

By

Ukoha Ukiwo

Americans have since 1994 when the Congress of the United States passed the King Holiday Act, designating it as a national day of volunteer service, commemorated January 15 as a day of national service. The King Holiday Act was passed 30 years after the signing of Civil Rights Act which ended racial segregation in public places. The theme for the 2008 King Holiday is 'a day of service'. This year's theme, and indeed the King Holiday, offers us an opportunity to celebrate and reflect on the life of service of Martin Luther King Jnr., the legendary civil rights activist.

Born Michael Luther King on January 15, 1929 in Atlanta, Georgia to Martin Luther King Sr., a Baptist minister and Alberta Williams King, a school teacher and minister's daughter, he decided to take up the name Martin Luther King Jnr. Martin Luther King Jnr. earned a Bachelor of Arts degree in Sociology at Morehouse College, a distinguished Atlanta based Negro college in 1949. He proceeded to study Theology at Crozer Theological Seminary, Chester, Pennsylvania in preparation for his career ambition as a minister of the gospel. His performances at College would earn him several recommendations for doctoral programme. Although Martin was accepted for doctoral programmes at Yale and Edinburgh, he chose Boston University's School of Theology partly because Edgar Brightman, author of Philosophy of Religion, which had made a great influence on him, was on the Boston Faculty. On June 1955, Martin Luther King Jnr was awarded the University of Boston PhD after he submitted his thesis on an examination of the differing conceptions of God propounded by Paul Tillich and Henry Wiemann. Remarkably, Martin's analysis benefited enormously on Hegel's dialectical approach. He held strongly to Hegelian thesis that every system contained contradictions that would lead to its own negation.

Even before completing his doctoral programme, Martin Luther King Jnr. was offered teaching positions in several colleges. He turned them down, against the wishes of his wife, Coretta Scot, a fellow Bostonian, whom he married in 1953. Coretta recalls Martin's reasons for rejecting a faculty position:

He had this strong feeling for the masses. He said to me, I'm going to be a pastor of a church, a large Baptist church in the south...I'm not going to be on a college campus..I am going back South. I'm going to live in the South because that's where I'm needed (Garrow 1986:48).

This desire to be where he was needed most indicated that Dr. King had decided for better or worse to serve his community. As he would reminisce later in life, even his adventure in ministry derived from his passion to serve humanity:

I had felt the urge to enter the ministry from my latter high school days, but accumulated doubts had somewhat blocked my urge. Now it appeared again with an inescapable drive. My call to the ministry was not a miraculous or supernatural something; on the contrary, it was an inner urge calling me to