

NAACP figure leads Moral Monday protests

by [Yonat Shimron](#) in the [July 24, 2013](#) issue

The throngs of demonstrators who flock to the grassy knoll outside the North Carolina Statehouse each Monday know the drill. They listen to a fiery speech denouncing the Republican majority's legislative actions. They sing freedom songs and chant civil rights slogans. Then they march two by two into the legislative building to be handcuffed by police and arrested for failing to obey orders to disperse.

Leading them in this weekly rite of nonviolent civil disobedience is William J. Barber II, president of the state's NAACP chapter. Since assuming the chapter presidency eight years ago, he has waged numerous battles challenging local and state governments to extend educational opportunities, broaden the voting base, provide health care and generally do more to lift up the poor.

At a time when the country is becoming less religious and liberal politicians shy away from faith-based rhetoric, this Disciples of Christ minister, who is steeped in the activist traditions of the black church, has emerged as a galvanizing force in North Carolina's pushback against the Republican-dominated legislature.

With his bearlike stature and thundery oratory, he has towered over his secular political counterparts.

Over the course of nearly two months he has prodded 480 North Carolinians to get arrested during "Moral Monday" demonstrations. At the June 24 demonstration, Barber expected nearly 300 more protesters at what is billed "Mass Moral Monday."

"He communicates the message of the South with a power I had heard only in recordings of Dr. Martin Luther King," said Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove, a Christian writer and activist in Durham who has known the preacher since he was in high school.

With Barber steering the opposition to cuts in unemployment benefits, health-care funding, voting rights and environmental regulations, the movement has taken on the feel of a church revival. Each demonstration begins with a call to join hands and pray. Barber's speech is inflected with biblical references to Pharaoh, Goliath, good and evil. Then there are the folksy civil rights refrains: "Woke up this morning with my mind set on justice" and "Ain't gonna let nobody turn me around."

With his face in the newspapers and on TV, the 49-year-old Barber has become as well known as Gov. Pat McCrory and Republican leaders of the House and Senate.

To outsiders, North Carolina is often indistinguishable from a host of southern states with equally conservative social and fiscal agendas. But in fact it has long been a moderate state. Democrats controlled the governor's office for 20 years and, until last year, had controlled at least one body of the legislature since the 1800s.

No one knows this better than Barber, an avid student of the state's history. Barber talks incessantly of his vision for "fusion politics" modeled after a period in the late 19th century when the state's Populist and Republican parties, blacks and whites, joined forces to govern the state.

He points out he's not wedded to the Democratic Party but rather to coalitions that are willing to fight for just causes. "Narrow-minded, isolated agendas aren't going to hold themselves up as meaningful in the changing demographics of our country," he said. "A regressive agenda doesn't fit."

To that end, he rises early each day and spends countless hours crisscrossing the state in a black GMC Yukon, meeting with various constituencies and building an ever-growing coalition.

On a typical day, after speaking to a conference of United Church of Christ ministers, he climbs into his car, gets on his cell phone and joins a conference call with ministers, rabbis and academics. By 10 p.m., he sets off for the 90-minute commute back to Goldsboro where he lives with his wife and five children.

The feverish activism is something he learned from his father. Barber was born in Indianapolis on August 30, 1963—two days after Martin Luther King Jr. delivered his "I Have a Dream" speech from the steps of the Lincoln Memorial. His father, a minister and an activist, was so swept up by the civil rights movement he decided to move his family back to North Carolina and enroll his only son in a segregated

school.

North Carolina's public schools began to desegregate in the early 1970s, and Barber's parents helped lead the charge.

Barber picked up the mantle early. He was elected president of the NAACP's youth council at age 15, president of his high school's student body at 17, and student government president at North Carolina Central University at 19.

After completing a master's at Duke Divinity School, he settled into the life of a pastor but very quickly found himself fighting on behalf of his congregants for clean water or the right of labor groups to organize.

All that activism hasn't won him many friends among Republicans in Raleigh, some of whom have dubbed the protests "Moron Mondays" and labeled the demonstrators "mostly white, angry, aged, former hippies."

"They're counterproductive," said Rep. Craig Horn, a Republican who represents Union County outside Charlotte, referring to the demonstrations. "I appreciate the concerns many people are voicing and the desire to be heard on a number of issues. But the way they're going about it serves no good purpose. It's all show and no go."

There's no question Barber is a polarizing figure to some, and that may be the reason there haven't been any serious face-to-face conversations between the lawmakers and the demonstrators.

"I think intelligent black men scare people," said Nancy Petty, pastor of Raleigh's Pullen Memorial Baptist Church, a liberal congregation active on many social justice issues.

Barber, too, may recognize there's little maneuvering space with the current legislature. He's focused on legal challenges and voter registration drives intended to stop the government's actions in its tracks.

And then there are the arrests. On Monday morning, Barber was in court to challenge them on constitutional grounds. But on Monday night, many will proudly wear a gray and white pin. It reads: "I went to jail with Rev. Barber." —RNS

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