

Bankole Thompson Concludes Historic Service on SCLC National Board with Testament to Legacy of Bernard LaFayette Jr

DETROIT, MI, UNITED STATES, June 25, 2026 /EINPresswire.com/ -- On June 22, the nationally acclaimed Detroit journalist, author, and standard-bearer for economic justice issues Bankole Thompson formally concluded his historic service on the National Board of Directors of the Atlanta-based Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), ending a distinguished tenure that reflected one of the most consequential intergenerational alliances in modern civil rights leadership. It effectively marked the closing of a chapter that intertwined one of the nation's most influential contemporary journalistic voices with one of the last surviving architects of the Civil Rights Movement.



Bankole Thompson, the Founder and Chairman of The PuLSE Institute presents the Global Civil Rights Leadership Award to his longtime friend and mentor, the late Rev. Dr. Bernard LaFayette Jr., a giant of the Civil Rights Movement.

His decision not to seek another term comes following the death of his mentor, confidant, and close friend, Rev. Dr. Bernard LaFayette Jr., the legendary civil rights strategist, Freedom Rider, and architect of the Voting Rights Act of 1965, who served as Chairman of the SCLC National Board until his passing on March 5 at the age of 85.

In 2023, Dr. LaFayette personally recruited and nominated Thompson to serve on the SCLC National Board of Directors, making him the first journalist in American history to serve on the highest governing body of the organization founded by Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., who served as its first president.

Dr. LaFayette told Thompson at the time, "With the all the remarkable things you are involved in and are doing, you could really help SCLC advance into the future and bring back the distinction

it once had by serving on the national board," after the journalist returned back to Detroit from a four-day visit to Selma, Alabama in May of 2023, where he spent several days with the civil rights leader.

While Thompson's three-year tenure on the board was historic in its own right, the conclusion of his service is now drawing national attention because of the extraordinary document he left behind.

His unusual eight-page resignation letter, submitted to SCLC leadership and fellow board members on May 18, has already emerged as a significant historical document. The letter, written with uncommon literary force and emotional depth, is already regarded by some within the organization as an important addition to SCLC's institutional archives, and reads less like a traditional resignation and more like a final eulogy to a man Thompson knew and admired for more than two decades.

Part tribute, part historical reflection, and part moral meditation, the document offers a powerful defense of Dr. LaFayette's place in American history while examining the rare bond between two men separated by generation but united by a shared commitment to justice. Its prose frequently rises to Shakespearean cadence, weaving together memory, history, gratitude, grief, and moral obligation in a turbulent age.

For more than twenty years, Thompson and LaFayette cultivated a relationship rooted in mutual respect, intellectual exchange, and a shared commitment to the unfinished work of civil rights, economic justice, and democratic renewal.

Before his death, the two men spoke regularly, often every other week. Their conversations ranged from the future of SCLC and the state of American democracy to the enduring relevance of nonviolence and the next generation of moral leadership. That included taking on issues of poverty, voting rights and the unfinished work of economic justice.

A year before his death, Dr. LaFayette had begun discussing with Thompson the possibility of writing a major book on civil rights and the two talked about Thompson making frequent trips to LaFayette's home in Tuskegee, Alabama for the commencement of the potential project.

LaFayette believed that preserving the movement's legacy required more than historical recollection. It demanded interpretation, context, and moral analysis. It required not merely historians but interpreters, respected communicators capable of connecting past struggles to contemporary challenges

He believed Thompson possessed those gifts and is uniquely positioned to undertake such a project.

Indeed, Dr. LaFayette repeatedly told Thompson that his presence on the National Board was

important because SCLC needed a critically acclaimed journalist and public intellectual deeply committed to civil rights and democracy to help guide the organization into a new era in navigating the rapidly changing social and political landscape.

He admired Thompson's ability to explain the interconnected forces of race, poverty, economic inequality, political power, and democratic participation, all issues that stood at the center of Dr. King's vision during the final years of his life.

That confidence carried extraordinary weight coming from a man whose own place in American history is beyond dispute.

A Freedom Rider who repeatedly risked his life confronting segregation across the South, Dr. LaFayette emerged as one of the principal strategists of the Civil Rights Movement and one of the chief architects of the Voting Rights Act of 1965, legislation that fundamentally transformed American democracy.

As a close associate of Dr. King, he helped organize some of the movement's most consequential campaigns and spent decades teaching the principles of nonviolent conflict reconciliation throughout the world.

