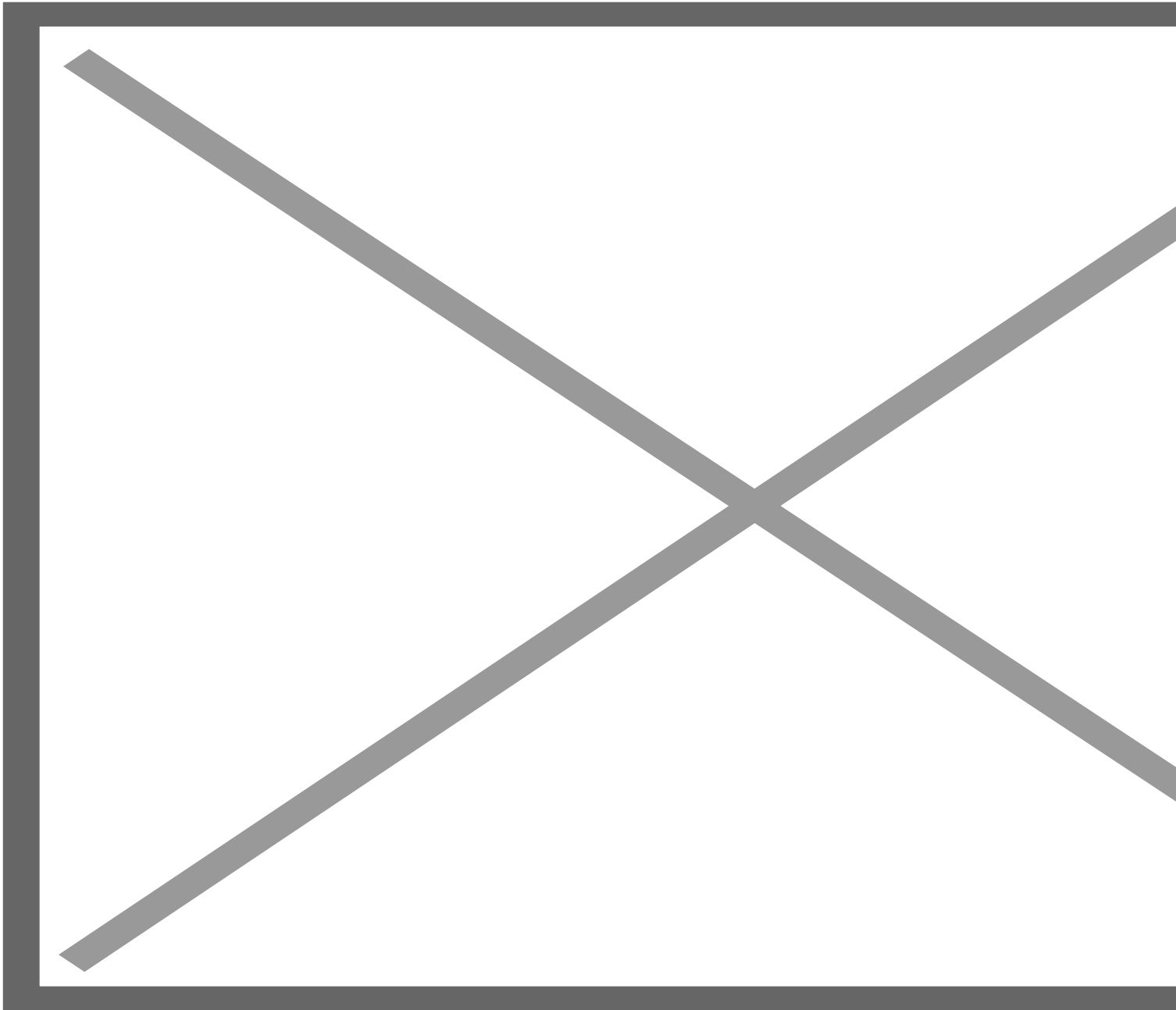


March on Washington renews focus on voting rights

by [Adelle M. Banks](#)

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Demonstrators listen to speakers during the March on Washington, near the Lincoln Memorial, August 28, in Washington, DC. (RNS photo/Adelle M. Banks)

Thousands of people gathered before the Lincoln Memorial on the 63rd anniversary of the March on Washington for a program on August 28 bookended by prayers and focused on voting rights.

The son of Martin Luther King Jr., who that day more than six decades before delivered his “I Have a Dream” speech, decried the state of voting rights in the United States, referring to the Supreme Court’s gutting of the landmark 1965 Voting Rights Act earlier this year.

“The fact that we still have to fight to maintain and renew voting rights in this country is beyond abysmal and a truly national disgrace,” Martin Luther King III said. “If some don’t change their ways, it won’t be long before we all experience the discomfort of the divine judgment that God has promised.”

Al Sharpton, president of the National Action Network civil rights organization, said it was time to organize for voting rights on a new level.

“We must turn this country upside down with those elected officials that are taking, for us, the right to vote,” he said, drawing cheers. “The [Callais decision](#) by the Supreme Court shot a bullet in the heart of voting rights, but they don’t understand we’re not going back. We will not let them turn back the hands of time.”

Sharpton’s network and the younger King’s [Drum Major Institute](#), two organizations focused on social justice, were joined at the event by leaders of religious, political, labor, and student organizations who took the stage in Lincoln’s shadow over the course of several hours.

Jonah Dov Pesner, the director of the Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism, blew a shofar, a traditional Jewish instrument made from a ram’s horn, before making his remarks.

Just as the shofar blast was used thousands of years ago as ancient Hebrew people worked to escape Egyptian slavery, Pesner said it is time to “wake up” to achieve “a robust, multiracial, inclusive democracy in which every voice is heard because every vote is counted.”

Rallying the audience, as some stood in the hot sun beside a covered Reflecting Pool while others crowded in shadier spots near trees farther away, he asked: “Some people want some people not to vote. Are we going to stand for that?”

“No!” came the response.

Some in the crowd, which was sometimes quiet and sometimes boisterous, seemed ready to take home the lessons of the day to share with others. Gregory Ross, pastor at Philadelphia’s Thankful Baptist Church was taking notes.

“I’ve never missed a vote since the age of 18,” he said, expressing his hope that his congregation and community will take the upcoming election more seriously when he shares what he heard at the march. “I believe if you promote positive information, it will create positive actions.”

Early in the program, a multi-faith set of prayers were uttered by Christian and Muslim speakers before dozens of speeches that often focused on voting and the upcoming midterm election, but also addressed other issues, including support for affordable healthcare and for diversity, equity, and inclusion.

Before marching to the Martin Luther King Jr. Memorial with leaders like actor and director Spike Lee and Congress of National Black Churches Chairman W. Franklyn Richardson, the crowd heard from several politicians. These included Congressional Black Caucus Chair Yvette Clarke, D-New York, Vermont Independent Senator Bernie Sanders and Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, D-New York. Other speakers included Yusef Jackson, the son of the late Jesse Jackson who succeeded his father as the head of the Rainbow Push Coalition.

After the speeches, a chanting, drumming crowd marched from the Lincoln Memorial to the King Memorial.

Before they stepped off, Bishop Leah Daughtry, national presiding prelate of the House of the Lord Churches, gave a closing prayer, acknowledging portions of the Voting Rights Act being cut.

“Our votes have been challenged. Our rights have been trodden. Our humanity has been questioned,” prayed Daughtry, who has twiced served as the CEO of the Democratic National Committee. “But Lord, you did not raise up a movement to depend on nine votes in a marble building. You raised up a people. And so, we do not send these marchers out in mourning. We send them out in commission to serve the least, the last and the lost.”
—Religion News Service