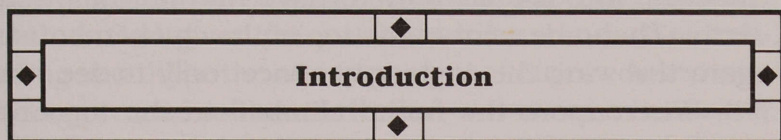
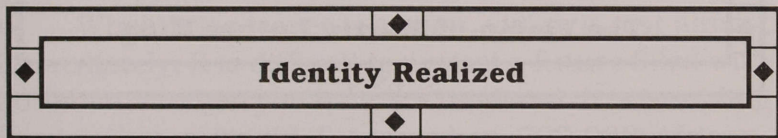


## Recognizing Our Identity\*



At a recent meeting of the faculty of Interdenominational Theological Center, I was in one of my rare defensive moods. The faculty was discussing poorly equipped students recommended for admission. Defensively, I commented that many local churches send us "chickens" and expect us to return "high-flying eagles." Seminaries receive criticism for failing to perform miracles with students, many of whom have severe deficits. Basic problems involve written and spoken language skills, inability to think logically, imprecision in articulating goals and limited worldviews.

During the discussion, one professor said something that ignited my spirit. "Maybe, Mr. President, they are eagles acting like chickens." He related the story of a farmer who, finding a young eagle, put him with his chickens. The eagle acquired the habits of chickens, pecking, scratching, flying from perch to perch, but never too high, never too far.



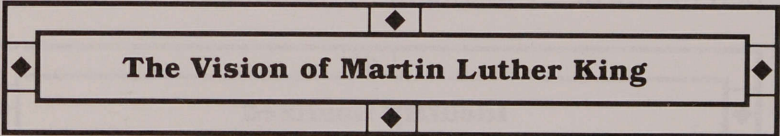
On one occasion, the farmer was visited by a friend who recognized that the bird cavorting with the chickens was really an eagle. He coaxed the farmer to

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permit him to teach the eagle to fly and hunt. He threw the eagle into the air only to have him fall limply to earth. Then, he went to the top of the chicken house, again throwing the eagle into space, only to see him fail. Whereupon, the friend climbed to the top of a nearby mountain and released the young eagle. Plummeting, the eagle stretched forth his wings made weak by inactivity and began to fly. Each stroke of the wings brought greater strength and confidence. Soon the eagle convinced himself of his identity, swooping low and soaring high, never again to grovel as a chicken, never again to be the hunted instead of the hunter, assuming the demeanor of an imperial bird, symbol of majesty and power. The eagle's identity would remain with him a lifetime.

Even though powerful, the species is seriously endangered, primarily by humans. The eagle is wantonly shot, trapped and physically abused, nests raided and eggs stolen, victim of indiscriminate use of toxic agricultural chemicals that weaken the shell and cause birth defects. Being an endangered species, the eagle, which is found everywhere in the world except in Antarctica and New Zealand, is making a dramatic comeback.



### **The Vision of Martin Luther King**

King reminds me of an eagle. What has happened to the African American in the United States closely parallels the life of the eagle. Eagles have piercing eyes enabling them to see great distances. Martin Luther

King was a visionary, seeing that the soul of America was being devoured because Black people were robbed of their God-given potential, that the standard of well-being should be the ninety percent of African Americans being pressed to the earth, that war is not a testimony of our strength but a demonstration of our inability to settle our differences. Were King alive today he would continue advocacy for the homeless, landless and hopeless.

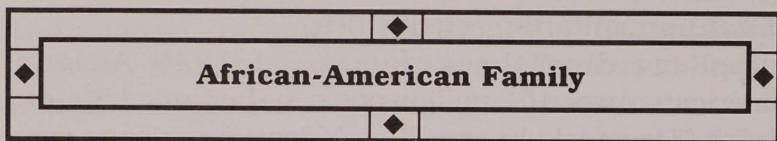
In terms of the homeless, it is appalling that in the United States thousands sleep on sewer grates, under viaducts, wandering aimlessly during the day. Distressingly, since the seventies, we have not had programs at the federal, state or local levels to correct these problems. Since a significant percentage of the homeless are dysfunctional, it brings into question all of our humanitarian sensitivities.

Regarding the landless, in 1945 African Americans owned 23 million acres in the United States. Today it is widely known that African Americans own less than 3 million acres. Several reasons account for this loss: death often forces the sale of property to white Americans with ready cash; failure to pay taxes causes the state to sell the property; inaccessible roads and utilities often force the Black owner to sell at a loss or retain useless land.

When hope leaves a person, vision is lost almost immediately. It is difficult to project a future filled with possibilities when you have surrendered. It is troubling to visualize a bright future when 700,000 African-American males are incarcerated while only 500,000 are in college. We note that ten years ago more African Americans were graduating from these schools. It is,

therefore, unthinkable to eradicate all race-specific scholarships at institutions receiving college grants. Further, it borders on criminal activity to curtail Affirmative Action Programs on the assumption that either they are no longer needed or the predominate society will do the right thing.

