

about...time

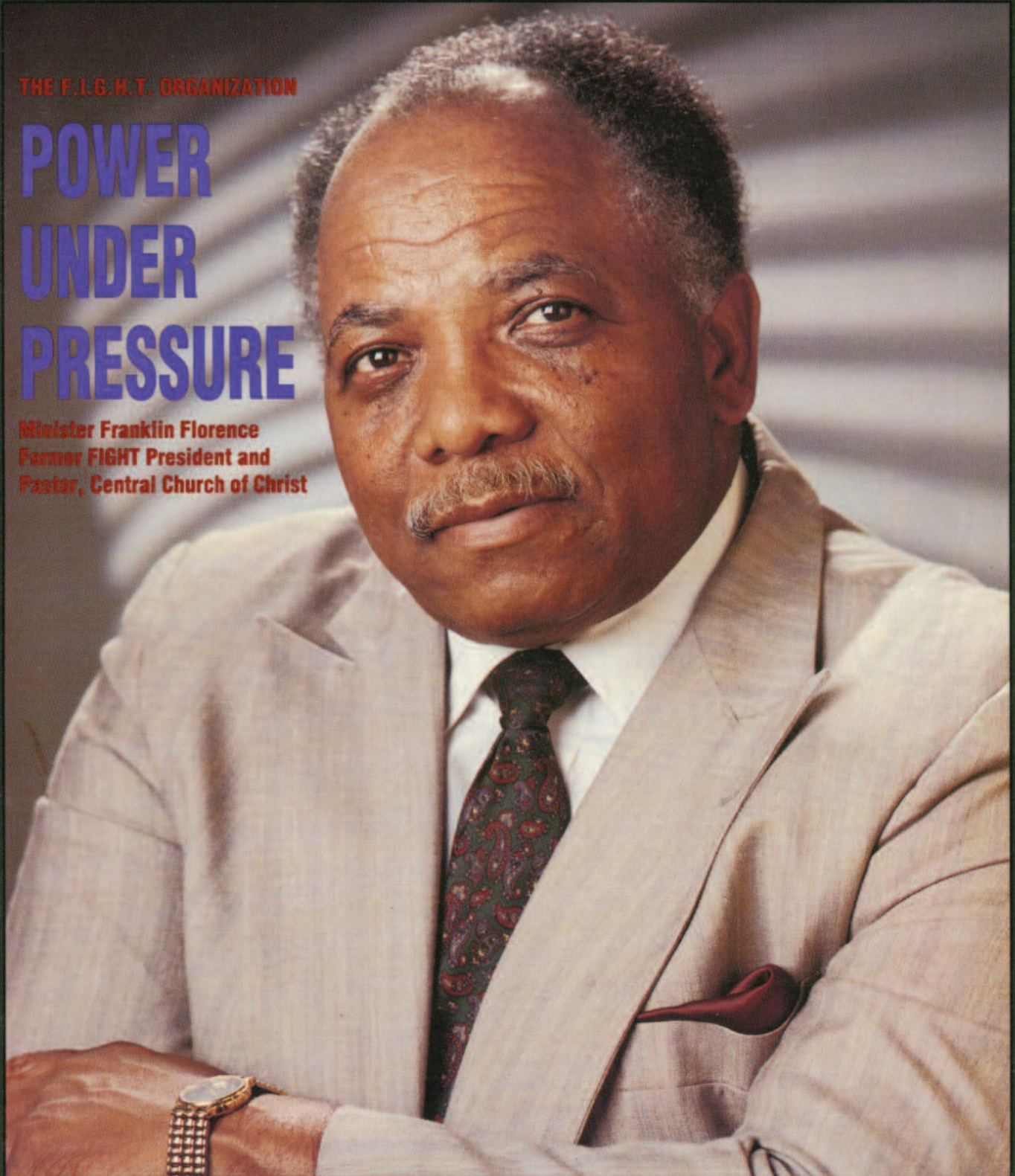
SEPTEMBER, 1990

REPRINT OF COVER ARTICLE, PARTS 1 & 2, SEPT. - OCT. 1990
Interview with Minister Franklin Florence

THE F.I.C.H.T. ORGANIZATION

POWER UNDER PRESSURE

Minister Franklin Florence
Former FIGHT President and
Pastor, Central Church of Christ



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FEATURES

THE F.I.G.H.T. ORGANIZATION

Power Under Pressure

By Carolyn S. Blount

PART 1 SEPT 1990 PP 8-12

PART 2 OCT 1990 PP 22-26



COVER

Despite the nationwide publicity given the FIGHT organization's confrontation with Eastman Kodak Company, Minister Franklin Florence says the greatest achievement of the FIGHT Organization during his leadership was that "it made its people stand tall and feel secure within their own community... Everybody was FIGHT, you know." Cover photo by Emmanuel K. Dokyi. Story on page 8.



Since **about...time** published this interview in 1990, the Rochester area recently recognized the Civil Rights Legacy of Minister Franklin Florence with a mural at East High School, naming of the "Minister Franklin D. Florence Civil Rights Heritage Site at Baden Park," and installation of his Civil Rights Banner along the Joseph Ave. Heritage Trail.

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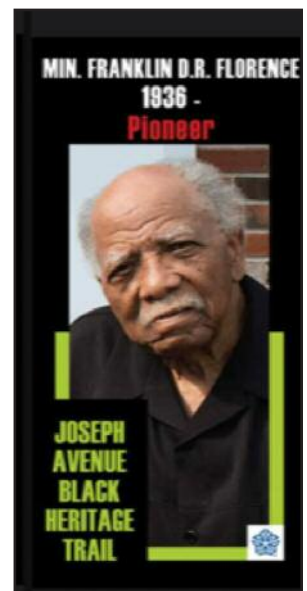
Community Builder and Activist

Jacqueline Sprague, Consultant

Expanding Organization Capabilities

Through System Approaches

Spraguejacqueline@yahoo.com



A Spirit of Community

If real leadership is a great and sustaining crusade for humanity, then it must represent an unselfish and relentless search for truth. This is not as difficult a task as it may seem.

It is true that when some people see obstacles, they are not optimistic about turning them around. This reaction is a manifestation of an oppressed people. However, there are always others who present no alibi and throw off the shackles of oppression to confront problems head-on as a necessary step for solving them. Within local communities across the nation, we continue to find leadership that points the way to a greater public awareness of and responsiveness to human needs.