To generations of activists and scholars, Dr. LaFayette became one of the foremost guardians of King's moral philosophy.

To Thompson, he became something more personal.

"I treasured Dr. LaFayette's friendship as much as I revered his leadership," Thompson said. "He was mentor, teacher, counselor, historian, strategist, and friend. Every conversation with him was a master class in courage, discipline, humility, and moral clarity."

The significance of the Thompson-LaFayette alliance extended beyond personal friendship.

It represented a bridge between the generation that helped transform America through sacrifice and direct action and a generation committed to preserving, interpreting, and extending that legacy through journalism, scholarship, civic leadership, and public discourse.

LaFayette saw in Thompson not merely a journalist, but a public intellectual capable of carrying forward the movement's moral vocabulary into a new century defined by widening economic inequality, threats to democratic institutions, and persistent racial disparities.

Likewise, Thompson viewed LaFayette as a living embodiment of the highest ideals of the Civil Rights Movement.

Although his tenure on the SCLC National Board has concluded, Thompson remains one of the

nation's most prominent voices advancing conversations around economic justice, democracy, and civic responsibility.

For example, just days before concluding his service on the board, Thompson accepted the invitation to deliver the opening Juneteenth keynote address at the 15th Annual National Civil Rights Conference in Detroit, organized by the Florida-based National Education and Empowerment Coalition.

The conference, which has emerged as an important gathering place for civil rights leaders, educators, policymakers, and advocates, was held in Detroit at the Curtis L. Ivery Downtown Campus of Wayne County Community College District. The previous year's conference was hosted at Fisk University in Nashville, one of the nation's most distinguished historically Black universities. The 2027 conference is planned for Savannah, Georgia.

Thompson's keynote address titled, "The Battle for America's Story: Media, Power and Economic Justice" challenged attendees to examine how narratives shape public policy, influence democratic participation, and determine whether the realities of poverty and inequality remain visible in the national conversation.

The address reflected themes that have defined Thompson's public work for decades and that is the fact that economic justice is not separate from civil rights, but its unfinished chapter.

That conviction informed the decision to honor Dr. LaFayette in July of 2025 when The PuLSE Institute, the national anti-poverty and economic justice think tank inspired by Thompson, paid tribute to Dr. LaFayette during its annual Civil Rights Leadership Dinner.

The evening included a surprise birthday celebration for the civil rights icon, an occasion now largely remembered as the final public birthday celebration of his remarkable life.

Following Dr. LaFayette's passing, Thompson further honored his mentor by dedicating his newly released sixth book, HOPE: On The Mountain Of Fear, to the civil rights giant.

The book features a foreword by Sister Simone Campbell, a recipient of the 2022 Presidential Medal of Freedom and one of the nation's leading voices for economic justice in the modern American Catholic Church, and an epilogue by Marc H. Morial, President and CEO of the National Urban League.

Beginning this fall, the book will serve as required reading in three sociology courses at Dillard University in New Orleans.

Thompson occupies a distinct place in American journalism by becoming one of the first Black editors in the nation to conduct exclusive sit-down interviews with former President Barack Obama. His own public career has earned national recognition.

In 2022, he delivered the keynote address for Brown University's Forum on Race and Democracy, where Brown President Christina Paxson gave the welcome and closing remarks in a keynote described as a "tour de force."

In 2020, he was selected as the twentieth keynote speaker for Michigan State University's prestigious Slavery to Freedom: An American Odyssey Lecture Series, whose speakers have included many of the nation's most celebrated civil rights leaders including the late civil rights heroes Congressman John Lewis and Harry Belafonte.

In a rare honor for a living journalist, the University of Michigan's Bentley Historical Library established the Bankole Thompson Papers in 2015, preserving his work alongside the papers of every Michigan governor.

His acclaimed book *Fiery Conscience* published in 2023 about his decades of speaking truth to power and reviewed by *Forbes*, is listed as a reference within the Jean Blackwell Hutson Research and Reference Division of the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture in New York.

In 2018, late civil rights leader, the Rev. Jesse L. Jackson Sr. personally presented Thompson with the Rainbow PUSH Coalition's Let Freedom Ring Journalism Award during commemorations marking the fiftieth anniversary of Dr. King's assassination.

