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Hugh B. Price
President and CEO

Keynote Address
National Urban League Convention
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This is a thrilling moment for me, as you can well imagine. Seeing the Urban League movement arrayed before me, several thousand strong, spanning four generations and primed for action, is a stunning sight to behold.

To the veterans who have built and sustained the movement through decades of adversity and triumph, to our allies of all complexions and religious faiths who have coalesced with us, and to the next generation of Urban League leaders -- especially the NULITES students who have journeyed here from Bloomington -- I salute each of you for making the Urban League the venerable and revered movement that it is. And I salute you for your collective determination to carry our cause of social, economic and legal justice for all into the 21st century.

The thrill I feel is tempered, I must admit, by a profound sense of humility. For I am following in the awesome footsteps of the likes of George Edmund Hayes; Eugene Kinckle Jones; Lester Granger, who led the movement with such a steady hand for so many years; Whitney Young, who expanded it and ushered it into the civil rights arena; Vernon Jordan, who positioned the League as a forceful advocate for justice; and John Jacob, who sustained it through excruciatingly difficult times with dignity and compassion.

Assuming the helm of the National Urban League is also humbling because the movement so much resembles family, with all the love, support and lofty expectations typically associated with that term.

Though I admittedly am a stranger to many of you, rest assured that the Urban League is no stranger to me. In fact, I've been part of your extended family my entire life.

As a child growing up in Washington, D.C., I often heard my uncle, Dr. R. Frank Jones, speak of the League in reverent tones. Early in my career as head of the Black Coalition of New Haven, Connecticut, Bob Bowles, director of the Urban League chapter there, served on my board and as a trusted mentor.

Junc Branch, another dear friend in Westchester County, is the niece of Lester Granger. And I learned just the other day that Eugene Kinckle Jones was the godfather of my cousin, Winifred Norman.

Now that I'm graduating from the extended family to the immediate Urban League family, let me introduce you to several members of my own who are here this evening. First and foremost my wife, Marilyn Lloyd Price, who I love even more today than the day we married, which we're both reluctant to admit was almost 31 years ago. Those physicians and dentists here who attended Howard may remember "Mama" Lloyd from the anatomy department. She's Marilyn's mother.

Our youngest daughter, Lauren, is here. She graduated from college a year ago and now works at the Washington-based Center for Youth Development, a field that's dear to many of us. Our two other daughters are globe-trotting today and thus couldn't join us. Traer, a designer and choreographer of water fountains, is on assignment in Taiwan. Janeen, a second-year law student, has just wrapped up a summer internship in Washington and arrived earlier today in Mexico City to begin a second internship there.

My own mother, Charlotte Schuster Price, has come from Cape Cod to share this moment with me. She and my late father, Dr. Kline A. Price, lived in Washington for nearly 40 years.

My brother, Dr. Kline Price, Jr., and his wife, Bebe Drew Price, are with us. Bebe, by the way, stands for "Blood Bank". Yes, she's the daughter of the late Dr. Charles Drew, an authentic African-American and American hero. My cousins, Al and Sandi Brothers, have

journeyed here from Ft. Wayne, where Sandi is active in the Urban League.

Occasionally I am asked by friends and colleagues how long I agonized over whether to accept the board's offer to become president of the National Urban League. I usually pause for a moment or three, and then reply that it took about that long. The decision was easy for several reasons.

For starters, service runs in my family. Like many physicians of his era who graduated from Howard and stayed in D.C., my father tithed with his time by volunteering many weekday mornings in the clinic for poor folk at Freedman's Hospital.

My mother was active in the movement to win Washingtonians the right to vote. Also, my parents were among the families who helped finance Charles Houston's early litigation efforts for the NAACP Legal Defense Fund that laid the legal foundation for Brown vs. Board of Education.

Reared in this tradition of service, I've devoted virtually my entire professional career to the cause of social and economic justice for our people. While it's true that I'm not an alumnus of the traditional civil rights movement, I have served our folk, effectively I would like to think, in other ways.

