Theoharis and others among us made a pilgrimage to Marks, MS – as part of Kensington Welfare Rights Union.

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We, the Poverty Initiative, returned to Marks this past year. In January of this year (2008), fifty students, professors, and staff from Union Theological Seminary as well as Jean Rice of Picture the Homeless (who else?), traveled to the Mississippi Delta. Our mission, on this fortieth anniversary of the Poor People's Campaign, sadly also the fortieth anniversary of Dr. King's assassination, was to make a pilgrimage to the place where the Poor People's Campaign was born – to the place where the Memphis sanitation workers struggle drew the attention of Martin Luther King – to the place where a mule train honored Dr. King's legacy by making the long, hard journey – yes, by mule drawn wagons and by foot – to Washington, DC. We wanted to honor the history of this great struggle. But that was not all. We wanted to understand what happened. What's going on now? What inspired people then and what inspires people now? What challenges did people face then and what do they face now? The Poor People's Campaign – the sanitation workers – these are not just interesting chapters in the history of a nation.

You must remember that the Poor People's Campaign, as remarkable as it was, has been largely and, I think, deliberately erased from the history of Dr. King's life and legacy. In fact, the last three years of Dr. King's life, his transition from civil rights to human rights, his call for a movement to end poverty led by the poor across racial lines and his opposition to the Vietnam War, that cruel manipulation of the poor – these truths might have been forgotten altogether, if it were not for people like Bertha's cousin, Betty Crawford.

You will see this evening Ms. Crawford's great contribution to the preservation of the memory of the Mule Train and the Poor People's Campaign. Her "story quilt" hangs today with the beautiful quilts of Tutwiler in James Chapel. And it is fitting that these quilts are together today. Because it is the women of Tutwiler who taught Betty how to quilt. That's right. Betty could not have told the story of the mule train through her quilt were it not for the women of Tutwiler and the art of quilting they shared. The Poverty Initiative may have come to know these women through separate channels, but, as it turns out, their lives are bound together. And that's how Movements are built after all. You never know what relationships can produce.

We have a special opportunity today, as Marian facilitates this conversation, to reflect on this history of a movement – which is our history too – and we will hopefully build from this reflection a vision of our own as we begin to "finish the unfinished business of Dr. King."