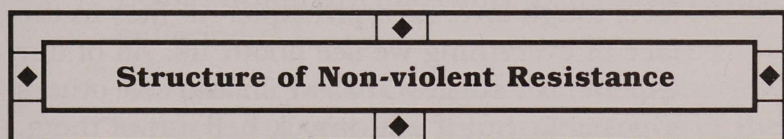
Hopelessness is like a giant snowball released from the top of a hill. As it gains momentum its size increases, starting an avalanche. When persons of any race see that every avenue is always blocked, they cease looking, resigning themselves to accept things as they are. Martin Luther King was concerned to keep hope alive, as Jesse Jackson would say, and the Million Man March was a massive assault on those factors that spawn hopelessness.



An inspiring feature of eagles is the care of their eaglets. For almost a year after birth, the young eagle stays close to the nest, having needs met by both parents. When the eaglet is ready, it is carried on the wings of the parent and given a demonstration of the techniques of flight. Soon, thereafter, the eagle is forced to fly by its own power, with its own skills.

This nurturing process was the norm for the African-American family. Historically, the family has been the strength of African Americans, because of its extended nature. That is, family included mama, daddy, sister, brother, aunt, uncle, homeless acquaintances and anyone in need of a family unit. This appears to be

less evident today, and as a result, fewer role models of compassion and concern are observable. When families are not there, gangs fill the void. They become the model, the "family," requiring absolute submission. Much of what happens in gang-families is anti-social and criminal. However, it is today the powerful model according to which many young African Americans learn to fly with subverted skill.



We have identified important needs of the African-American Community. However, what is needed today are solutions to problems. One can become quite paranoid by always citing the negative. This is why Martin Luther King will go down in history as one of the great leaders of all times. Studying the social and ethical views of Walter Rausenbusch and Reinhold Niebuhr and the tactical views of India's Mahatma Gandhi, King developed a six-pronged philosophy of non-violent resistance. This concept was successful because it was aggressive and persistent, yet it protected the dignity of all, the oppressor and the oppressed. I contend that King's method still has value for the achievement of positive results. Briefly, these six points are:

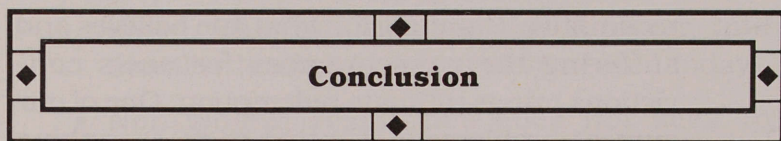
- Non-violence is not a method for cowards. We are accustomed to thinking that "might makes right," that if we flex our muscles and show how powerful we are, then we demonstrate power. It takes real courage to prepare oneself

physically, mentally and spiritually to be positioned for dangerous disadvantaged display, suffer indignities, face abuse and be jailed. This strategy has moral power, and morality is what is desperately needed today.

- Non-violent resistance does not seek to humiliate the opponent but to win friendship and understanding. This can be called radical love, tough love. As a principle, it flies in the face of everything we see about us. All of our experiences suggest that we should love others if possible, but if not, knock hell out of them. King's ultimate goal was to bring about what he called a "Beloved Community." Such a community seeks to correct wrongs in a way that does not create injustices. Both the ends and the methods used to achieve worthy goals must be consistent.
- Non-violent resistance is directed toward the forces and systems of evil rather than against persons who do evil. This is the message of Jesus, one that requires great maturity, great objectivity. Our inclination is to lump together the person and situation. Who could have imagined that deep south American states could have made such massive changes in their racial lives and decisions. When systems of segregation and mandated discrimination were changed, individuals were given the support they needed to alter their beliefs and behavior. In some instances, this activated what was already in their hearts.

- Non-violence leads to a willingness to accept suffering without retaliation. King's understanding was that unmerited suffering was redemptive. Standing for what one believes and suffering the consequences for one's convictions brings ultimate redemption. One of our current problems is wanting to do everything imaginable, but not wanting to pay the price. Being faithful to a just cause leads to satisfying suffering.
- Non-violent resistance avoids not only physical violence but also the internal violence of the spirit. Were he alive today, Martin Luther King would probably exert major emphasis on the physical violence and pathology that is crippling the African-American Community. He would remind us that violence begets violence and affects the spirit. External violence creates an internal void. Internal chaos develops indifference and a calloused spirit that promotes even greater external conflict. King would continue to work in major cities conducting non-violent workshops with urban youth and with gang-families.
- Non-violent resistance is on the side of justice. The end product of any positive movement for change needs to be a Just Society, one in which each man or woman becomes the best possible person, one where hard work and achievement are rewarded but also where handicap is recognized and corrected. A just society is, therefore, a mutual-aid society, a structure in

which each segment learns from and contributes to the other.



It is my honest opinion that the greatest need in society is to recapture our moral imperatives. We need to emphasize saving individuals from the moral dilemmas and crises currently engulfing them. We need to search for ways to help persons reach higher heights. In this way the potential eagles among us can stop acting like chickens and begin to fly to the peak of their potential. When this happens, we will have fewer mistaken identities, and all of us will be stronger, recognizing our reason for being. Then we will more clearly mirror the God who is, ever so marvelously, our Creator.