Indeed, I feel as though I have been apprenticing for the presidency of the League my entire professional life.

Another reason the decision was easy is because this isn't just a terrific job, it's a calling. By that I mean that we -- you and I -- who are this movement have little choice but to be in it.

Seven years ago, I yearned to become president of the public television station where I worked. It didn't happen and I was crestfallen for months. I possessed all the right credentials, or so I thought, and had run the key divisions of the station. Yet I smacked my head squarely against that glass ceiling before I'd even heard of the term.

It took my daughter Traer, who is rather spiritual, to pull me out of the funk. One day that I'll never forget, she said, "Dad, don't worry about not getting that job. You're being saved for something more important." This, obviously, is what she'd foreseen that I could not. Thank heavens that daughter always knows best.

Before charting the course for the Urban League through the remainder of this century and into the next, let me briefly describe the changing and challenging seas that we'll be navigating together. We who are African-American live, alongside all other Americans, in a world which bears little resemblance to that of a mere half-decade ago, much less a generation ago.

Communism has crumbled, falling victim to its own oppressiveness and inefficiency. Market economies now reign supreme. Nations are redefining themselves with stunning rapidity. Immigrants and refugees stream almost unchecked across borders, radically and rapidly altering the ethnic make-up of nations.

This ruthlessly competitive world waits for no nation, no ethnic group and no individual. Should any competitor falter, there is always an emerging country, an enterprising people or an eager immigrant waiting in the wings or, more likely, already seizing the opportunity to fill the void.

Technological change, "rightsizing", industrial outmigration and structural unemployment are now familiar phrases throughout the developed world. Statistically speaking, the unemployment problems of Canada, the U.K., France and Germany are twice as bad as ours.

Closer to home, America is enduring its own economic upheavals, with cities and the urban poor feeling the severest aftershocks. For millions of black folk who, thanks to the civil rights movement, have flooded into higher education, big corporations and their own mainstream businesses, these clearly are the best of times.

But for millions more of us stranded in violent, hopeless, poverty-stricken inner cities, only slavery and the half century that followed it could have been worse.

When the landmark Brown vs. Board of Education decision was handed down forty years ago this spring, I think it's fair to say we all assumed that the defeat of Jim Crow laws would fling open the doors of opportunity to the robust, post-World War II mainstream economy from which we'd by and large been excluded.

What no one foresaw back in '54 and even through the '70s was that urban economies would slowly yet steadily erode. The manufacturing jobs that once enabled blue collar workers to purchase their own homes and occasional new cars have all but vanished from the inner city.

Take my uncle Edgar Royster. Though not a college man, he was a provider in the noblest sense of the term. He worked for years at the Winchester arms plant in New Haven and held a second job at Yale University. Both were within walking distance of his home in the Dixwell neighborhood.

Uncle Edgar's earnings enabled his family to save enough money to move out of public housing into a new home that they built in nearby West Haven. They actually lived out the American dream almost exactly as the script was written back then.

Now, the Winchester plant is history, along with the decent-paying jobs that provided access for people like my uncle Edgar to the economic mainstream. Those service jobs that have replaced them often pay so miserably that the full-time employees who hold them still cannot work their way out of poverty.

I recite these global and domestic trends because it's essential that we place our circumstances in a larger context. Yes, racism is still abroad in the land. Though subtler and somewhat less pervasive now, it's still a well-documented and undeniable reality in employment, housing, lending and the like.

Even so, we must not let ourselves and, especially, our children fall into the paranoid trap of thinking that racism accounts for all that plagues us. The global realignment of work and wealth is, if anything, the bigger culprit. We who serve must be clear-eyed about these color-blind economic trends if we're to be genuinely helpful to our folk.

