

Leon Sullivan: Time is running out

By MARY BETH NIBLEY
Associated Press Writer

PHILADELPHIA -- Three letters -- "TTT" -- stand for a favorite motto of the Rev. Leon Sullivan: "Things take time."

He repeats the staccato letters to anyone who is tired of how long it takes to get things done, and he has met a lot of them in a lifetime of working with people for whom many things are elusive.

The letters convey a simple idea he undoubtedly will keep in mind over the next few months.

Sullivan, black activist and civil rights advocate, is the 66-year-old pastor of Zion Baptist Church in Philadelphia who in 1977 drafted a code of conduct for American corporations doing business in South Africa. The principles were aimed at improving the lot of non-white workers in a country that practices racial separation.

For a man like Sullivan, who has preached patience all his life, the setting of deadlines is a difficult matter. But a decade after his social-conscience guidelines came into being, he is urging American companies to leave South Africa unless that country turns away from its apartheid system by the end of May.

Many companies, such as Coca-Cola Co., General Motors Corp., International Business Machines Corp. and Eastman Kodak Co., already have departed or announced their intentions to do so within the last year.

Sullivan says the situation has brought sleepless nights as he agonizes over what will do the most good -- or the least harm.

"I'm wrestling with how to deal with that," said Sullivan, his head tilted sideways as his hand rubs his furrowed forehead.

Born Oct. 16, 1922, in segregated Charleston, W.Va., to a poor family, Leon Howard Sullivan is a tall man with a baritone voice at once gravelly and smooth who easily commands the attention of a listener. Long before he stood his full height of nearly 6½ feet, he was standing up for himself.

"At an early age, I saw the evils of discrimination," he said. In an interview, he talked of some incidents in his youth that focused his later life.

On one occasion he recalled being refused a hamburger in a "whites only" sandwich shop. "So I recited the preamble to the Constitution ... everybody stopped what they were doing."

In a similar incident, he was infuriated by a drugstore fountain clerk who would not serve him a soft drink and by the reaction of white patrons.

"They said: 'Stand up, black boy; you can't sit down here.' I looked at the fiery eyes of the man behind the counter, and I decided I would stand up against that kind of condition for the rest of my life."

He thanks an inspirational

grandmother for bequeathing him a sense of right and wrong -- and considerable gumption. Higher-profile figures also shaped his early adulthood, some of them prime forces in the black civil rights movement of the post-Depression era.

Adam Clayton Powell Jr., one of the country's best-known black leaders, and A. Phillip Randolph, who organized the 1940s March on Washington Movement that led President Franklin Roosevelt to start the Commission on Fair Employment Practices, were just two of the people who had significant influence on him.

Sullivan wrote poetry about religion and race relations. At 17, he went to a West Virginia college on an athletic scholarship and later became a Baptist minister.

During the early years of his ministry, he went to New York at Powell's request and worked with adolescents in Harlem in an effort to curb juvenile delinquency. He continued his studies at Union Theological Seminary and Columbia University.

He met the woman who would become his wife, Grace, in 1945 and together they left New York City. Grace has been "my greatest critic and my greatest support," Sullivan said. They have three grown children and one grandson.

Eventually, in 1950, he took over at Zion Baptist Church. "It became a very important force in the city for some of the changes that have taken place," he said.

The changes mainly come under the broad category of

economic development. One thing for which Sullivan is remembered is the citywide boycotts in the late 1950s and early '60s against businesses that shut their doors to blacks.

"The boycotts were tremendously successful," said Sullivan. But, once the doors were opened, "I found that blacks did not have the skills for the jobs. Integration was not preparation, it was frustration."

These observations led to the creation in 1964 of the Opportunities Industrialization Centers and other self-help educational programs for job training and fostering entrepreneurial activities through the pooling of community resources.

The Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. tapped Sullivan's know-how in the formation of Operation Breadbasket in Atlanta.

Sullivan points proudly to Philadelphia's Progress Plaza, the largest shopping center built, owned and operated by blacks in the United States. The shopping center and community outreach programs came about thanks largely to efforts by members of Zion and other area churches.

Not content to confine his sights to the lower rungs of the business ladder, Sullivan sought to persuade companies to put blacks in management roles. He wound up with an invitation to join General Motors' board of directors, and he has served on it since 1971.

He views the GM directorship pragmatically, saying that in his opinion, he was put on the board Please see page B10



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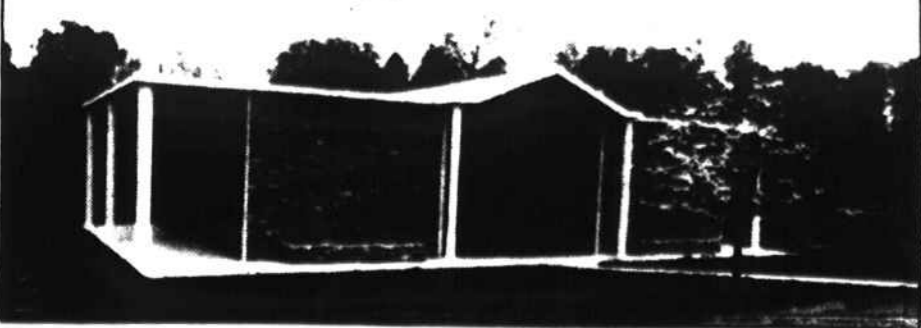
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