March message: The struggle goes on

Contributed by JOSÉ E. PÉREZ Special to South Florida Times
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MIAMI — With the 50th anniversary of the March on Washington less than two weeks away, community leaders in Miami staged a rally against the backdrop of evidence of insufficient change for Black America since 1963.

The Rev. Dr. Carl Johnson, pastor of the 93rd Street Community Baptist Church, which hosted the pre-march, declared during an opening prayer for marchers that “we march for justice, jobs, peace, and freedom. Symbolically, we’re marching to tumble down walls.”

State Rep. Cynthia Stafford, D-Miami, acknowledged the

contributions of those who mar-ched in the nation’s capital a half-century ago. “You were marching for me when you marched for jobs, justice, and freedom,” she said.

The 200 or so participants began their march with those in the front singing, We’ve Come this Far by Faith, past abandoned houses and empty lots that dot the landscape alongside well-kept homes and manicured lawns in the north-central section of Miami-Dade County.

“Goodwill Ambassadors” from the county passed out water at stations along the way.

Activist Ron Fulton, an uncle of slain Miami Gardens teenager Trayvon Martin, joined the march to fulfill a promise. “I made a commitment a long time ago to do everything I can do to bring equality and fairness to our justice system and our community,” Fulton said. “I’m hoping that this will be the start of civil rights and economic change.”

Fulton expressed concern over possible backlash from entrenched sectors of the country to any change that may come. “It’s already dangerous because certain people don’t want to change,” he said.

Algernon Austin, a researcher for the Economic Policy Institute, published figures that lend credence to the concerns of Fulton and other marchers.

Austin reported that almost 50 percent of black children “live in neighborhoods with concentrated poverty.” He reported also that there is de facto racial segregation in schools, with the same relative percentage of black grade school students – about 75 percent – attending majority black schools today as they did more than 40 years ago. Most of the schools are not on equal footing in terms of resources as schools with a majority of white students.

Austin’s research also revealed that the unemployment figures for blacks and whites are virtually unchanged since 1963, hovering at a 2-1 ratio.

The Economic Policy Institute study also showed that the 2012 jobless rate for blacks, at 14 percent, is higher than the jobless rate for the entire nation during the Great Depression, at 13 percent.

But having a job has not necessarily been good news, either. Austin reported that over a half-century, there has been no significant improvement for black workers in lower paying jobs. After adjusting for inflation, the minimum wage today, at $7.25, is worth $2 less than in 1968 “and is nowhere close to a living wage.”

Separately, Signe-Mary McKernan and Caroline Ratcliffe of the Urban Institute found that the average wealth of white families was $230,000 higher than the average wealth of black and Hispanic families in 1983. The gap widened to more than $500,000 by 2010.

It was in this context that the march held in Miami was organized and conducted, as a precursor for anniversary observances which will take place on Wednesday, Aug. 28, in Washington.

The Miami-Dade NAACP Branch will take marchers to the capital by bus.

Saturday, a few people who marched in 1963 spoke of their experience. They included educator Shirley Johnson and former Miami-Dade NAACP President Brad Brown.

Miami-Dade County School Board Member Dorothy

Bendross Mindlingall said she was not permitted to go to the march while attending Tuskeegee University and is doing her best to keep the dream alive.

Miami-Dade County Commissioner Audrey Edmonson and others said that there are still battles to fight to achieve true equality and justice. “We still need to fight and get together,” she said.

Melonie Burke, a representative of County Commissioner Jean Monestime, echoed that sentiment, saying, “It doesn’t stop.”

State Sen. Dwight Bullard, D-Miami, made the drive up from his home district in South Miami-Dade to join the rally held after the march in front of the 93rd Street Community Baptist Church.

“Let’s understand what we’re doing here,” he said. “We represent the manifestation of that dream so our commitment is to understand that our job is not done.”

*MARCHING IN MIAMI: Some 200 people take part in a “pre-march” in Miami-Dade Saturday in advance of the observance of the 50th anniversary of the March on Washington.

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