Lest we and our children forget, the civil rights movement was a huge success in many respects. It unquestionably placed those of us with solid educations, ample family support, personal drive and a healthy dose of luck on the up escalator economically.

Yet millions of our people remain stuck on the down escalator, headed nowhere or worse. Their dire circumstances must dwell in our consciences because of the tragic loss of human potential and the mounting drain on societal resources and compassion.

It is their fate, then, that must be the primary focus of the Urban League movement. This renewed emphasis on our sisters and brothers and children in greatest need honors our original mission, which was to serve those of us in meager circumstances who are seeking access to mainstream society.

How will we pursue this ambitious goal? Given our limited resources, we must concentrate with laser-like focus on those critical areas where we can leverage our unique strengths for greatest impact. I see three areas of concentration for the Urban League:

- The first is the education and development of our children growing up in the inner city so that they have the academic and social skills to be successful.
- The second is to enable their families to become economically self-sufficient.
- Finally, we should encourage racial inclusion so that our folk can participate fully in the mainstream economy.

Let me elaborate on each priority. First, and foremost, our children, for all the obvious reasons. How easy it is to forget, in the flood of

awful articles and newscasts about youth violence, that they are our future.

Look around you at the 500 smart and committed NULITES students. They, too, are our future, though we seldom read or see anything about them in the media. Let's make certain these young leaders know how much we love and appreciate them by giving them a rousing round of applause.

Children growing up in the inner city are being cheated of many supports that are crucial for their success. The Urban League intends to do something about two of them -- education and social development.

There's little mystery about how to do a better job of educating poor children. School reformers, like James Comer, Jeff Howard, Bob Slavin and Ted Sizer, and dedicated teachers across the country have shown convincingly that it can be done. Among the key ingredients are high expectations, challenging academic material and flexible instructional techniques.

Unfortunately, effective teaching and learning for poor children occurs mostly in isolated classrooms led by motivated teachers. It seldom permeates entire schools and school districts. That's largely because districts still aren't genuinely committed to reform or prepared to invest adequately in retooling teachers and principals to take it on in earnest.

What's missing, therefore, is not the way to change, but the will. It'll take concerted outside pressure from parents and community groups to prevail upon school systems to improve the education of inner-city children.

That's precisely where the Urban League comes in. I see us mobilizing and equipping parents and community leaders to become sophisticated and insistent consumers of education for their children.

Let's go house-by-house, living room-by-living room in the inner-city neighborhoods we serve. Let's help parents understand, in

layman's terms, exactly what their children must know and be able to do in order to meet 21st century standards of competency.

If their kids are off course, then encourage them to inquire, constructively yet insistently, exactly what the teachers intend to do about it, by when, and what they, the parents, can do concretely to be supportive.

I repeat. Concerted pressure from sophisticated consumers -- namely parents -- is a major missing ingredient in urban school reform. That's the Urban League's natural niche, our unique contribution to improving the education of our children.

But we cannot stop there. What happens after class is equally important since children spend most of their waking hours outside of school. In the home, of course. But also in extracurricular programs, settlement houses and boys clubs, and organized sports.

Ideally, this is where social development of children occurs. Where their values are shaped. Where they learn to collaborate with others in teams. Where they learn social graces. Where they are exposed to new horizons through visits to museums and such.

That's the theory anyway. The trouble is that in all too many inner-city neighborhoods, this so-called developmental infrastructure has virtually vanished. Many parents these days, especially single moms, are stringing together several low wage jobs just to get by. They simply aren't home in mid-afternoon when their children arrive from school.

Most urban school systems are too strapped financially to provide the rich array of extracurricular clubs that many of us enjoyed as teenagers. Many inner-city settlement houses, assuming they're even still on the scene, are too underfunded and dilapidated physically to provide safe havens and constructive activities for all the children who need them. Municipal park and recreation departments are but a shadow programmatically of their former selves.