Sometimes when individuals and organizations take on tasks to help improve our communities, it may be necessary to remember Einstein's theory at work. You don't really need legions of people to accomplish goals, what you really need is a critical mass, a small and dedicated core, to bring about positive change.

In the story on *Extraordinary Efforts*, we see the energetic determination of individuals gathering in a "critical mass" of volunteers to establish needed community services. Shirley Wilmoth has initiated a support group for grandparents who have had to resume their role of child rearing for the children of their children. Sister Mary Benjamin has taken on the task of providing young women with alternatives to prostitution, while Rosa Wims has directed her energies to provide an intense program of preventive health and food services in the heart of the southwest section of the city. These ladies did not sit back and criticize what they thought wasn't being done, nor did they wait for someone else to do the job. Instead, they took the burden of responsibility upon themselves to confront the problems at hand.

A generation of young adults who are now "twenty-something and thirty-something" are *Laying The Myth To Rest* that they represent a lost generation caught up in a cycle of self-interest. Instead, they are blessed with a certain "spirit of community" that impels each person to care about others. It is good to know the African American community is continuing to develop its own advocates and venerable warriors that have been such a great part of our heritage.

Sometimes it is also necessary to re-examine our history and take advantage of hindsight to truly understand how our successes and/or failures have been shaped by forces that have merged at a particular time and place. *Power Under Pressure* examines a time frame in the civil rights movement when the F.I.G.H.T. (Freedom, Integrity, God, Honor and Truth) organization was shaking up the traditional power structure in Rochester, New York. This story is being presented in two parts, so we will have a better understanding of local and national trends impacting on the organization and its leadership.

Recent incidents of racial bigotry, both subtle and direct, have created a renewed cry from the African American community for leadership from organizations that have been standard bearers in the struggle for civil rights. Such is the case with the revitalization of the Rochester branch of the NAACP.

Another example of emerging leadership can be seen in the Committee for BET (Black Entertainment Television), which has been formed to protest the overall reduction in daily transmission of BET programming in the Monroe County area serviced by Greater Rochester Cablevision (GRC). BET offers a wide array of programming geared to the African American audience, including documentaries, editorial talk shows, news, sports, situation comedies, inspirational programming and music videos. However, in some areas of the county BET programming has been reduced to one hour per day. Sometimes hitting the bottom can be the first step toward recovery.

In a letter to inform the community about this turn of events, the Committee for BET says: "As members of the black community, we must accept responsibility to protect and expand those aspects of daily life that enlighten, encourage and uplift us." They are asking for community involvement and support, to help achieve a goal of 24-hour, 7-day-a-week access to BET. To add your support to the committee's efforts, call 716-427-1336.

Let us keep the spirit of community alive.



James M. Blount, Publisher

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POWER UNDER PRESSURE

By Carolyn S. Blount

Patience is a trait acquired through experience. However, it is not something that Minister Franklin Florence, pastor of the Central Church of Christ, claims to have mastered during the time of his presidency of the F.I.G.H.T. Organization in Rochester, New York, one of many local activist groups which made up the civil rights movement of the 1960s.

FIGHT was formed out the "stirred embers" of the Rochester riot of July 24-26, 1964, during a time when there was a real strife and rift between the hand picked leaders acceptable to the white community and what would be called the "people's leaders." Even within the church community, a new emerging order was challenging the church to get out and do the work. That's how Minister Florence became the designated spokesperson for a very important period in Rochester's history.

When there is a perceived vacuum in leadership, it doesn't stay a vacuum long, it fills itself. All over the country the national civil rights movement was being propelled by local actions that caused new personalities to emerge through a collective kind of appointment.

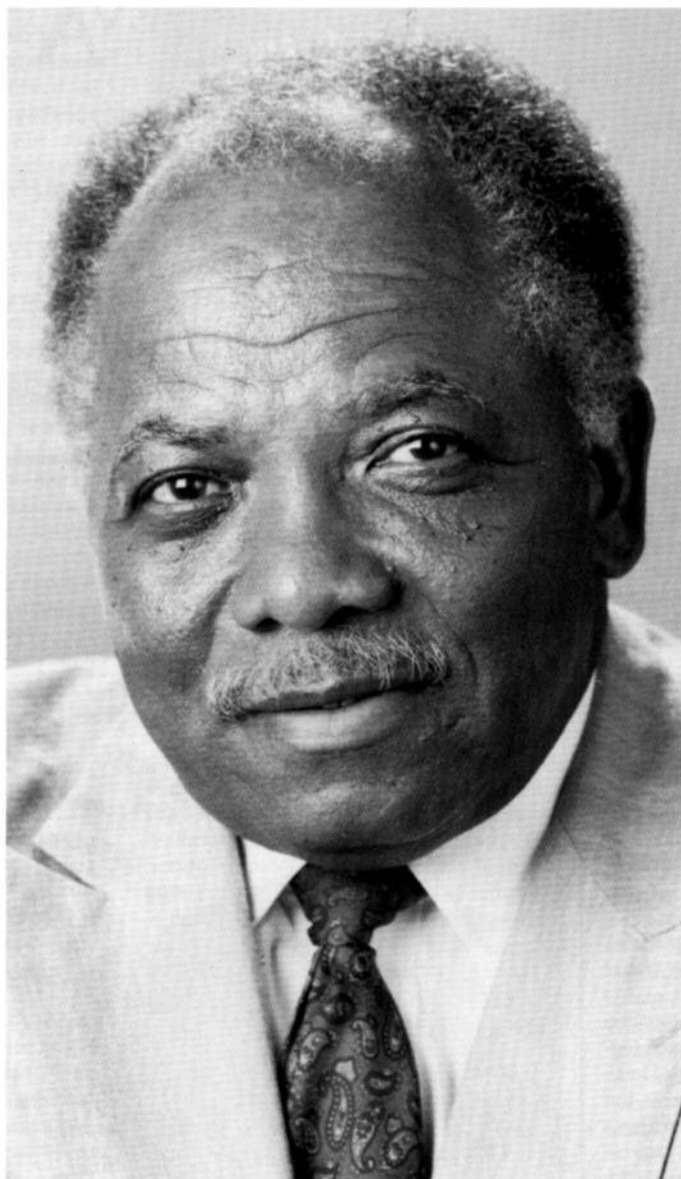
The flames in Rochester became the catalyst for riots that followed in Harlem, Watts, Detroit, Philadelphia, Atlanta and other cities. These "legal rebellions," Florence says, were an expression of the seething anger among the masses of African Americans who were full of indignation and wanted jobs, decent housing and quality schools for their children.

