

King's daughter ready to assume SCLC helm: Bernice King to be first woman president

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To many, she is simply known as the youngest daughter of Martin Luther King Jr., the five-year-old cuddled in her mother's lap at her father's funeral in 1968.

But Bernice King, nicknamed "Bunny" by her parents, has grown up to become a minister and motivational speaker and, in October, was elected president of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, the civil rights organization her father helped found five decades ago.

"As time passes and there are some successes along the way, I certainly think people will begin to see me in my own right," she said in an interview November 5. "Certainly those that are of the generation behind me, I think, will see me in the context of my own individual self."

King, 46, the first woman president of the SCLC, said she is following not only in the footsteps of her father and brother, Martin Luther King III, who each served as the organization's president, but of her mother, Coretta Scott King, who played a key role in its creation in 1957.

"The organization felt that it, perhaps, was important to have another King at the helm in this time," she said, "to kind of restore the spirit of Dr. King to the organization and to continue the work that he didn't get to finish."

She expects to work with churches, women, youth and the labor movement to engage communities in nonviolent activism.

"We need both the wisdom of the elders, as I say, and we need the strength . . . and the energy of the young," said King, who will be the third youngest member of the board that elected her. "I believe that I've been uniquely positioned because of my journey to bring people together, perhaps, that wouldn't come together, and

certainly it's going to be my agenda to try to do that.”

Morehouse College President Robert Franklin said King, who has divinity and law degrees and contributed to a motivational rap CD, can bridge the divides between the hip-hop generation and more traditional black church culture. He thinks she can also span the gaps between prosperity gospel proponents and those known for the social justice causes of her father.

“She is comfortable in both positions and it would be terrific to see her bring those together in a way that few others have,” said Franklin, an expert on black church issues.

As she prepares to become SCLC president in 2010, King serves as a minister at New Birth Missionary Baptist Church in the Atlanta suburb of Lithonia, where Bishop Eddie Long, known for espousing prosperity gospel and addressing social justice, is the senior pastor. “I expect her to be the spark that will catapult SCLC forward,” Long said in a statement.

The organization has been struggling with internal disputes about finances and leadership. “My commitment . . . is to bring greater visibility and prominence to the organization and an agenda where people can feel comfortable in supporting it,” she said.

Joseph Lowery, who co-founded the SCLC and served as its president for 20 years, has discussed with King what lies ahead for her.

“I raised questions with her about the difficulties they’ve been having, whether she was aware of all of the difficulties,” he said. “But she said that God had called her and, as we say in the wedding ritual . . . what God has put together let not man put asunder. I wish her well. I hope God stays with her.”

Lowery, who has known King all her life, said some have questioned whether she needed more administrative experience, but he considers it a “noble cause” for her to involve more young people and called her a “good preacher.”

Other clergy familiar with King say her theological and legal backgrounds have prepared her for the post. She served as a law clerk under Judge Glenda Hatchett, host of the syndicated “Judge Hatchett” television show.

Her education will serve her well, said Cheryl Townsend Gilkes, a professor of African-American studies at Colby College in Maine: "She's both a minister and a lawyer, so she represents a new generation of highly educated ministers who both bring the church to the larger world and bring certain skills highly valued in the larger world to the church." -*Adelle M. Banks, Religion News Service*