But I'll tell you who is well-financed and omnipresent, however. The gangs that are growing everywhere. They've filled the void left by we supposedly responsible adults and have built their own anti-social developmental infrastructure which ensnares youngsters in search of identity and companionship.

Just listen to this chillingly perceptive analysis by a Los Angeles gang leader, one Tee Rogers, of why adolescents join gangs:

What I think is formulating here is that human nature wants to be accepted. A human being gives less of a damn what he is accepted into. At that age -- eleven to seventeen -- all kids want to belong. They are unpeople.

Politicians talk incessantly these days about taking back the streets from criminals. I say we take back our children from the streets and from the gangs, and the streets will take care of themselves.

It's high time that society at large and, especially, we of the African-American community muster the will and the wherewithal to ensure that each inner-city child who needs attention, support and direction has a caring adult in his or her life every day.

We African Americans who have made it must tithe with our time and, more importantly, our money to see to it that those of our children whom the civil rights movement hasn't yet touched also have a real chance to succeed. Volunteer mentors are wonderful. But given their often unpredictable schedules, even the most well-meaning of them aren't reliable enough to provide the continuity of caring needed by these kids.

Let's get right down to cases. I propose that each Urban League affiliate establish a Youth Development Fund and formulate, in conjunction with others in the community, a master plan for delivering youth services after school and over the summer in churches, schools, settlement houses, community centers, safe homes, museums, even National Guard armories.

Mind you, the idea isn't to run our own programs with this money. That would undercut our credibility because people might think it's merely a money grab by us. For the same reason, we probably need a credible, representative panel of community people to disburse the funds. Our goal is to be of service in the broadest sense of the term.

I also see us monitoring the performance of those who receive the funds and connecting contributors with the kids. We should be flexible so that donor groups, like sororities, can retain their identity while giving to the fund.

Where would the money come from? From our young, well-heeled professionals who don't yet have family obligations. From older folk like me whose children are now out of college. From everyone else -- of all races, I hasten to add -- who can afford to give. From those who cannot but are willing to stage fundraisers instead. From groups like the Elks, the frats, and so forth.

How much have I in mind? I belong to a black men's organization, called the Westchester Clubmen. We partner with the White Plains YMCA in providing an after-school program for adolescent African-American boys from the local middle school.

A few Sundays ago, the twenty-five of us put up \$17,000, yes \$17,000, for this year's program. Our grant pays the salaries of the three part-time youth workers who are there with the 17 or so youngsters every weekday afternoon during the school year.

In other words, for a mere \$1,000 annually per child, we can put a caring adult in the daily life of a youngster throughout the school year. Given the frightening realities facing our kids today, how can we afford not to make certain this happens? How can we in good conscience buy that luxury car when a less expensive model would serve our needs plus those of an inner-city youngster as well? Think about it, sisters and brothers.

Our mission, then, is to raise \$500 to \$1000 each year from every African American who can possibly afford it so we can put a caring adult regularly in the life of every child who needs one. If we're

successful, we can then turn the tables on the majority community -- business, government and foundations -- and challenge it to match us for a change.

If we personally buy into this prevention strategy, we'll then be in a better position to say to our elected officials who are obsessed with crime, and legitimately so, that there's a smarter way to spend tax dollars to combat it.

Those 100,000 cops we're about to add under the federal anti-crime bill are the rough equivalent, cost-wise, of 300,000 part-time youth workers. Working at a ratio of one of them to every six or seven youngsters, we could, with the same money, put a caring youth worker in the daily lives of 2 million inner-city youngsters.

Which anti-crime strategy -- 100,000 cops or 2 million inner-city kids tended by a caring adult every day -- do you think would work best? I know which bet I'm prepared to place as a taxpayer.

Back now to our own youth development fund. We obviously need an army of fundraisers to extract this money from our folks. My friends, we've actually got one already enlisted in our cause. We simply need to give them new marching orders with the instruction that there is no more important mission for the Urban League. If need be, tell them: "Uncle Hugh wants you -- now."