"They didn't feel they were properly represented and didn't feel they had a stake in the community, so they spoke for themselves. As always, the poor were the ones to give the signal. They were the ones because they didn't have anything, and therefore had nothing to lose."

He says it's important to understand that the riots forever changed America, just as re-

cent events are transforming Eastern Europe and the Middle East. Change requires patience.

"Patience was something we were trying to acquire. I had to be disciplined in the organization to learn how to handle anger," Minister Florence remembers, "not so much when it's hot, but when it's cold. Cold anger is power under pressure. It's what the Lord called 'meekness' in the *Sermon on the Mount*. You know the Greek term for meekness is 'power under pressure'—it's under control," he explains.



"Hot anger is that anger that causes one to act prematurely without thinking, without direction. It's unloading one's temperamental pressure at the moment. *Cold anger* is the kind the Orientals and the African chiefs had when they could look at you and smile and be ready to snatch your head, but you didn't know it."

The FIGHT organization would grow into an amalgamation of over 200 church, civic, social and fraternal groups within the African American community. As neighborhood people came together around the issues, the organization was on the cutting edge of the police question, urban renewal, neighborhood redlining, and education, as well as employment, job training and business development issues.

One of the most highly publicized issues was FIGHT's confrontation with the Eastman Kodak Company over hiring practices. This action could be compared in intensity with the Montgomery Improvement Association and its bus boycott that propelled Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. to the national forefront of the Civil Rights Movement.

Minister Franklin D.R. Florence, pastor of Central Church of Christ in Rochester, NY, headed the FIGHT organization during the height of the Civil Rights era. "Everybody had a voice. FIGHT was empowering people. It was a people's organization, not a single personality."

"The greatest achievement of the FIGHT organization was that it made its people stand tall and feel secure in their own community," Florence says. "At that time, you got strength from people as you walked down Pennsylvania Avenue, Baden Street, Ward Street, Clarissa Street, etc., when they would say, 'Hey FIGHT!' Everybody was FIGHT, you know. You lost your own identity into the community. All of us felt a sense of security with one another."

During the first week in August, members of Minister Florence's congregation at the Central Church of Christ, as well as people from the community, came to a series of events paying tribute to his leadership. Perhaps Andrew Langston, owner of WDKX-FM Radio Station, best summarized the thoughts of those who participated. "All too often we forget those who have gone before us to smooth the path and open the doors. This entire community has benefitted from Minister Florence's sacrifices. Many of us have profited financially from his sacrifices and contributions. We need to do something for this man who has done so much and asked so little of us in return."

By understanding this time in history, adults and children will understand their responsibility to prepare themselves to safeguard the future for other generations to come.

But first, let's go back to Florence's own youth to see the forces influencing his life and preparing him as "a man for the times."

Franklin Delano Roosevelt Florence was born in Miami, Florida, the youngest of four children. His parents made their home on Lang Street between Third and Fourth Avenues, just a stone's throw from the heart of the downtown section. His father, an associate minister in the Church of Christ reformation, worked for the railroad and also had his own taxi and ice business. His mother worked for one of the editors of the *Miami Herald*.

The black community was like one big family, Florence says, recalling the neighborhood people. There was Rev. Evans, a very educated man who pastored Mt. Zion Baptist Church. "He lived in a large parsonage, with fruit trees in his back yard. He took a real interest in our neighborhood and was the voice of our community."

Down the street was a gentleman named Mr. Parker, who ran a drug store. He had a lot of influence on young people who came to buy ice cream at his gathering place. "We played football in the street in front of our homes, and after we finished playing ball, we would either end up on Pastor Evans' huge front porch or in the shade eating the fruit. Or, once we'd clean up, we might go across the street to Mr. Parker's drug store and get a sundae."

Next door to Mr. Parker was Dr. Lowery and his family. Another doctor lived on Eighth Street. His daughter married Sugar Ray Robinson. Florence also remembers when big name entertainers like Cab Calloway and Billy Eckstine came to the neighborhood. "When black entertainers finished working Miami Beach with the rich folk, they would come over to Second Avenue to perform for the blacks and lay over for the night."

As a youngster, Florence worked in Miami Beach. "You had to have a green card with your name and address, to work over in Miami Beach. They would punch the time in and the time out as you went over the bridge. That's where all the good jobs were at the time. To bring about economic deprivation, they could deny you a green card."

When the churches brought great race leaders like Mary McLeod Bethune to speak, the neighborhood children were required to go. "The adults made that a part of our activity. The leaders talked about race and education, and spoke to issues that affected our situation. They talked about caring about one another. We revered them."

"We had a principal at Booker T. Washington High School whose name was Professor Williams. He was like a father to everybody and he was also a strong disciplinarian. You didn't skip class. He didn't allow us to fail. He didn't allow us to run with wrong crowd. He knew all the students and their parents."

"We had our own newspaper, the *Miami Times*, which is still operating in the black community. You didn't get any news out of the *Herald*. If you wanted to know what was happening in black minds, you had to take the *Miami Times* and that was in everybody's home. You knew the editor, he lived on Eighth Street."

"In that neighborhood, everybody's parents had a relationship with the children. If your parents were out working, Mrs. Jones or Mrs. Williams kept watch over the children. One of the worse beatings I remember getting was from Mrs. Williams, whom we called 'Grandma' Williams," Florence recalls. "After school, I would have to report to her before I went home. She didn't work outside the home, she took in laundry. The senior citizens also gave our birthday parties."

Adults in the neighborhood worked with the youth to make sure they understood what was going on around them. They wanted the youth to see black adults taking the lead. "Mr. Parker held a neighborhood meeting to complain about the high prices and low quality of food offered by the merchants. He, Rev. Evans and Dr. Lowery organized people to boycott Mr. Sugarman's shop. Then they organized young people to go to the public market to help load greens and other food on a truck to bring back to the neighborhood. When we finished unloading, Mr. Parker would buy us ice cream and take us to the park."

"Our teachers gave insight on who we were as a people, even at the kindergarten level, so there was never this thing that you need to find your self-worth and value by sitting next to white people. Everything we admired and wanted to be was in our neighborhood. We saw excellence in our doctors, lawyers, teachers, businesses... we didn't have to look outside. One of the curses of television, is that it takes you away from what's right among you."

"All of us grew up with a real sense of awareness of who we were and what it was going to take to shake off oppression. One of the reasons we were so pro black was because we had the economic, religious, communication and educational base right there in the neighborhood!"