As Thompson closes this chapter of public service on SCLC National Board, his resignation letter stands as both a personal testament and a historical reflection.

More than a farewell to a revered organization, it is a tribute to a friendship that endured for over two decades and a declaration that the ideals championed by Dr. King and Dr. LaFayette remain unfinished obligations for future generations.

"History will remember Rev. Dr. Bernard LaFayette Jr., as one of the architects of America's democratic promise. I will remember him as a friend who challenged me to think deeper, lead better, and never surrender faith in the possibility of justice. His life expanded the moral possibilities of this nation. The responsibility now belongs to those of us who remain," Thompson said. "The greatest tribute we can offer Dr. LaFayette is not remembrance alone. It is continued service. It is pursuing economic justice when it is denied and refusing to surrender our faith in the moral possibilities of America."

Perhaps most importantly, Thompson's departure from the SCLC National Board does not signal a retreat from public life or from the causes that have defined his career. Rather, it reflects a transition from one historic chapter of service to another.

While deeply shaped by the lessons of the Civil Rights Movement, Thompson has increasingly distinguished himself as a visionary thinker whose work focuses not only on the moral

challenges of the present but also on preparing the next generation to confront the challenges of the future.

Throughout his career, Thompson has argued that the struggle for economic justice represents the unfinished business of the Civil Rights Movement and that the future of American democracy will ultimately depend upon whether the nation can reconcile prosperity with opportunity, power with responsibility, and innovation with human dignity.

That vision was evident just days before the conclusion of his SCLC National Board service when he accepted the invitation to deliver the opening Juneteenth keynote address at the 15th Annual National Civil Rights Conference in Detroit, organized by the Florida-based National Education and Empowerment Coalition. The previous year's conference was hosted at Fisk University in Nashville and the 2027 conference is slated for Savannah, Georgia.

His keynote, titled "The Battle for America's Story: Media, Power and Economic Justice," challenged leaders to consider how narratives shape public policy, democratic participation, and public understanding of poverty, inequality, and social mobility.

The address reflected a central theme of Thompson's public work and that is the fact that economic justice is not a peripheral concern of democracy but one of its defining tests.

Indeed, those who have worked closely with Thompson often describe him as a futurist whose ideas consistently look beyond immediate political cycles toward the long-term health of democratic institutions and communities.

That future-oriented vision is perhaps best reflected in the institutions he has built.

In 2028, The PuLSE Institute, chaired by Thompson will celebrate its tenth anniversary. Over the last decade, The Institute has emerged as a respected platform for advancing conversations around poverty, economic mobility, corporate responsibility, civil rights, public policy, and leadership. Its high-profile speaker forum has featured national and internationally renowned leaders including Dr. Natalia Kanem, former United Nations Under-Secretary and Executive Director of UNFPA, former U.S. Ambassador Anne Derse, United States Bankruptcy Judge Mark Randon among others.

Yet Thompson's most recent undertaking may be his most ambitious.

The establishment of The Bankole Thompson Center, a national youth leadership and empowerment initiative, reflects his growing focus on cultivating the next generation of civic, business, and community leaders.

The Center is chaired by former White House spokesman Robert Weiner, who has long admired Thompson's work and shares his belief that leadership development is essential to preserving

democratic institutions and expanding opportunity.

Together, The PuLSE Institute and The Bankole Thompson Center represent more than organizations. They embody a philosophy that has guided Thompson's work for decades. That is the fact that enduring social change requires not only critique but construction. Not only commentary but institution-building and not only remembering history but preparing future generations to shape it.

In many respects, this commitment to building institutions was one of the qualities Dr. LaFayette most admired in Thompson.

LaFayette understood that every generation must find its own methods for advancing justice. While his generation transformed America through direct action and nonviolent resistance, he believed future generations would also need intellectual institutions, leadership academies, and platforms capable of preparing people for the moral and economic challenges ahead.

It was one of the many reasons he encouraged Thompson's leadership and viewed him as an important voice and an asset to SCLC in the continuing struggle for democracy and human dignity.

As Thompson concludes his historic tenure with SCLC National Board, his work continues to reflect the lesson he learned from his mentor: that the pursuit of justice is not merely about preserving a legacy, but expanding it.

And if Rev. Dr. Bernard LaFayette Jr. helped America imagine a more just democracy, Bankole Thompson remains committed to helping future generations build one.

BANKOLE THOMPSON

The PuLSE Institute

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