

Religion

Perspective

Black Christians have lived out their faith by fighting for voting access

By Esau McCaulley

August 20, 2020 at 2:03 p.m. CDT

Some 58 years ago, Fannie Lou Hamer found her way to a mass meeting at William Chapel Missionary Baptist Church in Ruleville, Miss., population 1,902. She was nearing her 45th birthday and had heard something that would change her life and American society.

James Bevel, a preacher affiliated with the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, told the congregation on that night in August 1962 that Black people can't be denied their right to vote.

That sermon, recounted in Charles Marsh's book "[God's Long Summer](#)," began a life of activism rooted in Hamer's faith.

"How can we discern the signs of the times, Bevel asked? How can we not recognize that the hour has arrived for black men and women to claim what is rightfully their own — indeed the right to vote?" Marsh writes of the sermon. "Our demand is that we not ignore the clear signs before our eyes. God's time is upon us; let us not back down from the [challenge](#)."

Fannie Lou Hamer. (Warren Leffler/Library of Congress)

A few weeks later, Hamer and 17 others rode a bus some 24 miles to Indianola, Miss., to register to vote. It took three attempts at literacy tests designed to disenfranchise Blacks and the payment of poll taxes for Hamer to obtain voting rights. As a reward for her efforts, she and her husband were kicked off the plantation where they worked. She faced death threats and endured a severe beating that left her with lasting kidney damage.

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The terror visited upon her did not hinder her activism. Instead, she co-founded the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party and pushed for it to be recognized as the official delegation from Mississippi at the 1964 Democratic National Convention. At her speech before the credentials committee, Hamer asked questions that resonate: "Is this America, the land of the free and the home of the brave, where we have to sleep with our telephones off the hooks because our lives be threatened daily, because we want to live as decent human beings, in America?"

Her words linked voting, the opportunity to make our concerns known, to life. She wanted to know whether America wanted Black people to live and flourish in this country or simply pick its cotton and shuck its corn. Those who look upon what continues to happen to Black people in this country still find ourselves asking, "Is this America?" Is America the place that shoots Black women who were sleeping in their

homes or uses pickup trucks to stalk Black men? How can we vote for hope and against terror except through concrete policies designed to expand Black freedom?

Although her efforts at the 1964 convention were unsuccessful, Hamer dedicated her energy to helping the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference expand voting rights to others. Many voter registration drives such as the one that inspired Hamer occurred in Black churches. Hamer described her activism as rooted in her Christian faith.

After American women obtained the right to vote 100 years ago, many Black Christian women such as Hamer fought against restrictions that kept them from the same voting booths as White women. Much attention has been rightly paid to the late congressman John Lewis for his historic role in voting rights activism, but Americans should also familiarize themselves with Hamer's story.

The fight for voting access is one way that Black Christians have lived out their faith in the public square. But when one constructs a list of issues that religious voters care about, voting rights is not often mentioned.

What does Christianity have to do with voting? A central teaching of Christianity, arising from the Genesis 1:26-28 text that we share with Judaism, states that all people are created in the image of God. We believe that there is no hierarchy of value based on ethnicity, class or gender. Therefore, any laws undergirded by assumptions about human worth are enacted parables that tell a lie about the world that God created.

The job of the Christian is to name those lies for what they are. Restricting voting rights for Black people was rooted in a falsehood about what Black people were. It was a heretical anthropology. The same was true of the limits on the voting rights of women. It was rooted in a lie about what women were, the gifts and abilities that they possessed. More importantly, voting can be an act of neighborly love. In a democratic republic, laws should be a manifestation of the will of the people. Therefore, the Christian who supports policies that do the most to assist in human flourishing is showing a deep concern for others. Voting is not a Christian requirement, but it can be a profoundly Christian act.

Black Christians who are heirs to this legacy have every reason to be concerned about voting access, the right that we have as citizens to make our will known through the electoral process. We have every right to wonder why as many as 1,700 polling places were closed, many in Black and Brown communities, since federal oversight was removed in [2012](#).

We also have the right to question what is going on with the U.S. Postal Service. We should do whatever we can to make sure that we have more than enough funding to cover any added stress on the Postal Service. Given the history of voter suppression in this country, we should have a bias toward access. It should not be difficult to vote. We can also wonder what agenda underlies casting doubt on mail-in ballots, which have never been the cause of fraud sufficient to sway a national [election](#). If we have no data to suggest that the fraud concern is legitimate, then what are we to think about the criticism of mail-in votes? Christians who love their neighbors cannot sit idly when their rights are threatened.

The [coronavirus](#) has changed everything about the American way of living. We have to shop differently, have to educate our children using new methods, and have made adjustments in worshiping communities. Do we really expect the November voting process to remain largely unchanged with the world shifting around us?

I have made it my practice to vote regularly. I voted even when I knew that my preferred candidate had little chance of carrying the day. I did so because my vote mattered to my ancestors. I owed them my vote, my voice and my advocacy. Many Black Christians paid the price in blood, gave their very lives, for the privilege.

The work is not finished. Black churches and other faith-based organizations continue to hold [get-out-the-vote events](#). Members of the clergy work alongside lawyers who are experts in fighting voting suppression. Like the civil rights leaders before them, they are explicitly linking the expansion of voting access to what Christians believe people are. They are not telling people how to vote. They are fighting for the right itself. All those who care about the continuation of our democracy should strive to do the same.

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