

## Keynote Speech

*by The Reverend Dr. Dorothy Sanders Wells*

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Delivered at MIFA's Golden Gala on October 11, 2018



I am so grateful to be here this evening, celebrating the milestone of MIFA's 50th anniversary, and I thank you all for sharing this evening with us. Serving as MIFA's board chair is indeed one of the greatest honors of my life. This is an organization that I have admired for years—and I'm thrilled to be even a small part of what MIFA does to serve vulnerable seniors and families in our community.

Tonight is truly a night to celebrate all that MIFA is and has been in this community for the past 50 years. From our Meals on Wheels program, which provided more than half a million meals to over 3,500 seniors in our last fiscal year, to our Emergency Services program, which responds to more than 3,500 requests for utility, rent and mortgage assistance, to a senior companions program, in which volunteers logged more than 58,000 hours helping seniors in their homes and in care facilities continue to live independent lives, to a Rapid Rehousing program, which connected more than 250 families with permanent housing after periods of being without shelter, to the more than 2,000 volunteers who, together with our amazing staff, make it all happen each and every day. We bring Memphians together every single day, to serve and to be served. I could utilize this time tonight to thank again all of the people who have made these 50 years of MIFA possible—from our founders, to our first VISTA volunteers, to everyone who gives even one dollar to continue our important work, to every person who has ever delivered a meal.

But what I really want to do is to talk about 1968—and the climate that gave rise to MIFA. What I really want to share with you is what it means to live with courage and faith, even in the midst of darkness, doubt, and despair.

1968 was a year of chaos and turmoil in our nation: On April 4, Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. would be assassinated in Memphis, after coming here in response to a Sanitation Workers' strike that helped put a human face on segregation and poverty. Following Dr. King's death, riots broke out in more than 100 cities, leaving 39 people dead, more than 2,600 injured and over 21,000 arrested. Just two months later, Sen. Robert Kennedy would be assassinated in Los Angeles, while campaigning for the Presidency. Growing dissatisfaction around the escalating conflict in Vietnam led to an increasing number of protests. Less than two weeks after Robert Kennedy's death, the Poor People's Campaign, envisioned by Dr. King to bring to light the plight of the poor of all races, brought 50,000 to a rally in Washington, D.C. The times were explosive.

But in the midst of explosive times in our nation, here in Memphis, people dared to live courageously.

It was in the midst of the Sanitation Workers' strike that five Episcopal businessmen—Fred Beason, Charles Crump, John T. Fisher, Joe Orgill, John Salmon—representing three local parish churches—came together in a courageous act that helped to define everything that is good in Memphis. What brought them together was the strike, and their collective sense as businessmen in Memphis that they needed to “do something” to save their city. The group decided to call on Mayor Loeb—with whom they

apparently were casually acquainted because his wife worshipped at St. John's Episcopal Church—to ask him to bring some resolution to the strike. They weren't able to persuade him, and, realizing that they hadn't heard the other side of the story, decided to meet with the workers themselves. They were struck by the fact that they were the only white people at Centenary Methodist Church, seeking audience with none other than Reverend James Lawson, confidant to the workers, student of nonviolence and advisor to Reverend Dr. King. In that meeting, they learned the sanitation workers' three demands: better pay, a place to shower at the end of a long day, and the ability to work in the mechanics' shop on rainy days. Reverend James Lawson later would confirm that these men were the only white people to come to meet with him and the striking workers. The meeting changed their hearts; for the first time, they understood what the striking workers wanted and the reasonableness of their demands. Their efforts would not go unanswered: Fred Beason was attacked—stabbed—in his home, with his wife and daughters present; Joe Orgill's family business suffered, when clients stopped paying bills; John T. Fisher's auto dealership suffered, when customers learned that his restrooms had been desegregated. These men expressed no regrets for the having stepped forward in courage at a time when courageous leadership was needed.

And as these businessmen stepped forward to do what they could, an interfaith group of 250 clergy, led by Dean William Dimmick of St. Mary's Episcopal Cathedral, carrying the Cathedral's procession cross, and Rabbi James Wax of Temple Israel also called on Mayor Loeb. Rabbi Wax spoke for the group, demanding that Mayor Loeb bring to an end a strike which had been borne out of injustice and inhumanity. One look at a photograph captured as this clergy group met with Mayor Loeb, and anyone can see the fire in the eyes of Rabbi Wax as he spoke. For his part, in boldly carrying the Cathedral's procession cross to Mayor Loeb's office, Dean Dimmick also suffered.

But determination kept them going. Rabbi Wax, Dean Dimmick, John T. Fisher, and 27 other clergy and committed Memphians would come together on September 15, 1968, gathering for a conference focused on creating an interfaith ministry for the urban poor. On that day, MIFA was born. To be certain, intentionally walking together and crossing racial and religious boundary lines would prove difficult; but fifty years later, we are together and we bring together hands and hearts in our community to make a difference in the lives of our most vulnerable citizens.

Memphis is a better place because of the Episcopal Five, because of Dean Dimmick, because of Rabbi Wax, because of MIFA.

But in 2018, at a time when unity, when civil discourse, when courtesy, when compassion, seem to be so very much needed in our nation's dialogue, at a time when our nation seems nearly as divided as it was in 1968, from where does the next act of courage come?

In his last sermon, delivered here in Memphis at Mason Temple on April 3, 1968, Dr. King spoke of living with a dangerous unselfishness, in which our first question is not what becomes of us, but rather what will happen to our neighbors in need around us if we don't step in—to work, to care, to serve.

I am grateful to have learned many lessons about courage, about compassion, about serving, about living with that dangerous unselfishness, as a very young child. I guess I can say that I have been involved in serving meals on wheels most of my life—well, more accurately, I'd have to say, meals on heels: When I was a very young child, I

spent a lot of time with my great aunt, my grandmother's sister. Aunt Ella began each day checking on her neighbors and on the shut-in from her church. From her morning phone calls, she was able to determine who was most in need of a hot meal and a touch of her genuine love and affection that day. I would occupy myself with dolls or coloring while she cooked, and then the two of us would take off, hand in hand, walking—hence, meals on heels—to deliver that hot, home cooked lunch.

Mrs. Jones, who lived on Chinquapin Street, was the farthest away, and my three-year-old legs scarcely felt that I could keep up. But we would deliver that hot meal, and Aunt Ella, as she did on all of her visits, recited Psalm 23, prayed the Lord's Prayer, and sang her favorite hymn, "Sweet Hour of Prayer." Aunt Ella was – and still is – my hero. Although she had precious little in terms of her own resources, she was generous—perhaps to a fault—in sharing with others, and she taught everyone around her what it means to serve. She lived with thanksgiving, with a generous heart, with a sense of holy purpose, with a heart for putting the needs of others before her own, with confidence and courage, up until her death at age 100.

Now, in 2018, as we celebrate our jubilee year, a time of renewal and recommitment to the work that we do, I pray for our community—I pray for all of our children—to grow up learning the kind of dangerous unselfishness about which Dr. King spoke, the kind of dangerous unselfishness that those who walked before us in Memphis in 1968 knew and lived out. I pray for us all to stand together with courageous hearts and the sense of the same holy purpose that brought Memphians together—across all of our human-made boundaries – in 1968. I pray for a renewal of our mission—to come together to serve the most vulnerable among us, and to continue to model for our community, our nation and our world true respect, true dignity and true love for all people.

Thank you all so much for sharing this evening with us.



