

Thousands in Philadelphia co-sign U.S. Declaration of Independence

by Patricia Salisbury

Over the July 4 weekend, the first shot of a campaign to revitalize America's rotting political institutions rang out in Philadelphia, and echoed across the country. A series of events sponsored by the Declaration of Independence Co-Signers' Convention (DICC) drew over 1,000 people to the nation's first capital. The coalition was initiated by Rev. James Bevel to rededicate the United States in practice to the principles expressed in the opening words of the Declaration of Independence: "that all Men are created equal and endowed by the Creator with certain Inalienable Rights"—words with which too many Americans no longer agree. At the invitation of Bevel, a former top lieutenant to Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. in the civil rights movement, delegations traveled from Ohio, Illinois, Indiana, New Jersey, New York, Canada, and even Washington State, all bearing hundreds of signatures on the Declaration of Independence which had been gathered at churches and other sites around the country.

The events began with a concert on July 2 at the historic Tindley Temple United Methodist Church in honor of the great Classical singer Marian Anderson, who passed away on April 8. To many of the 800 people attending the concert, Marian Anderson, more than any other recent figure, truly represented the human spirit on which the nation was founded, through her dignified defeat of prejudice and injustice. Anderson overcame great obstacles to assert her equal right to study and perform the works of European Classical polyphony, an achievement which was finally acknowledged when she became the first black singer to perform a leading role at the New York Metropolitan Opera.

The featured singer was baritone Robert McFerrin, who in 1955 became the first black artist to perform under contract with the Metropolitan Opera, following Anderson's groundbreaking guest appearance. Now 72, McFerrin, despite a recent stroke which temporarily left him entirely unable to speak, beautifully performed a program which included seven songs of Robert Schumann's song cycle *Dichterliebe*, Rigoletto's famous aria "Cortigiani, vil razza dannata," from the Giuseppe Verdi opera, and four Negro spirituals in Classical settings by Hall Johnson. McFerrin was accompanied on piano by Sylvia Olden Lee, another trailblazer who in 1954 was the first black person to work in a professional capacity at the Metropolitan Opera when she became the leading vocal coach. Lee has been a teacher and inspiration for dozens of singers, including sopranos Kathleen Battle and Jessye Nor-

man. The performance of McFerrin and Lee brought the audience to several sustained ovations.

Activating government's 'fourth branch'

The Co-Signers' Convention proper opened the following day at Mt. Olivet Tabernacle Baptist Church. The keynote speaker was the Reverend Bevel, speaking on "The Foundation, Principle, Method, and Goal of the American Revolution." Leading the audience through a guided tour of the ills of the nation in comparison to the promise of the Declaration of Independence, Bevel demonstrated that most of the rights secured to the people by the founding document are in fact not enjoyed. "You must realize that if we don't have these rights, then we do not have a government. . . . And if you don't have government, is it not your duty to institute it? That's not a question of waiting for someone to do it; that's a question that this fourth branch of government has to be activated."

The challenge raised by Reverend Bevel was explored in more detail during afternoon workshops. Over 150 people assembled for discussions of the history and purpose of the Declaration of Independence, much of it refuting the currently fashionable approach of criticizing the Declaration and slandering the Founding Fathers.

Following the workshops, a plenary session was held to pass resolutions, including one declaring that Lyndon LaRouche's imprisonment is a "violation of human rights in what is supposed to be the most humane country in the world," and urging President Clinton to effect his unconditional release.

That evening, an awards ceremony was held to honor leaders of the civil rights movement. Civil rights leader and Schiller Institute vice chairman Amelia Boynton Robinson delivered the keynote address, stressing that we have been put on earth in order to achieve a great purpose.

On Sunday, July 4, churches throughout Philadelphia participated in ceremonies to co-sign the Declaration of Independence. All told, 225 churches in the city participated in organizing for the events, along with 130 schools and 70 organizations, including trade unions and civic groups such as the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People.

All co-signers' signatures were then assembled at the convention's afternoon closing rally, held at Drexel University's playing field.