And who's that standing army, you might ask? It's the 3000 local Urban League board members, the 3000 members of our local guilds, the thousands of other volunteers who pitch in from time to time, the 2000-plus executives in BEEP (the Black Executive Exchange Program), the 500-strong NULITES students and, yes, the thousands of clients we've helped locally over the years through our training and other programs.

My friends, this mobilization campaign to take back our children from the streets is the manifest destiny of the Urban League movement. Who else has the credibility and the capacity and the connections to pull it off all across the country? If not us, then who? If not now, when? Our children urgently await our answer.

Let me turn now to our second focus area -- economic self-sufficiency for poor families. As I said earlier, the economies of cities have undergone profound changes which have undermined the ability of marginally skilled and low skilled workers of all races adequately to support their families.

Just a generation ago, these blue collar workers were the backbone of the American economy, and celebrated in the media as such. With the destruction of their livelihoods has come the rapid deterioration of their neighborhoods, the onset of despair, the break-up of families whose fathers can no longer be proud providers like my Uncle Edgar, the escalation of violent crime, and the ascendancy of the code of the streets.

Make no mistake, it's all of a piece. Each breakdown begets or exacerbates another. To break the cycle, we must go back to the source of the problem, namely the growing inability of inner-city adults to find legitimate jobs that enable their families to live in dignity with a decent standard of living.

Marvelous as the market economy works for most Americans, it has all but collapsed for inner-city folk. There are fewer and fewer jobs for low skilled workers, especially males. And the wages for those jobs that exist are just plain lousy, all too often at or below the poverty line.

In my view, many politicians and economists are in denial about the depth of this problem. Some blame its victims, saying they don't want to work anyway, despite convincing evidence to the contrary.

Others say high unemployment and low wages for low skilled workers are the natural order of things in modern market economies and that government ought not interfere. Still others argue, optimistically, that there will be a happy ending when technology eventually replaces the lost jobs with more highly skilled and highly paid new ones.

The trouble is that none of these scenarios holds out much hope for inner-city people trapped in poverty today. It's unrealistic to expect all of them to upgrade themselves overnight from laborers and welfare recipients to office workers and small entrepreneurs.

Yet society these days expects everyone to support themselves. And the poor, not unreasonably, expect work to be worthwhile economically. Otherwise, why bother? Only the independently wealthy toil for therapeutic reasons alone.

Government invests lots of money in job training, but largely avoids the ideologically uncomfortable question of whether the market economy is actually creating enough jobs for everyone in the inner city who wants to or is expected to work.

The Urban League will join this crucial issue at several levels. Our bottom line goal, as Brother Herman Ewing of Memphis puts it, is to help dependent people become independently productive. Obviously we must continue our successful job training and placement programs. We'll also encourage entrepreneurship education for our young people and economic development for African-American firms. In this vein, we welcome our partnership with the U.S. Small Business Administration, which has the Small Business Resource Center here.

We will pressure private and public employers to cut poor people in on the local job action, so that everyone has a shared stake in the overall community's quality of life. For instance, what if employers reserved training slots and real jobs for residents of neighborhoods or census tracts with high unemployment rates.

The way I see it, this wouldn't be a politically contentious race-based approach. Instead, it's a more palatable alternative which recognizes that poor people of all races need decent jobs.

But even these local measures may not be enough to employ everyone. There simply may be no alternative to government action if legitimate work is to be reintroduced as the prevailing way of life in poor neighborhoods.

I call upon government to create a new labor-intensive public enterprise to perform services valued by taxpayers. We taxpayers all know there's plenty of infrastructure work to do. Schools are crumbling. Subway and bus stations are strewn with graffiti and railroad rights-of-way are littered with trash. Public parks in cities and suburbs alike are poorly maintained.

Critics of governments jobs programs usually say it's the private sector's responsibility to create jobs. I agree in principle. But when the private labor market comes up woefully short, as it does today in the inner city, then government must step in if people are to work.