The church provided another kind of influence for Florence. Even before he was born, his mother was telling everybody she was carrying her Church of Christ preacher. "She kept that before me all the time and always talked about the good that kind of service would be to people. She would go out of her way to do things for others."

Sometimes the children felt she was letting people walk over her, such as when she was ordered out of her seat at the back of a crowded bus so a white man could sit down.

"My uncle who lived with us helped us understand my mother's attitude. She was the type of person who literally thought that if you did her wrong, she would not retaliate, but leave that up to a higher power. But people on my daddy's side didn't believe that, and I think I took after them. He was a church man and would not provoke an issue. But you couldn't lay your hands on him, you couldn't be disrespectful to his wife, you couldn't threaten his family while he lived." Florence was three when his father died.

Marshal Keeble, president of Nashville Christian Institute convinced Florence to come to NCI for high school and study for the ministry. "Keeble was very influential and people looked up to him. He was the guy that baptized my father. My home was kind of like the prophets' home. When any of the preachers in our reformation would come into the community, they stayed with us."

Florence enrolled in the Nashville, Tennessee school. Most of the males in his class wanted to be ministers in the Church of Christ, and they wanted to attend David Lipscomb College which was also in Nashville. "I was class president and I wrote a letter to the president of Lipscomb, saying we wanted to attend a college of our own faith, and we had already made an agreement to stay in our dormitories at NCI while attending Lipscomb. The president, Dr. Athens Clay Pullus, wrote me back saying that as long as he was president of that school, no Negro would ever attend David Lipscomb College!"

"When our high school held its lectureship where the reformation preachers would come from all over the country to instruct and lecture, Pullus was always on the program. So our class sent him a letter and told him he was not welcomed on our campus because of his segregationist views. When we were told he was coming anyway, I organized and led a boycott that kept the school shut down for two weeks." Attempts to expel the students were countered by NCI's dean of students.

"I had to travel over 3,000 miles away from home to go to college

because a predominantly white Christian college, of the same faith, refused me!" Florence graduated from Pepperdine University in California, with a major in religion and political science.

After the courts mandated integration of schools that received government grants, Lipscomb changed its policies. "These so called white born again Christians do all this Bible quoting, but their hearts are not in it. You know the devil quoted the scripture. I'm like the Lord, let your fruits speak for you."

Florence presented his first sermon in Nashville. The title was "God Is Looking For A Man."

As an adult, he returned to Nashville many times, organizing marches and boycotts. That's where he first met Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., when King was speaking at Fisk University. Florence also met other confidants of King, such as Andy Young, Wyatt T. Walker and Jesse Jackson. These relationships continue today.

Crossing denominational lines was unheard of in Florence's reformation during that time. However, he says the struggle really was a movement through the churches. "Everything that Jesus did, he did in the streets and in the open. So when I talk about the church, I don't see it as meeting once a week within four walls and singing and praying and going home. I have always had the idea that the church had a role to make the world and community better."

After graduating from Pepperdine University, Florence pastored at the Eighteenth Street Church of Christ in West Palm Beach, Florida, serving for six years. Alonzo Rose who was preaching in Atlanta, Georgia, recommended that Florence accept the challenge as a full time minister in Rochester, NY. One of his adopted sisters, Althea Lofton, wife of Josh Lofton, had moved to Rochester and also encouraged him to come. (His mother adopted three other children after her husband died.)

His new church home, Reynolds Street Church of Christ, provided freedom to do some community work. "When I came the church was being supported by a group of white people, and I suggested that we should do that for ourselves. I preferred taking less money to be self-determined."

Florence worked in an area where many other black professionals had started before, as a janitor, in this case with Sibley's department store. The job helped supplement his \$67 a week salary, which wasn't bad because the church provided a parsonage and utilities.

There were lively discussions in Little Jake's and Ray Daniels' barber shops, which represented the "meeting places" on the east and west side of town, respectively. "Everybody—the intellectuals, the poor, the working class—used to meet in the barber shop and argue everything—religion, philosophy, history, politics. You'd go there on Saturday morning and you didn't leave until Saturday evening. You would get so wound up discussing black issues."

Clarissa Street and Jefferson Avenue represented the community heartbeat on the westside, while Joseph Avenue and North Street were comparative areas on the eastside. After the riots, urban renewal came along to tore the life out of these communities.

On the eastside of town, Florence met a long-time community activist, Mildred Johnson, who immediately challenged the newcomer to do something to help the community. "She told me about the NAACP chapter. In the South, the NAACP was made up of activists on the cutting edge of every issue. They were not the philosophers they came to be in the North."

Florence became a vice president during the time when the Rochester NAACP branch had researched the issue of defacto school segregation and was ready to file a lawsuit. Nobody in Rochester would take the case, so it was filed through the state NAACP.

Similar documentation was developed to prove housing discrimination and was brought to the NAACP board for action. One of the documented absentee slum landlords had been supporting the branch financially, and a white lawyer stood up and said, "You can't file that because he's my friend and that's where I go to get money to help us pay the rent, lights, and utilities."

When the branch backed off the issue, those who had argued for the suit became disillusioned and left the NAACP, marking the last real surge of NAACP activism in Rochester. A new revival of the

NAACP branch is being attempted this year (see page 13).

In towns and cities across the nation, incidents that ignited the riots almost always resulted from a police action, and Rochester was no exception. When the Rochester police invaded a Muslim Mosque, Florence was among the local leaders calling the police "Nazi Stormtroopers." He warned the religious community that "it could be your church or my church tomorrow. The next Sunday at 11:00, a policeman walked into a black church in the Third Ward with his gun on and brought along his dog. That's when we told the police to get the dogs off the streets.

"You also had people on City Council making very racist and explosive statements about black people. There was another incident in one of the factories and others in the schools. The police force



Special guests at the Central Church of Christ 20th Anniversary Banquet included (l-r): Andrew Langston, WDKX Radio Station (master of ceremonies); Percy Sutton, owner of radio and cable companies and Managing General Partner of the Apollo Theatre (guest speaker); and Minister Franklin Florence (honoree).

was completely out of control and was viewed as one of the worse in the North, relative to race relations. It's always a minority, but there were about four policemen in this town that made a reputation of beating blacks. They were sadist, starting at 6:00 on Friday right through Saturday night!"

After an incident when the police brutalized Rufus Fairwell who was closing up a service station where he worked, the black community forced the city to meet its demands for a police review commission, the first in the United States. In another case involving A.C. White—"a community drunk who wouldn't hurt a soul"—the police beat him to within an inch of his life and tried to disguise it, Florence recalls.

