

Profile: Rev. James Bevel

A Christian soldier who fights without violence

The Reverend James L. Bevel, 55, is a prominent name in the history of the American civil rights movement, in the history of the movement against the Vietnam War, and other milestones of twentieth-century American political life.

Born on Oct. 19, 1936, in Itta Bena, Mississippi, he is an ordained Baptist minister, having attended the American Baptist Theological Seminary in Nashville, Tennessee from 1957 to 1961. He has pastored churches in Tennessee, Illinois, Ohio, and New York.

In his theological studies, and later as a minister, Reverend Bevel came to the understanding of Christianity as what he characterizes as the "science of human consciousness," underlying and mandating each and every individual citizen to take responsibility for the human community overall. It was on the basis of that outlook that he came to nonviolence, and came to assume responsibility for the pivotal role in the civil rights movement of the 1960s.

At the same time, he says he came to see expressed in the Declaration of Independence the fullest sociological manifestation of scientific human consciousness, the goal toward which all people must strive.

It was those two concepts, he says, that formed—and

form—the twin bases of his thinking, social action, and educational and economic development theories and processes.

As a young pastor of a congregation, Reverend Bevel was introduced to Leo Tolstoy's *The Kingdom of God Is Within You* and Mahatma Gandhi's *My Experiment with Truth*, and as a result, his ministry turned in a radically different direction as he became involved with a nonviolent study group in Nashville in 1959. In 1960, he became a leader of the sit-in movement in Nashville; from that day forward, he says, he was involved in consistently applying the theology of the Sermon on the Mount to social problems and personal needs alike.

It was under his chairmanship of the Nashville Student Movement that the Freedom Rides were continued—the Freedom Rides which led to the ending of segregation in interstate transportation.

As a member of the Student Nonviolent National Steering Committee, Reverend Bevel assumed responsibility for the Mississippi Project, one of three projects being set up in 1961-62 by the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), the other two being the Albany Project and the Selma Project. It was his work in, and his success in, these projects that led Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. to ask him to function as the Mississippi field organizer for the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, and, later, as the director of the SCLC's Direct Action.

While serving in this capacity, Reverend Bevel developed the Children's Marches in Birmingham and initiated the world-famous March on Washington in 1963.

After the 1963 bombing of the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, he proposed, developed, and execut-



James Bevel (left) and other mourners carry Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s casket to the crypt, on April 5, 1968.

ed the Alabama Right to Vote Movement, which culminated in the Selma campaign and the March on Montgomery in 1965. Those movements led, in turn, to the passage of the 1965 federal Voting Rights Act.

Wanting to test the theory of nonviolence in a Northern context, he developed the Tenant Unions and the Open Housing Movement in Chicago in 1965 and 1966, which led to a ruling by the U.S. Supreme Court to outlaw racial segregation in housing. He had previously challenged the nonviolent movement to oppose the use of violence in foreign policy. As a result, in 1966, he became the director of the Mobilization to End the War in Vietnam. Under his directorship, the Mobilization to End the War in Vietnam produced the largest demonstration in the history of the United States to that date, at the United Nations building in New York, on April 15, 1967.

Bevel was the Director of Nonviolent Education in the Poor People's Campaign, and was present with Martin Luther King at the Lorraine Motel in Memphis, Tennessee on April 4, 1968 when King was shot.

After the death of Dr. King

Bevel's insistence on a fair trial for accused Martin Luther King assassin James Earl Ray, and his ability to organize the base of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference for the principle of justice for all, led to his being ousted from the leadership of that organization.

In graduate studies at Vanderbilt University Divinity School, he discovered that existing psychoanalytical disciples were unable to address the psychological damage created by slavery, segregation, and oppression. For the next 20 years he developed institutions to study and treat these problems, including the Man Nonviolent Clinic in Baltimore, the Human and Community Development Project in Nashville, the Organic Farm Project in Hiram, Ohio, and Students for Education and Economic Development (SEED) in Chicago.

In 1984, Bevel ran for Congress in the 7th Congressional District in Illinois, introducing the Precinct Council as a means for character, institutional, and economic development. Running as a Republican, he received 33% of the vote in a district where Republicans normally receive 8-10% of the vote.

Reverend Bevel traveled to Omaha, Nebraska in October 1990, as chairman of the Citizens' Fact-Finding Commission to Investigate Human Rights Violations in Nebraska. He was so horrified by the evidence of satanic sexual child abuse being committed by powerful figures in Nebraska's financial and political circles with ties to the Bush White House, that he moved to Nebraska for a year to work with citizens there resisting the pedophiles' coverup.

He was recently elected as the director of the Bettis Academy in Trenton, South Carolina, where he has been developing a comprehensive educational and economic development curriculum that will leave students economically independent and institutionally sovereign.

Reverend Bevel has traveled extensively throughout the United States and many countries of the world, including Northern Ireland and South Africa. His friends throughout the world echo the sentiment of his friends in Nebraska: "Thank God for Reverend Bevel. When he found out that we were resisting being crushed by powerful men, he came to shine the light of truth on our struggle."

Bevel's campaigns

The following chronology gives some of the highlights of James Bevel's career:

1960: leader of Nashville, Tennessee Sit-in Movement

1960: co-founder of Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC)

1961: director of the Open Theater Movement, Nashville

1961: director of the Continuation of the Freedom Rides

1961-62: director of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee Mississippi Project

1962: co-founder of Council of Federated Organizations in Mississippi

1962: director of the Greenwood, Mississippi Voter Registration Campaign

1963: organizer of the Children's Marches, Birmingham, Alabama

1963: initiator of the March on Washington

1965: director of Nonviolent Direct Action, Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC)

1965: co-author and director of the Selma Right to Vote Movement

1966: developer and director of the Chicago Open Housing Movement

1966: developer and organizer of the Tenant Unions in Chicago

1967: director of the Mobilization to End the War in Vietnam

1968: director of Nonviolent Education in the Poor People's Campaign

1970-72: developer of the Nonviolent Clinical Process, Baltimore

1975: developer of the Human and Community Development Institute, Nashville

1980: director of the Organic Farm Project in Hiram, Ohio

1984: developer and director of the Students for Education and Economic Development