How quickly we forget in this post-Perestroika era that the military once was what I've just proposed -- a labor-intensive public enterprise employing thousands of marginally skilled workers who helped produce goods and services -- namely the national defense -- that taxpayers really wanted.

Let's elevate America's infrastructure to the same valued status and alleviate urban unemployment in the bargain. What's several billion in new public dollars invested in schools, parks and people when compared with the billions more now spent much less productively on public assistance for the able-bodied and extra policemen and prisons?

That brings me to my third and final focus area -- helping our racially diverse society work more harmoniously. Belief in racial inclusion goes to the marrow of my bones. My great, great grandfather was a slave named George Latimer. He escaped from his master in Virginia. Latimer fled to Massachusetts, where white abolitionists rallied around him and prevented his recapture.

The incident inspired John Greenleaf Whittier to write a poem about it, entitled "From Massachusetts to Virginia." By the way, Latimer was the father of the celebrated inventor, Lewis Latimer, and the grandfather of the cousin I mentioned earlier, Winifred Norman, who is the goddaughter of Eugene Kinckle Jones.

I fully understand the instinct to separate when we are incessantly under economic siege. When we're still discriminated against some forty years after the Brown decision. And when, thanks to those recurring images on evening newscasts of black youngsters being hauled off to jail, even our honor students are trailed like common thieves when they enter stores.

Even so, it's suicidal economically to become so bitter that we isolate ourselves from others. America is a robustly multicultural society. So is its labor market. For example, I read recently of a small manufacturing firm in Southern California which has 200 workers representing 30 nationalities. That's the new U.S. labor market. We deny this reality at our -- and our children's -- peril.

For all our suffering, we cannot become so fixated on our problems that we ignore our commonality of interest with others. All of the problems I've addressed this evening --inadequate schooling, idle and alienated youngsters, and chronic unemployment -- cut across racial lines. If we're ever to deal with them on a scale remotely equal to their size, we must coalesce with people of other complexions who feel the same pain, even if it isn't yet as acute.

For instance, the expanded Earned Income Tax Credit and, soon I hope, universal health would never happen were they seen solely as our issues. Yet both are of enormous benefit to our people.

Whites of all religions have oppressed us at one time or another. Mormons, Catholics, Jews, Episcopalians, Baptists. We've even been oppressed by our own on occasion. It's a form of reverse racism to single out any specific group of whites for vilification.

Many whites of good will have accompanied us on our long journey for racial, social and economic justice. None has matched the Jewish community as long distance runners in the civil rights movement.

Just as we denounce misleading media stereotypes of African-Americans, it is morally repugnant as well to impugn an entire people, especially long-standing allies, like Jews, because of the unconscionable behavior of some of them.

What constructive purpose is served by driving deeper wedges between races? Of course we must root out any vestiges of racism. But let's not wallow forever in real or perceived grievances lest we become Bosnia some day.

I say, let's get on with making our gloriously multicultural society work. If Nelson Mandela and F.W. DeKlerk can bury the hatchets of hatred and oppression in the sand, instead of one another's heads, and get on with South Africa's future, then surely so can we.

At the same time, our allies should understand that serious-minded African Americans must be free to discuss the acute pain afflicting our community. Even if that means conferring with those with whom we vehemently disagree on other issues.

Dialoguing, even arguing, with those who hold abhorrent views is difficult yet sometimes necessary. Otherwise, opposing sides remain at loggerheads to the detriment of progress. How would U.S. relations with arch-enemy China ever have been normalized had Richard Nixon never met with Mao Tse Tong?

Would there ever have been a Camp David accord had Begin refused to dialogue with Sadat? Did Yitzhak Rabin compromise his moral integrity by meeting with Yassar Arafat as a prelude to today's Middle East peace? Would apartheid ever have ended had Mandela adamantly refused to negotiate with his people's brutal and hated oppressors?