Minister Florence and Ray Daniels went to Strong Hospital to check on A.C. White, and carried a camera to document what they saw. Then a meeting was called at Florence's church and the church was packed with people seething with anger and wanting to take some action.

"Everyone knew it would only take a small incident to ignite the powderkeg that was about to explode," he says. Even some powerful decision-makers in the industrial community took notice and held a meeting with Minister Florence, Rev. Andrew Gibson, Connie Mitchell, and three PhD chemists who were community activists, William Knox, Walter Cooper and William Lee, to find out what could be done.

Florence credits Rev. Gibson of Memorial A.M.E. Zion Church with being "somebody who was always there during the times of FIGHT and our preparation for that organization." Connie Mitchell was the first black elected official on the old Monroe County Board of Supervisors.

Knox, Cooper and Lee, were the "people's intellectuals" who developed the research and documentation, and provided strategy and direction for the community. "I called them the 'poor people's representatives.' They came up through the ranks in their own professional lives, with their own battles, and knew what it was to fight segregation and discrimination. Although they were part of the corporate world, they didn't forget the pain, hurt, suffering and depri-

vation of others," Florence adds.

Leadership in the black community was coming from many different directions, such as the Monroe County Non Partisan League, Congress Of Racial Equality, the Dr. Robert Turner and Freddie Thomas groups, as well as some underground movements.

"When people became full of this kind of indignation, they didn't care about what was being said, they just exploded and gave the signal for change!"

Florence was in Miami for an evangelical meeting and was returning from a service with his mother when the news reported a riot taking place in Rochester, NY. He returned immediately.

"There were mass arrests. Paddy wagons were coming by all the time. It was just like a war zone. People were trying to locate children, husbands, wives." Florence was among those helping people move through the maze. "There was no sleep. It was an around the clock kind of thing—trying to get people settled with food, clothing and housing, and trying to ward off retaliation by the police," he explains.

"The riots started a real movement among blacks about who represented whom and what. Young folk were challenging the old...everybody was suspect. The system responded by clamping down on certain job activities and investigating the personal lives of people around the city. Those in industry felt it and things were getting rough."

The white Council of Churches wanted to bring in Saul Alinsky's Chicago-based group, but he wouldn't come unless the black community invited him. The black churches tried to bring in SCLC but that didn't work.

"Some of us were trying to convince Malcolm X to bring his new organization to Rochester, but he wasn't ready. "When we brought Malcolm X to speak in Rochester, I asked for his thoughts on the temporary organization Alinsky was being asked to form. Malcolm X said they respected his organizational ability in Chicago. He told me the black community had movements, but needed to learn organizational skills that could be used for our people."

In the process of obtaining several thousand signatures to invite Alinsky to Rochester, the black community was already organizing itself. Mildred Johnson was in the forefront of that.

Saul Alinsky sent Ed Chambers from Chicago to serve as staff director. Chambers concentrated on the Kodak situation. A few months later, Ronald Jones was sent in to help with the training sessions for organizing neighborhood people.

"I had to get out and organize block clubs, business groups and church groups. Nothing was handed to you, you had to work for it. You had to organize to have any power within that organization," Florence recalls.

Reynolds Street Church of Christ and St. Simon's Episcopal Church had two of the most powerful delegations in the new FIGHT organization. Minister Florence became the president and Canon St. Julian Simpkins of St. Simon's became the first vice president.

FIGHT had built in accountability factors. All of the neighborhood organizations were represented—churches, businesses, block clubs, social clubs, youth groups, etc. It was a people's organization. "Orders came from the bottom up, and that's true democracy."

An Executive Cabinet ran the day to day operations, supervised by a powerful Steering Committee that met every week on Tuesdays. Then, once a month, the Delegates' Council met to vote up or down the way the organization was being run. The Council was like a miniature convention with representation from all the neighborhood organizations. And there was an annual convention which drew enthusiastic crowds.

"St. Simon's had a very strong and active element in the organization. They maintained the balance and were the group we had to contend with to get matters passed at the Delegates' Council meetings. We had to politic with one another to get things pushed through those meetings because there were so many pockets of interest," Florence explains.

Other committees were formed around issues like housing, education, public safety, urban renewal, business development, health care and job training/employment. These committees met every

week and were chaired by persons whose names are very familiar today—Jim Dobson, Lawrence Wray, James Patterson, Ray Daniels, Little Jake, Rocky Simmons, Dr. Kenneth Woodward, Rev. Jarvers, Rev. Shankle and others. "FIGHT was empowering people, everybody had a voice."

Minister Florence and Ronald Jones conducted training sessions for community leaders and neighborhood people when they got off from work, "teaching them how to analyze issues, how to negotiate, how to organize and synchronize strategy. We were talking about time management because meetings had to start on time and end on time. We talked about quality control and planning to make things happen," Florence says.

"Every day somebody was dealing with the issues. Somebody was talking to the superintendent, every day...with the mayor, every day...with Kodak, every day. That's the difference in a movement and an organization."



"FIGHT was not a single personality, it was a people's organization. Community folk controlled it," Minister Florence says.

FIGHT was accumulating power and respect nationally. Congressman Adam Clayton Powell, Jr. invited Florence to the first national black power conference which was held in the Sam Rayburn Congressional Office Building in Washington, DC, along with about sixty other nationalist leaders throughout the country.

"That's when they asked me to tell them about FIGHT, what it was and how it was run, who controlled it. A lot of people thought Alinsky was in control of the organization. It wasn't Alinsky, it was people like Ray Daniels and Dan who owned the pool hall on Clarissa Street who was a neighborhood officer. It was people like Mildred Johnson, Howard Coles, Mama Hines. So FIGHT was not a single personality, it was a people's organization. Community folk controlled it."

[In Part II, we will discover how FIGHT took on the Eastman Kodak Company and developed other employment programs in industry; how it led the way in developing the first Section 8 housing in the state and had plans for developing urban renewal land in the entire Third Ward; how it built its own factory as part of a black economic infrastructure for the community. And we will see how the seeds of greed and personal accumulation of power came into focus and created a kind of internal stress that invaded the organization and ultimately led to its demise.] ■■■

POWER UNDER PRESSURE

ByCarolyn S. Blount

[EDITOR'S NOTE: Part I of Power Under Pressure provided insight into Minister Franklin D.R. Florence's own youth, to show the forces influencing his life and preparing him as "a man for the times," when he became head of the FIGHT organization during the height of the Civil Rights Movement. Part I also painted a picture of the unrest within the African American community as it dealt with police brutality, slum housing, unemployment and other forms of oppression which ignited the Rochester riots of July 24-26, 1964. The FIGHT organization was formed out of the "stirred embers" of the riot and ushered forth a new leadership and organizational style that this article continues to describe.]

