

27 Feb
1956

Notes on MIA Mass Meeting at Holt Street Baptist Church, by Donald T. Ferron

27 February 1956
Montgomery, Ala.

King and other MIA leaders sought to maintain morale at a prayer service and mass meeting at Holt Street Baptist Church. The capacious sanctuary was filled by 5 P.M. for the prayer service; informal singing continued until King and the other ministers began the program two hours later. In Ferron's notes that are not printed here, Rufus Lewis, head of the transportation committee, expressed concern about the effect of the mass arrests on the car pool and called for more cars, drivers, and dispatchers. Ralph Abernathy then reminded the audience that by arresting the leaders, the grand jury wouldn't stop the movement: "This is your movement," he said, "you are the leaders." Abernathy clarified King's role as president: "There are too many people to talk at once. We tell Rev. King what to say and he says what we want him to say." According to another account of the same meeting, another clergyman identified King as the preeminent spokesperson for the MIA: "He is our elected leader, no other individual is authorized to speak for us, unless specifically designated by him (King) to do so."¹ In the following portion of Ferron's notes, King observes that the Montgomery struggle has become an "international" one, but "wherever there's progress, there is the pulling back force of retrogression."

Rev. M. L. King—"Presiding officer, platform associates and friends," Good Evening! We have "new zeal, new stamina to carry on. When we saw this protest many, many weeks, ago, we thought it would last but a short time." It has "reached out beyond Montgomery", it has become an "international problem". "We have the prayer and support of men and women all over the nation. They're saying one thing—"You've gone too far; you can't turn back now".² Altho confronted with splinters, we're going to keep going. Wherever there's progress, there is the pulling back force of retrogression; where there's burden there is pain. Therefore, we're using Christian "principles". Out of progress may come "damaging revolution" as set forth by "Karl Marx and communism", or "passive resistance with love as ammunition and a breast plate of righteousness". Negroes have suffered "economic reprisal", have been "segregated", and have suffered "humility", Rev. King concluded, but in spite of these obstacles we continue to carry on with a policy of non-violence, a "voice from high heaven will say, 'well done'." This is the way we'll carry on. God bless you." [. . .]

1. J. Harold Jones, Notes, MIA Mass Meeting at Holt Street Baptist Church, 27 February 1956.

2. According to Jones's account of the mass meeting, King mentioned that "eight or ten hours would be required to read the telegrams and letters" of support. He added: "The method has not changed, it is the same as at the beginning. Whenever there is a surge toward the new, there is a resurgence toward the old. The method comes from Judeo-Christian principles as opposed to Karl Marx's damaging revolutionary methods. Ours is a spiritual movement. We are protesting segregation with passive resistance."

Announcements by Rev. King:

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1. Keep your “sense of dignity”
2. Vote to stop protest—Rev. Bennett was exercising his “democratic right” to vote the way he did. We should “admire him for his courage”. He is as much with us as he was in the beginning.³
3. Continue your policy of “non-violence”
4. Mrs. Reese withdrew her name as a plaintiff. Stop bothering her with “phone call threats.”⁴

AD. PV-ARC-LNT.

3. On 20 February 1956, amid growing rumors that boycott leaders were about to be indicted, MIA members overwhelmingly voted down a compromise seating proposal mediated by the Men of Montgomery, a white business group. Rev. L. Roy Bennett and his assistant pastor were the only dissenting votes out of four thousand. The compromise would have preserved segregated sections in the front and rear of city buses while eliminating several humiliating practices and granting amnesty to protesters (see Ralph Abernathy, Memo to the Men of Montgomery, 20 February 1956; and Men of Montgomery, Outline of Suggestions to End Montgomery Bus Boycott, 13 February 1956).

4. Fearing the personal consequences, Jeanatta Reese had withdrawn as a plaintiff in the *Browder v. Gayle* federal lawsuit.