

FLOOR STATEMENT
January 15, 2019
Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Holiday



Senator Jennifer L. McClellan, *Chair*
Virginia Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Memorial Commission

Mr. President and colleagues:

Ninety years ago today, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was born in Atlanta, Georgia. This past April marked the 50th anniversary of his death from an assassin's bullet.

The Virginia Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Memorial Commission, of which I am proud to serve as Chair, has spent the past year focusing on Dr. King's life and legacy in Virginia, and his vision of the "Beloved Community" that he sought to build.

As described by the King Center in Atlanta:

In the Beloved Community, poverty, hunger and homelessness will not be tolerated because international standards of human decency will not allow it. Racism and all forms of discrimination, bigotry and prejudice will be replaced by an all-inclusive spirit of sisterhood and brotherhood. In the Beloved Community, international disputes will be resolved by peaceful conflict-resolution and reconciliation of adversaries, instead of military power. Love and trust will triumph over fear and hatred. Peace with justice will prevail over war and military conflict.

Dr. King spent a significant amount of time in Virginia, protesting the closing of public schools, encouraging African American voter registration and political involvement, guiding civil demonstrations, and preaching his message of love and nonviolence. Between 1953 and 1967, he visited over a dozen localities in Virginia. A multi-city tour of Virginia was planned for March 1968, when he decided to go to Memphis to support sanitation workers protesting working conditions.

In the past year, the Commission held a series of Beloved Community Conversations in eleven of the Virginia locations that Dr. King visited and will visit the remaining two in the coming months. During these visits, we asked each community, "Where are we now, fifty years later, in achieving Dr. King's vision of a Beloved Community?" and the question Dr. King focused on in the last year of his life, "Where do we go from here?"

Community members and panelists, who included educators, historians, legislators, religious and community leaders, students, and civil rights leaders who knew Dr. King and experienced his time in Virginia firsthand, all gave their perspectives on the Beloved Community in Virginia today.

We aren't there yet.

Those who spoke expressed dissatisfaction, uncertainty, and fear in the current political and cultural climate. Many felt a sense of having lost touch with our history, and having lost cohesiveness in our communities. Many expressed feelings of helplessness against the ingrained systems that perpetuate racial and economic division. Many felt that social media had driven a wedge between themselves and others. Many feared that any progress we had made is under attack and being dramatically reversed.

But no community was without hope, nor did any community fail to acknowledge the change we have seen between Dr. King's lifetime and now. When he led a rally at the State Capitol to call on Governor Almond to reopen Prince Edward County Schools, which had closed in defiance of *Brown v. Board of Education*, there was not a single African American legislator in the Virginia General Assembly. When he visited Farmville in 1962, Prince Edward County's public schools were still closed and would remain so for another two years until a federal court ordered them to reopen. When Dr. King visited Danville in 1963, it was in the wake of police violence against African American protestors on what came to be known as Bloody Monday.

Across the Commonwealth, students recognized their school education was falling short to teach them the history of their own communities, and they called on adults to educate and guide them, but also to listen to and learn from them. Religious leaders noted where the church was working to improve the community, and where it could assume a more active role. Some acknowledged the success of programming to regularly bring together black and white churches in the community. Citizens renewed their commitments to vote, to hold their leaders accountable, and, for some, to take on leadership roles of their own. Historians urged that we remember Dr. King not as the uncontroversial figure we have made him to be, but as someone who was deeply unpopular with much of the nation, who upset the status quo, and who promised and created radical change. When we remember Dr. King as he was, we do justice to his memory, and we can embrace the work that lies ahead of us.

The Commission recorded and has posted on its website videos of each of the Beloved Community Conversations around the state, preserving the discussion and firsthand accounts from those who knew him. With the recent loss of leaders like Rev. Dr. Curtis West Harris and Dr. Wyatt Tee Walker, these accounts connecting us to our recent history become all the more valuable.

In the coming year, as we commemorate the 400th arrival of the first recorded Africans to the shores of Jamestown, the first English women recruited to Jamestown, and the first meeting of the longest continuous representative democracy in the western hemisphere, the King

Commission will share in telling the complicated history of our Commonwealth. We cannot achieve a vision of the Beloved Community in the future if we cannot come to terms with our past.

And so, the King Commission will focus on the history of lynching in Virginia, working to uncover and shed light on the painful parts of our past and promote reconciliation in Virginia's still-wounded communities. At the end of this year, the Emancipation and Freedom Monument is expected to be completed and unveiled on Browns Island and will stand as a testament to and a reminder of the work that African American Virginians have done and continue to do to win freedom and equality.

In March 1968 in the Washington Cathedral, Dr. King gave one of his final sermons, entitled "Remaining Awake Through a Revolution." It was a theme he previewed in his last visit to Virginia in 1967. He recalled the story of Rip Van Winkle, who slept for 20 years. When Rip went up the mountain for his long sleep, he passed a tavern with a portrait of King George III. When he came down, that portrait had been replaced by one of President George Washington.

Rip had slept through a revolution.

Dr. King reflected that "one of the great liabilities of life is that all too many people find themselves living amid a great period of social change, and yet they fail to develop the new attitudes, the new mental responses, that the new situation demands. They end up sleeping through a revolution."

And he pointed out that we were in the midst of a triple revolution in the world: a technological revolution, a revolution in weaponry, and a human rights revolution. And he talked about the challenges we face as a result.

First, we are challenged to develop a world perspective, because no individual or nation can live alone, and anyone who thinks we can is sleeping through a revolution. He said:

We must all learn to live together as brothers or we will all perish together as fools. We are tied together in the single garment of destiny, caught in an inescapable network of mutuality. And whatever affects one directly affects all indirectly.

Second, he pointed to the challenge to eradicate the last vestiges of racial injustice from our nation. He said:

Somewhere we must come to see that human progress never rolls in on the wheels of inevitability. It comes through the tireless efforts and the persistent work of dedicated individuals who are willing to be co-workers with God. And without this hard work, time itself becomes an ally of the primitive forces of social stagnation. So we must help time and realize that the time is always ripe to do right.

And third, we are challenged to rid our nation and the world of poverty. And he outlined his plans for the Poor People's Campaign that would include another march on Washington "to demand that the government address itself to the problem of poverty."

Finally, he discussed the challenge of finding another alternative to war and bloodshed.

These are the central tenets of the Beloved Community he strove for, the Promised Land of which he spoke the night before he died. He knew he wouldn't get there with us. But he had an abiding faith that we as a people will get to the Promised Land.

And so, it is up to us—each of us—to do our part to get there. And as we reflect on his life and legacy today and on the holiday that bears his name Monday, ask yourself what you will do to achieve the Beloved Community.

Mr. President, I move that when the Senate adjourns today, it does so in memory and honor of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.