The FIGHT organization was suspect when it was first established in the wake of the riots. From the beginning, the news media ran harsh attacks against the organization and its new leaders, as well as against Saul Alinsky and his Chicago-based Industrial Areas Foundation (IFA).

Two other new organizations had been formed in the African American community just ahead of FIGHT. Action for a Better Community, Inc. (ABC), an anti-poverty agency to serve Rochester and Monroe County under the Economic Opportunity Act of 1964 (P.L. 88-452), was incorporated in December 1964 and began operating in January 1965. The Urban League of Rochester, a social action agency, was formed in April 1965.

Officially formed in July 1965, FIGHT started from scratch and, through a lot of church-sponsored community organizing and neighborhood development, evolved to become a federation of over 200 civic groups, social clubs and neighborhood organizations. Allies in the white community also organized the Friends of FIGHT.

As FIGHT helped people exercise some control over their community, it began to carry out elements of its name

(FIGHT = Freedom, Integration, God, Honor, Today—later, Integration was changed to Independence). But at first, even within the African American community, questions were raised about "who does FIGHT represent...nobody knows them!"

"That was the issue," Florence recalls. "So we said, let's see who we represent and let's see who will recognize us. When we looked around and asked who runs the town, everybody was either directly or indirectly affected by the Eastman Kodak Company. You couldn't do anything in Rochester without Kodak. It was the leader, it was the boss. So what we had to do was to go for the boss."

The FIGHT organization spent a whole year investigating Kodak and documenting its problems with poor people and especially with black people. Minister Franklin Florence and Alinsky's on-site organizer, Edward Chambers, were aided in their research by a lawyer who had kept files documenting Kodak's suppression of the union movement during the Great Depression. George Eastman borrowed money from the Queen of England to fight off unionism. In exchange for the funds, Eastman was asked to develop a factory in South Africa which was under English rule at that time.

A lot of "cloak and dagger" operations follow the trail of this David and Goliath story. "One night while we were researching, a lawyer called my office and wanted to talk. He wouldn't give his name, but he said he had a cabinet full of documentation and information about how Kodak had been anti-working-people since the days of George Eastman. He invited us over."

"The pastorate comes in the school of the prophets, who were visionary activists, challenging the king and shaking up the kingdom," declares Minister Franklin D.R. Florence, former president of the FIGHT organization in Rochester, New York.



Florence and Chambers went to the lawyer's office, downtown off an alley right across from the Monroe County office building. After going through the back way up some winding stairs, they were received in one office by the lawyer who was between 65-70 years, and then taken across the hall to another small office full of cabinets with documentation on Kodak's anti-union activities.

"We got a lot of good stuff. Every night Chambers was in this guy's office, digesting all that material like a beaver. That's the kind of mind Chambers had. He was brilliant. The only time the lawyer would let us in was at night, and we had to come the same way all the time because he was afraid of Kodak," Florence recalls.

"When we were fighting Eastman Kodak, my office was broken into and ransacked. My home was broken into and even Sol Alinsky's office in Chicago. The only things stolen were documents bearing Kodak's name. I remember somebody set my garage on fire one night. My kids had to go to school under armed guard. Men in the community provided their protection, not the police. This was during that period when we were getting ready for the confrontation with Kodak," he adds.

"Kodak knew they were our target because we had made that public. They just didn't know how and when. We told them at our convention that FIGHT would be calling on them for jobs. Ed Chambers stayed until after the Kodak struggle, that was his baby."

The struggle with Kodak over jobs and job training became a negotiating nightmare. After initial talks came to a halt, Florence began a series of demonstrations, carrying large numbers of job seekers to put in applications for employment at Kodak.

"That went on for almost two years. An agreement produced by plant managers was rejected by Kodak's top management. Kodak was intransigent. We knew it would be a long struggle, so we had to prepare our organization for that possibility." FIGHT had to endure constant attacks on the airwaves. "Every night Dick Tobias was describing me as some kind of wild man. The media was trying to say I was too close to Malcolm X and other people who had communist leanings."

Community organizing was a constant factor, implemented mostly by Minister Florence and Ronald Jones of Alinsky's organization. "If we found an activist group on Columbia Avenue trying to do something to help the community, we would give them support and invite them to attend our meetings. If they couldn't come to our office we would go over there and observe. Before you knew it, they would fill out an application for membership in the FIGHT organization."

"We didn't try to get them to give up their autonomy—they would continue their work—but they had to be a legitimate group and go before the Steering Committee with sponsors, and then the Delegates' Council to become a bona fide member of FIGHT. Then we would assign a staff person to that group to help teach them about structuring and organizing and how it's done," Florence explains, adding that in some instances whites formed rump groups as an attempt to infiltrate and disrupt the organization.

Other disruptions were threatened by people within the African American community who wanted to blow the town up. "A building was set ablaze across from the public market and the police came to my house and said somebody told them I had ordered it, and I was arrested. On another occasion, we met with what was called the Three Percenters, an underground radical movement right in this town that had national ties in Texas, California, New York, Detroit and New Jersey. They set up here and wanted to turn our controlled organizational power into a revolution. They threatened to do something to make us bow to their philosophy, but we never did."

"Our rhetoric was matched with action that was planned to empower people to take care of their own business and to strengthen them politically, economically and socially. We knew that anytime you had a riot, it just tore down our own neighborhoods and white people didn't care. Our thing was to protect our environment."

This philosophy would serve the FIGHT organization well during its confrontation with Kodak in Flemington, New Jersey. FIGHT purchased stock and attempted to present their demands during a national demonstration at Kodak's annual stockholders' meeting in

Flemington. "Ron and I had gone throughout the northeast organizing groups to join us in Flemington. We had buses coming in from New York, the Oranges, Newark, Baltimore, Washington, DC, and of course Rochester, Syracuse and Buffalo. We were thrown out of the stockholders meeting that morning and we told them we would be back in the afternoon."

"While we were waiting, Saul came over and said I'd better go check on the people because some guy was over there telling the demonstrators to invade the stockholders meeting. That would have meant massive arrests which we didn't want," Florence recalls.

