

Chavis Made More Dedicated By Prison Experience (Continued on Page 2)

tween Asheville and Raleigh. We had what we called organizing training sessions. And I found myself, every night, sometimes twice a day, in different churches. Most ministers say they get a "calling" . . .

Q. A bolt from the blue?

CHAVIS: If anything, I called the Lord, a reversed kind of call. I've got to be involved in the church because that's where my people are. I

Christianity has been used by white folk to oppress us. We didn't have no problems with Christian theology per se, it's just how it was being interpreted by white folk. So we sought to bring about a true interpretation, particularly one that would be relevant for Black people engaged in the struggle.

believe in God. Prior to that time I had felt that the church was not being used properly in terms of being a medium in the structure to bring about some liberation. But I found that it could be, through King. The church could properly find its right place in the community. And so I dedicated my life to follow in the footsteps of King, to keep his dream alive.

Then I also made a commitment to the Christian ministry. I am a Christian minister but I recognize the values of dealing with all religions. Islam. I think we have a lot to learn from our Islamic brothers. Not the dispute they are presently going through, but in terms of their self-help programs for the community. What Elijah Muhammad did in instilling Black pride in the community, I think, was very positive.

One of the things I've been doing is trying to trace not only our biological roots to our ancestors, but to trace our cultural and religious roots. As Black people, we've always been a very religious people. The theory that religion came out of the West is incorrect. For Western civilization, religion is a tool that's been manipulated for capitalist and imperialist ideals. I found that some of the founders of Christianity itself were Blacks and Africans. St. Augustine was a Black man who wrote part of the Canons of Catholicism which lead to Protestantism.

What I'm trying to say is that I found myself comfortable in the Black church; prodding the existing churches toward where they should be in terms of what's written in the gospel. . . in terms of the experiences of Black folk.

So far, I've been successful. That's another reason I'm in jail now. It was around a Black church that I went to Wilmington. It was in a Black church that we were attacked.

Q. That leads to the next question. Exactly what did you hope to achieve when you went to Wilmington in 1971?

CHAVIS: Between sixty-nine, seventy and seventy-one, the South was going through what Boston and Louisville, Kentucky are going through now — desegregation of the schools. Most school districts, almost every one in North Carolina resisted the orderly integration of schools. All of my high school years were in a Black school system. There was no integration when I graduated from high school: there was talk about integration but there

wasn't integration. So the NAACP Legal Defense Fund filed various suits in various counties. New Hanover County, where Wilmington is, is one of these counties.

However, whites used our NAACP Legal Defense suits to bring about integration and turn the repression back on the community. What I mean by that is they went in and closed or demoted all the Black high schools. There were only two institutions that Black people controlled at the time, that was the school and the church. They were stepping on some sensitive turf when talking about taking our schools or demoting or degrading them.

In Wilmington it was Willison High School, a very famous high school. Meadowlark Lemon, Althea Gibson and a lot of famous athletes came out of there. Blacks should be very sensitive about this school situation, but they didn't turn to violence. The Black community, being very law abiding went on with the desegregation order. They put their kids on the buses and went out to the suburbs and tried to go to school. What happened was, white folk said, "No. We don't want niggers out here in Wilmington, not in the suburbs trying to go to school."



Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. — the person most influential in Chavis' life.

The precipitating incident was on January 15, which was King's birthday when Black students wanted to have memorial services at New Hanover High School. The school officials refused so the students went out at lunchtime and had a non-violent vigil around the American flag pole, sang "We Shall Overcome", and attempted to go back to class. But they were attacked by some vigilantes. Now when I go outside of North Carolina and talk about the Ku Klux Klans and vigilantes, people say, "Well, wow! Is that still going on?"

Q. Did Wilmington surpass all your expectations in terms of racism and repression?

CHAVIS: Yes. Now I'm from Oxford where there's a Klan element in Granville county; they still burn a few crosses, wear a few hoods. But they usually try to hide it. But down there in Wilmington these white folk were bold with their racism. They came on out up front and said "if you niggers keep meeting over there at that church (Gregory Congregational Church was the Black church where the students were meeting) we're going to wipe you out."

I wasn't going to submit to their threats. The people down there took the threats seriously. But sure enough they started meeting at the church. The students decided to

boycott after the January 15 incident. They made a call to Reverend Leon White in Raleigh, who was my director at the time, and asked for assistance.

So I was sent to Wilmington to give organizational assistance and help the students meet their demands. That they be treated fairly in class; they were made to sit in the back of all classrooms. They were taking a typing class and weren't allowed to use the typewriters. Stuff like that, just racism.

Q. This was in 1971 in Wilmington, North Carolina?

CHAVIS: Right, 1971 in Wilmington. They couldn't be on the cheer-leading squad because of the color of their skin. White male teachers would harass Black female students. It was a kind of intolerable situation. So I got them to put all this down in Black and white. One of the things I try to do when I go into a community is exhaust the existing channels. I know they do not work but I try to exhaust them anyway. Set up the meetings with the school board; give demands to the city council and county commissioners, so they'll know what's going down so they won't claim out of ignorance they don't know

said "we want law and order"?"

CHAVIS: Right. The chief of police down there was named Williamson at the time. I went to him several times, along with the pastor of the church, and actually begged for police protection. This was in 1971 before the actual racial warfare broke out. All of it could have been avoided if they had called a curfew or if they had protected the church. But they chose not to because many of the law enforcement officers in Wilmington were themselves members of the Ku Klux Klan and were members of a new organization started in Wilmington called the Rights of White People (ROWP). This was a para-military, white supremacists organization with high-powered weapons, a lot of ammunition, and a lot of guts. They literally shot up the Black community so the Black folk whose property was being shot up decided to defend themselves. That's when law and order came.

There was no law and order as long as the white vigilantes were shooting up the Black community. When Black people decided to defend themselves against these attacks, then the police moved in and attacked the Black community, too.

So it was a whole set-up kind of thing.

"It's a miracle, actually, that I'm alive or any of the Wilmington 10 are alive, because they tried to kill all of the Black community in that area. But luckily, thanks to God and other powers, the Black community survived the attack. For four days in Wilmington, it was something that probably had never happened in this century. There was a full-scaled racial war going on.

Q. Do you feel that there was an active "get Chavis" element from the time you arrived and made your presence known in Wilmington?

CHAVIS: Oh yes. Particularly in the established media down there. In front-page headlines I was referred to as an "Outside Agitator". Automatically their problem went from their own racism to me — "Get Chavis". I was their problem.

A group of businessmen in Wilmington even raised ten thousand dollars for somebody to kill me. This was reported to me by the local law enforcement.

They said, "Chavis, we have this information so you'd better leave town." I said, "If you have this information that somebody raised money for somebody to kill me, that's conspiracy to murder. Why don't you go and arrest those folks?" They said, "No, we can't do that unless they, in fact, murder you." So I thanked them for their information; but I wasn't going to let that threat drive me out of Wilmington.

One of the things I found in working in a lot of communities is when things get hot you can't leave. I didn't have a history of running out on folks and I wasn't going to do it in Wilmington. In fact, after the racial warfare was over with, I moved back to Wilmington and stayed all that year and founded a church in Wilmington called the First African Temple of the Black Messiah.

Q. You actually went to the existing authorities in that town and