

Working Together Jackson – WTJ: Refounding Convention and City-wide Assembly

By Christopher Young

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New Horizon Church International Praise Team & Choir

Together Jackson website, <https://workingtogetherjackson.org>, it was founded in 2012. WTJ is a broad-based coalition of institutions committed to collaborative strategies that solve many of the problems facing Jackson. Their institutions cross racial, religious and economic lines within the city.

On Sunday, April 23 at 3 p.m., a solid 500 people filled New Horizon Church International for their 10-year Refounding Convention and City-Wide Assembly.

The main purpose of this meeting was to launch a robust community engagement campaign that included institutional house meetings and neighborhood walks. Training for this will begin on Thursday, June 8 from 6-8 p.m. and Saturday, June 17, from 2-4 p.m. at Greater Mt. Bethel Church. All are invited to participate in the campaign.



**Bishop Glake Hill and Julianne Tharp
photos BY Chris Young**

While the majority of attendees live in Jackson, there were also attendees and partners from across Mississippi, and as far away as Baltimore, MD and Brooklyn, N.Y.

The WTJ mission is to rebuild Jackson through institutional leadership development as well as pragmatic and cooperative community problem-solving. They do that by working with community leaders, organizations and institutions to address problems within Jackson and to create solutions to those issues.

Festivities began with two selections from the New Horizon Church International praise team and choir. Bishop Glake Hill (Southern Diocese, Church of Christ (Holiness) U.S.A. and Julianne Tharp (Fondren Presbyterian Church) served as MCs for the event which raised over \$62,000 from its member organizations in checks and pledges. Bishop Ronnie Crudup (NHCI), Reverend Lorenzo Neal (New Bethel AME), and Rhoda Yoder (Open Door Mennonite Church) shared perceptions about the disinvestment in Jackson, civic segregation and failure of leadership.



WTJ member organizations line up to make financial pledges.

They were clear and concise with their examples, and absolutely not shy on speaking the truth – from the garbage contract, attempts to takeover Jackson Public Schools, 1% sales tax, partnership with Hinds Community College workforce training program to expand their programs to include over 500 people, water crisis, contracting disparities, and the anti-Jackson legislative session that just adjourned.

Prior to the introduction of the keynote speaker, Bishop Glake Hill reminded that both WTJ and Working Together Mississippi (led by Perry Perkins) are affiliated with the oldest organization and training institute in America, the Industrial Areas Foundation. Reverend David K. Brawley of East Brooklyn Congregations (a sister organization of WTJ) provided a keynote address that was informative as well as deeply inspiring. He shared about The Nehemiah homes built in East New York and in the Brownsville neighborhood and how “changing one block can make a difference, but one organization makes all the difference in the world.”

“Forty years ago, leaders got together and they built power – the regeneration of an entire community – where initially homes sold for about \$40,000 are now worth \$500,000. The power is with the people. We organized and one institution saved an entire community, and if we could do it forty years ago, you can do it today.”



L-R, Bishop Ronnie Crudup, Rev. Lorenzo Neal, Rhoda Yoder

He claimed that the slow work of democracy, intentionality, imagination, the willingness to work and the willingness to fight for what you believe in are the key ingredients of this community regeneration.

“We now have affordable housing, moving from public housing to home ownership, we have better supermarkets, we have better schools, we have better public safety, we have a better community – a community that was once called the murder capital of the state of New York that in now called a beloved community. Forty years ago, East New York was Jackson Mississippi today.”

Additional speakers included co-director of TurnAround Tuesdays – a jobs movement in Baltimore – Melvin Wilson. He indicated that TurnAround Tuesdays was born from WTJ’s sister-organization BUILD (Baltimoreans United in Leadership Development), Reverend Dr. Leroy Barber (Neighborhood Economics), Bishop Brian Seage (Episcopal Diocese of Mississippi), and Reverend Jimmy Edwards (Rosemont Missionary Baptist Church).

The Mississippi Link asked Chevon Chatman for her impressions. “I’m pleased with the turnout and the energy and enthusiasm of WTJ members and guests here today. It speaks to the determination and resiliency of this vehicle and of this city to do what it needs to do to become a stronger

Jackson. I am proud to be the lead organizer of Working Together Jackson,” she said.

Savannah Willis, an organizer at WTJ, said it like this, “I feel like there is a lot of energy in the city right now, and today was a reflection of that and seeing how it touches everybody despite our differences, despite our divisions – there is energy in this city to make a change.”

The vision for a better and stronger Jackson was a constant theme throughout the ninety-minute event. There was a true sense of community, despite our many challenges here in The City with Soul, and a feeling of a gathering optimism about our own beloved city.