Florence jumped on the back of the truck and grabbed the mike from the disrupters. He told the crowd that anybody could go in and turn out a stockholders meeting. Instead, Florence called for a national candlelight march in Rochester on the anniversary of the riots. The Associated Press grabbed that headline and put it all over the country.

"Saul Alinsky told Ed Chambers and Ronald Jones to go get that fool, because he doesn't know what he's done. He said every wild-eyed radical between here and Cuba would be invading Rochester and that's what the enemies of the organization would want. When things were over, I told Saul that was the only way to calm the crowd down. Otherwise, we all would have been flat on our faces in Flemington with this radical group coming out of the Oranges to take over the momentum nationally."

Fortunately, Kodak also wanted to head off the candlelight march and a compromise was negotiated with the assistance of Daniel Patrick Moynihan. Kodak's hiring practices became more serious towards Blacks and Hispanics.

Also, a number of industrial leaders accepted the FIGHT organization. They were convinced that people needed a voice. "They didn't agree with everything that FIGHT did, but they understood that this dynamic was good for the community," Florence says.

"That's one thing about that period of time. It had people who were big enough to disagree with you ideologically, politically, even religiously...but especially socially in this sense. But they didn't try to do anything that would harm your person or that would divert you from what you were trying to do with your people."

"Industry knew what was coming in the future, in terms of the shift in the workforce population we see today. They had the truth long before they shared that truth with the community, so they were always prepared to accept some minorities." Minister Florence began to see that kind of thinking as he traveled with Saul Alinsky to lecture on community organizing at Ivy League schools such as Harvard and Yale.

During his presidency of FIGHT, Florence received no salary. Besides pastoring the church, he has made his living doing consulting work and evangelizing. "I have been involved in the church's national school meetings, lectureships and policy conferences all over the place. I teach community organization skills."

Another proud accomplishment of FIGHT during its early years was its plan to build a black economic infrastructure for the community. Joseph Wilson, the head of Xerox Corporation, came to FIGHT's headquarters on Prospect Street one evening and met with Florence and other members of the Steering Committee to see what could be done to help the organization during its confrontation with Eastman Kodak. "We told him we wanted to develop a factory that would employ community people," Florence says.

The idea for a factory had already been triggered before Joseph Wilson called to offer assistance. "One evening after a frustrating day challenging Kodak, we were discussing ways to get that company to come across, and I said what FIGHT needed was its own factory. Someone else asked, why don't we build our own? We already knew what we wanted," Florence explains.

"FIGHT was always empowering people. So it was the Business Committee within the FIGHT organization that decided to have a factory, who was going to run it, how it was going to be run and the policies that affected it. The only thing I was able to do, and I take less credit than anybody," he says, "was to articulate what folk felt and thought."

Deleon McEwen, who had operated his own family business,



The community spirit of the FIGHT organization is reflected in this photo of Minister Franklin Florence addressing representatives at an annual convention of the FIGHT organization during the time of the FIGHT/Kodak confrontations.

was the first president of the new company called FIGHTON, Inc. (now known as Eltrex Industries). The FIGHT organization paid McEwen a salary and asked him to develop the factory and run its day-to-day operation. "That was his night and day job, to develop that factory and he did," Florence adds.

"FIGHT was not just a hull of a movement. We stimulated blacks to go into engineering and architectural planning. We stimulated black neighborhood people to become interested in public policy. We didn't leave the right of these perceptions to what we call the experts in the white community, or nonblacks. We also turned the system upside down, because while we gave the so called black middle class responsibility to manage and lead at their level, they had to re-

port their moves to the poor. In our structure, the orders came from the bottom up, and that's true democracy.

"That's why we had to have people over the enterprises, and the enterprises had to be separate from the political arm of the organization. The person who worked for FIGHTON couldn't have a seat in the political arena. He couldn't have power and money. If he was going to run the factory, that's where his attention had to be," Florence explains.

The Eastman Kodak Company put Frank McElrath on loan to FIGHT to start research on the factory. Today McElrath is president of P.A. Plastics, Inc. Marine Midland Bank managed the financial package that gave FIGHTON its life. Xerox sent over some key people who had set up factories for the company all over the world, so that was no plaything.

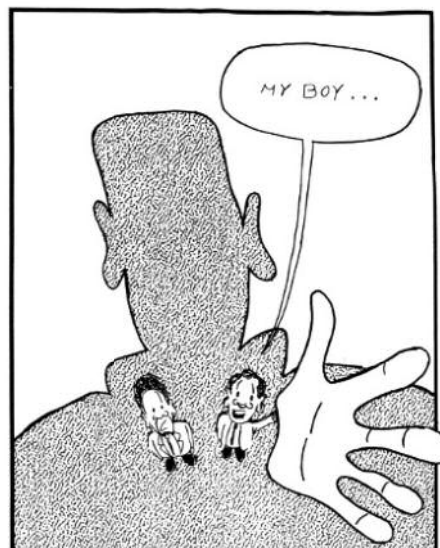
However, Florence says the FIGHTON factory would never have gotten off the ground if it had not been for the commitment and cooperation of Joseph Wilson. "Unlike Kodak, Joseph Wilson's organization was more tuned in to people. Working with him and his representatives, you felt that all people counted—women, blacks, working poor," Florence recalls. "He was also concerned about housing in the Third Ward, and concerned about the kind of jobs that were available at Xerox and in other industries in this community and around the country. He helped influence a lot of other things."

The first employment and training program operated by the Jobs Committee of the FIGHT Organization was *Operation Breakthrough*, established with Xerox Corporation. That became a national program at Xerox and a lot of blacks were hired through that effort, Florence says. In fact, in cooperation with Xerox, FIGHT organized its own transportation system to get people to the jobs that were out in the Webster, New York plant, because there were no buses servicing that area.

Employment was a key factor in the FIGHT organization. The pastor of Atlantic Avenue Baptist Church headed its Job Training Committee. Monies came in from the U.S. Department of Labor to develop job training programs. In addition to Kodak, Xerox, Bausch & Lomb and other industries, the major grocery chains were also investigated. The STAR Market family was a leader at that time, while FIGHT struggled to obtain hiring covenants with A&P and Wegmans.

Many of the issues FIGHT undertook, came directly from what Florence calls the "power of the people" to influence change. The organization struggled to get the welfare department and government employment agencies to establish satellite offices close to the people needing the services. "That idea didn't come from the officers of FIGHT, nor its main people," Florence explains. "That came

GLAZED JELLY DONUT SOCIETY



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from mothers who had to drag their children out to Westfall Road and wait all day long for welfare services or job appointments when all the State operations were out there. Those offices were in outlying areas of the city, away from the black community. They weren't even utilizing the settlement houses to deliver needed services."