As Churchill once said, "it's better to jaw, jaw, than to war, war." The time-honored role of the Urban League is to build bridges, not just between poverty and plenty, but between peoples of all races and persuasions.

The challenges I've outlined tonight are formidable. But seeing the thousands of Urban League faithful out there and feeling the energy emanating from you, I'm even more confident than when I took office that we're equal to them.

Why am I optimistic? Because Americans are beginning to see the connection between the nation's economic competitiveness and their own quality of life, on the one hand, and the decline of cities and the persistence of urban poverty, on the other.

They're finally connecting the dots between these phenomena. That's due in no small part to a President and First Lady who really understand and genuinely care about these issues, about our issues. That's a rare and welcome combination in elected officials these days.

I see a greater sense of shared risk, which is the necessary prelude to shared responsibility for finding solutions to our problems. And there's a growing sense that the social compact between society and the individual needs strengthening on both sides.

One side defines what people owe society -- personal responsibility, nurturing their children, supporting themselves and their families, and abiding by society's laws. The other side defines what society owes its citizens -- the opportunity to be self-reliant and protection from anarchy at home and invasion from abroad.

In recent decades, important elements of both sides of the social compact have eroded due to the profound economic changes sweeping the developed world, including our own country.

Many individuals are shirking responsibility and wreaking havoc on fellow citizens. Meanwhile, society has reneged on its obligation of providing reasonable access to opportunity for all. The result is the chaos we now see in cities.

We of the Urban League must work with our own in restoring personal responsibility -- taking family obligations, child-rearing, education, self-reliance and citizenship seriously.

But society must update and then uphold its end of the bargain. What use is talk of opportunity when poor people see so little of it? The social compact must be revised so that self-reliance, with dignity and a decent standard of living, is an everyday reality instead of empty rhetoric.

To pursue the ambitious agenda I've outlined tonight, the Urban League must become a force to be reckoned with, not merely another minority face at the table.

That means reinvigorating and focusing our movement for maximum effectiveness. That means creating a state-of-the-art organization that's equipped today for the 21st century.

That means speaking once again with the authority that derives from our own research, our own innovative yet realistic ideas, and our own thorough critiques of the policies and approaches of others.

And that means backing our intellectual credibility with the clout of a vast network of influential and effective affiliates which are deeply rooted in their communities.

This is a tall order, but I'm absolutely confident that we're equal to it. Why? Because of the firm foundation that you in this vast audience have built over 84 years of service to our folk. Because of our unparalleled strengths -- a proud history, a treasured household name, a terrific track record, a vast army of volunteers, and an affiliate network that delivers the goods every day for our people.

I'm often asked in interviews whether the Urban League has lost touch, whether we're relevant any longer to the needs of ordinary, as opposed to affluent, African Americans. What's my reply?

Just come with me, I say, to Africa Square Park in Liberty City and listen to T. Willard Fair tell you how the Miami Urban League recaptured that park from drug dealers and transformed it into a safe haven for children, complete with constructive programs after school and over the summer.

Come to Memphis and talk, as I did, to the public housing mother of five who told me how she's on her way to economic self-sufficiency thanks to the Urban League's Skill Center training.

Come with me to the Chicago Urban League to see Jim Compton's impressive research department which prepared the definitive state-wide study of school finance inequities that cheat poor children of better educations.

That's the impressive and relevant work that skeptics would see in the field today were they actually to take a look.

Still, to those of us in this remarkable and respected movement, I say, that's great, but not yet good enough. Together we must take the Urban League to an entirely new plateau of effectiveness and impact for our people.

That's "the something more important" that my daughter predicted I was being saved for. That is your charge to me as I take office, And that is my challenge to you tonight. That is the manifest destiny of this great movement.

Ladies and gentlemen, it's time we get on with our calling. Let this 84th Annual Conference of the Urban League begin.