

# PREFACE

*Never to Leave Us Alone* was inspired by a keen awareness that no other book-length work examines the prayers and prayer life of Martin Luther King Jr. While numerous studies of King's sermons, speeches, and pulpit style have appeared in published form over the last half century, his prayers, attitude toward prayer, and practice of the art and discipline of prayer have been woefully neglected. This little volume is designed to correct this glaring omission, while also demonstrating how King's prayer life and reflections on prayer offer infinite possibilities for the cultivation of positive and core human values.

The decision to write and publish *Never to Leave Us Alone* came after repeated but unsuccessful attempts to obtain permission to edit and publish a collection of King's personal prayers, under the title *Never Alone: The Prayers of Martin Luther King Jr.* The research for *Never Alone* actually began more than two decades ago, and the work was completed in 2007. Some seventy-eight prayers of King were discovered through a careful reading of his sermons, speeches, and published and unpublished writings, and I organized them into four categories; namely, Prayers from Student Days, 1948–54; Pastoral Prayers, 1954–68; Sermonic Prayers, 1954–68; and Movement Prayers, 1955–68. The project was made known to both the King Estate and the Senior Editor of the King

Papers Project at Stanford University in March, 2008, and weeks later I was informed that they had something similar in mind, and that this might create a competitive conflict with projects that the King Estate was pursuing. I also learned later that permissions to publish anthologies or collections could not be granted at that time, especially since various parties were involved in larger discussions of these rights for the King Estate. In any case, I remain hopeful that *Never Alone* will be published in the future and that it will serve as a companion volume to *Never to Leave Us Alone*.

Although the full range of King documents is compulsory reading for anyone interested in his spirituality, his sermons constitute the richest sources for exploring his prayer life. Here one finds not only the civil rights leader's personal prayers but also his favorite prayer lines from scripture and the Christian tradition. These prayer sources, some of which consist of one or two sentences, blend adoration, confession, entreaty, and thanksgiving with meditation, mystery, and wonder. They reveal how King turned to prayer as the foundation of his personal spiritual life, the center of his devotional practice, and a powerful, sacred force in his struggle to liberate and empower people. This material also indicates how King developed prayer as living, passionate speech, sermonistic discourse, and pastoral conversation.

I hope that *Never to Leave Us Alone* is a groundbreaking effort to analyze King's prayer life and conception of prayer. King was arguably the most advertised religious figure in America in the 1960s, and his prayer life, philosophy of prayer, and practice of praying are immensely important for understanding him as both a person of faith and a social activist. This study shows that King never reduced prayer to simply inspired speech, religiously informed rhetoric, sacred or soul language, or indulgence in the torrents of passionate oratory. Instead, prayer for King was a gift from God that has infinite dimensions for exploration, a spiritual quality that must be continuously cultivated. It was about facilitating an intimate relationship with the living spirit and leading people into the presence of the Supreme Personality. Thus, *praying*

*time* for King was *sacred time* and *self-purification time*, and prayer became a built-in, structured aspect of his private and public life. King had an all-pervasive sense of the divine presence and of the life-filling richness of prayer, and he consistently noted that praying is about responding in a spirit of humility to the activity of God's grace in daily life.

In a more general sense, this volume explains what King shared about the salient features of prayer and how he refused to separate prayer from his larger effort to craft theologically sound and effective ministries for the church and in the streets. It reveals that King majored in the traditional trajectories of Christian prayer—adoration, confession and supplication, petition, thanksgiving, intercession, meditation, and contemplation—all of which were often combined whenever he recited psalms of prayer, prayers of illumination, communion prayers, hymns of prayer, benedictions, and doxologies in congregational contexts. In King's estimation, all of these devotional forms constituted salient features of the well-defined prayer life, and they were uppermost in his thinking whenever he theologized about prayer and praying. Clearly, there is a need to rethink questions not only about King's theology but also his politics and ethics in light of his prayer life and attitude toward praying.

This book is equally significant for what it reveals concerning King's assault on age-old myths and misconceptions concerning prayer and the art of praying. King rejected the claims, made essentially by atheists, that prayer is a mindless activity, that it speaks to the absence of intellect, and that it is an exercise in futility. For King, prayer involved both head and heart, and praying was designed to stimulate spiritual growth and to inform the mind. King spoke of prayer and the search for the living God in language that penetrated the thinking of people. Furthermore, King was an unwavering critic of the claim that prayer is unproductive and of the Aristotelian notion that God is unmoved by the struggles, cries, and joys of the world. *Never to Leave Us Alone* proves that King modeled a more hope-filled approach to prayer and praying and that he consistently spoke to the efficacy of prayer despite the

ambiguities of life in the universe. Consequently, he ignited deep and productive thinking about the task, habit, and possibilities of prayer.

The ways in which King engaged in prayer and praying as creative energy may be the most distinctive angle developed in this work. In King's case, prayer, voiced and unvoiced, became a call to mission or to action. He was convinced that prayer worked as an empowering and liberating force in the context of struggle. He had little patience with those who turned to prayer as a substitute for human initiative or who prayed while ignoring the social maladies that afflict society. A part of his rallying cry was that activism prefaced by prayer can be most effective. This is why King concentrated on persuasive prayer, or prayers of persuasion—the kind that incited listeners to action. In King's civil rights campaigns, prayer became a form of creative energy, a unique spiritual force in which religion, art, and protest coexisted and found vital expression.

King's utilization of prayer as creative energy in his own personal life is not ignored in this volume. In other words, *Never to Leave Us Alone* is not merely about those times when King was lost in the high frenzy of public prayer. It is also about those moments of sacred stillness, of solitude and private prayer, when King found the courage to follow God's will and not his own. It is about the personal spiritual journey behind King's prayer life. Moreover, it highlights King's ability to rise above the doubts and fears that haunted him and to subvert nagging concerns about his own safety in favor of an ethic of risk, sacrifice, and redemptive suffering. In other words, King always found new wisdom and guidance in prayer. Evidently, King's emphasis on private prayer as creative energy was, as the content of this work shows, consistent with his tendency to place spiritual transformation at the center of every action he took as a crusader for freedom, justice, and human dignity. Thus, he was able to confront the relentless pressure of the forces of evil and retrogression without faltering.

Although much is said in this book about prayer as the central element of the weekly rhythm of King's activities as a preacher,

pastor, and social activist, the extent to which he reclaimed prayer as both a living tradition and lived theology is no less important. *Never to Leave Us Alone* explains how King's prayer life was enriched with insights and wisdom from a range of experiential, cultural, and intellectual traditions or sources. King reflected the influence of these traditions and sources each time he knelt or bowed in prayer, though he never consciously provided a prayer model or primer on prayer. Because King was functioning in the broad context of Christian traditions, he was always mindful of the transformative power, curative purposes, and therapeutic value of prayer and praying, especially for black people, whose response to oppression had always been largely liturgical. King reclaimed prayer as eloquent, sacred speech, as soulful communication with the God of the universe, and as "a balm" in the quest for healing and deliverance, and this is part of that unique quality that made him such a profound communicator of the Christian faith.

*Never to Leave Us Alone* concludes that King remains a model of spirituality and godly devotion in these perilous times of globalization, polarization, social regression, and growing cultural cynicism. It is just the beginning of what I hope will be a deeper and more meaningful conversation about how King perceived and employed the art and discipline of prayer in his personal life, the church, and the larger world of civil and human rights struggles, and about the degree to which King's prayer life and philosophy of prayer remain helpful and instructive for us today. If this work reignites intense and positive exchanges about the meaning, task, and possibilities of prayer at all levels of human life and activity, my greatest hope for it will be realized. So let the conversation begin.