Another key focal point of the organization was the issue of urban renewal and the availability of quality low-income housing. "We fought for and won an agreement with the city to develop all of the Third Ward in the section now known as Corn Hill. All of that property was to have been developed by the FIGHT organization. FIGHT Square in the Third Ward led the way in developing the first Section 8 housing in the state. FIGHT Village was being planned for the Seventh Ward.

FIGHT's leadership in housing, paved the way for members of the organization to work on other housing projects, such as Jim Dobson's work with the Catholic Interracial Council's Van Auken development in the Third Ward, and Canon St. Julian Simpkins' work on the St. Simon Terrace development for his church. All these projects were community owned," Florence says.

"Simpkins was a man who was committed to black people. He was an integrationist and did everything he could to bring positive results to his people. He always worked within the system for the advantage of his people. He never 'sold them out.' I wasn't an integrationist, I was a nationalist, and that's what I am," he adds.

Throughout this interview Minister Florence called many names of blacks and whites who helped the organization. Leatrice Patterson organized the headquarters. The law firm of Lloyd Hurst and Reuben Davis, as well as attorneys Herm Walls and Emmanuel Goldman, provided a lot of free legal work. "We argued with Mannie a lot, but he was the kind of person who always tried to keep reason alive and he was able to talk with people at every level. He was a man of integrity."

Pastor Murphy Greer (Aeon Baptist Church) was his mentor. "He was the one I turned to. He had a heart of gold and was dedicated to his people. He was the counterpart of Mildred Johnson who had an office on Joseph Avenue. People gravitated toward Mildred because she was out there serving them. She wasn't looking for a title or any acclaim, just serving."

One reason why FIGHT had to be so aggressive was in response to a new mood evolving throughout the country, that would later be called Black Nationalism. "It was not something that was organized, but it was a spirit that was emerging," he explains. "And anything that smacked of non-African leadership was held in suspect, especially the white dominance in our national organizations.

"People had grown tired of what appeared to have been compromise on vital issues like calling moratoriums on direct action, busing and integration. They were sending our national leaders through a reformation. There were personalities the white community gravitated to who wanted to *dialogue*, while others wanted more *action* because the dialoguing had gotten nowhere," Florence says.

"We used a saying in FIGHT that Rochester was Selma come North! White paternalism invaded every facet of black life. People didn't see any difference here than what they saw in the old Confederate states because they met the same oppression."

FIGHT's response was different from other groups. "Back in the 1960s when we attacked Kodak, FIGHT was calling racism, *institutional racism!* Although the restaurants, transportation system and some job areas were being desegregated, we were saying that as long as institutional racism exists, you will not have control over the economic power in our communities. That's why we still have bad schools, bad housing, and so forth. So we started attacking the institutions that represented the citadels of power. That idea came from the local level. King's SCLC organization set up Operation Breadbasket for the same reason," he adds.

"FIGHT was headed toward self determination which really means economic empowerment. That's what the power structure really hated about the organization. It wasn't Florence, but the possibility of empowerment of people that they didn't want."

However, Florence doesn't fault outside forces for the demise of

FIGHT. Just as FIGHT began to get everything in place—the factory, Third Ward housing development, job training programs and even the beginnings of a community school—another kind of change began to occur.

"FIGHT was building a kind of respect and power nationally, and some people misread what that meant. We had accumulated so much so fast until it was a built-in danger to the organization's survival. We got away from the neighborhood development and house meetings that really made FIGHT work in the early days. Folks sensed that the enterprises seemed more important than the people they represented and were developed to serve," Florence reflects.

The money that was being thrown into programs also served to plant the seeds of greed and personal accumulation of power as new alignments were made with the power structure. People who had an aversion to nationalism and were frightened by it, withdrew their support and began to sow the seeds of partisan politics. Malcolm X and Dr. King were assassinated. H. Rap Brown and Stokely Carmichael had to go underground. While local organizations had a longer staying power, the change would eventually hit Rochester and overthrow Florence's administration.

"I never will forget that night. That was my fifth year. The constitution had been changed the year before so I would be able to run consecutively. But the night of the convention we knew we had the numbers to win. But the opposition caught us off balance, and we didn't react to that very quickly.

"I was waiting to give my presidential address, but they kept me off the podium. They denied the convention chairman, circumvented the order of business and moved for the election to be the first thing on the agenda. Someone placed Bernard Gifford's name in nomination and agreed to go by voice vote, rather than by ballots as we normally did," Florence recalls. "Women and children were part of the convention, so I didn't want to chance a physical confrontation."

After the convention there were disorders on Clarissa Street, Prospect Street, Joseph Avenue. Florence's group and other committee and organizational people went to court to protest the convention proceedings. Funds were being cut for the housing development and other support was being withdrawn, so Florence called a truce with Gifford. "I told him he could not fight that war while we were fighting, so we would become a loyal opposition, and work for the good of the organization."

Within the original FIGHT team, Minister Florence and Ronald Jones had functioned as alter egos who could sense each other out. Minister Florence and Canon Simpkins may have disagreed philosophically over integration, they worked diligently on behalf of and were committed to black people. "Gifford was different in that sense," Florence muses. "He had a strong pull for himself at the expense of others. I contribute that to his youthfulness and inexperience at the time. The new leadership of FIGHT didn't know the blueprint or plan. Because they weren't part of the dream, they couldn't direct the organization."

Throughout this time, Minister Florence also participated in national demonstrations and made many friends across the nation, including Malcolm X and Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. "Malcolm was what made Martin really relevant. King had the *moral tone* of the country, Malcolm had the *hearts and minds of the masses*. People were acquiescing to Malcolm's truth while they were rationalizing and intellectualizing King's philosophy."

Minister Franklin Florence continues to serve his church and community. He continues to believe "the church's role is to empower people to manage the power of God in their own lives."

He says the other job of the ministry is "to organize the church to do its own work. Everything shouldn't be focused on the pastorate. The Lord expects us to do the things that we can do for ourselves. The things that we can't do, he will do through us and for us."

He also stresses that "The pastorate comes in the school of the prophets, who were visionary activists, challenging the king and shaking up the kingdom. That's what the black church got angry with Dr. King about, because he was shaking up the kingdom, challenging pastors to get out and do the work." ■■■

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