

Dr. Martin Luther King: Remembrance and Reconciliation

In 1903, the historian W. E. B. Du Bois wrote that “the problem of the Twentieth Century is the problem of the color-line.” One hundred years later, despite serious efforts to erase it, the “color-line” continues to persist in many communities throughout the nation. On the 40th anniversary of the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., the Maryland Humanities Council is undertaking a broad initiative in late 2007 and 2008 to engage communities throughout the state in an examination of the legacy of Dr. King, the current state of race relations in their communities, and ways in which successful attempts have been made or could be made to bridge the racial divide and resolve racial differences.

In matters of race, as in many other areas, Maryland’s experience is different from states to the north and south of it. In the North, African-American emigrants followed previous groups of newcomers into the slums and ghettos of northern industrial cities with their informal, but rigid, patterns of segregation and discrimination. In the South, long established black populations were quickly disenfranchised and endured almost a century of strict “Jim Crow” segregation laws after slavery ended. In the years before the Civil War, however, Baltimore had the largest antebellum population of free blacks of any city in the nation, and Maryland had the largest free black population of any state. Although it had been a slave state, Maryland abolished the institution in 1864, African-Americans celebrated the passage of the Fifteenth Amendment with a grand parade in Baltimore, and Marylanders narrowly rejected the 1906 Poe Amendment, which would have disenfranchised black citizens.

Baltimore — with long-established, separate black institutions — is arguably the birthplace of the modern civil rights movement. A young Thurgood Marshall successfully challenged legal segregation in Maryland’s colleges and universities in the 1936 *Murray v Pearson* case. Marshall went on to fight for equality in teachers’ salaries in a series of 1940s Maryland court cases, while the Baltimore chapter of the NAACP aggressively pushed for integration of theatres, department stores, and

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parks in that city. In 1954, the Baltimore City Public School System became the first integrated system south of the Mason-Dixon line.

In the last half century, Prince George's County transformed from a largely rural county to the first "majority minority" suburban county in the nation, and it currently has a median family income more than one-third higher than the national average. In Howard County, the creators of Columbia envisioned a new city with both racially and economically integrated communities. And, in the state's largest jurisdiction — Montgomery County — Asians, Latinos, and blacks will probably outnumber whites within the next 20 years.

A wide variety of issues can intersect with race, so the "color-line" can manifest itself in very different ways in different communities. Divisions within a community might exist in areas such as political control or educational opportunities or living patterns, but perhaps not in others such as economic power or social interactions or public commemorations. The nature of these splits can also change over time as communities work to address them or as areas evolve and grow.

Through a wide range of public programs, this initiative will stimulate facilitated discussions about issues of racial division and racial harmony in communities throughout Maryland. Among the central questions for these conversations are:

- To what extent is the dream of Dr. King applicable in your community today?
- What has changed and what has remained the same since 1968?
- Are there model communities in which citizens have worked together to promote civic unity around issues of race?
- What have we learned, as individuals and as communities, in the wake of Dr. King's assassination and its aftermath?
- What attempts have been made to reconcile racial differences in your community?

By using the resources of the Humanities — history, literature, philosophy, art history, jurisprudence, ethics, and so on — the Council will stimulate informed dialogues that explore ourselves, our society, and a continuing critical issue in Maryland communities.