

Bankole Thompson Devotes Major Chapter of Forthcoming Seventh Book to Late Mentor, King Confidant Bernard Lafayette Jr

In "Bankole Thompson's 12 Moral Questions," Nationally Acclaimed Journalist Brings Douglass, LaFayette into Examination of the Nation's Moral Inheritance

DETROIT, MI, UNITED STATES, September 1, 2026 /EINPresswire.com/ -- Nationally acclaimed journalist, author and public intellectual Bankole Thompson has devoted a major chapter of his forthcoming seventh book, "Bankole Thompson's 12 Moral Questions: Frederick Douglass and the Soul of America at 250," to his late mentor, Rev. Dr. Bernard LaFayette Jr., the legendary civil rights leader, Freedom Rider, nonviolence authority and close associate of Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.



Rev. Dr. Bernard Lafayette Jr. speaking at The PuLSE Institute's 2025 National Civil Rights Leadership Award Dinner held at the Detroit Athletic Club.

The chapter takes on added historical significance because the book arrives only months after LaFayette's death on March 5, 2026, at age 85, and as the United States observes the 250th anniversary of its founding. LaFayette was one of the pivotal figures of the modern Civil Rights Movement and spent his life attempting to force American democracy closer to the promises proclaimed at the nation's birth.

But Thompson said the chapter is neither a conventional biography nor simply a tribute.

It is his own reckoning with what he learned during a two-decade relationship with LaFayette and with the questions LaFayette's life, philosophy and understanding of America leave for the generations that follow him.

"I am not attempting to write Bernard LaFayette's biography. I am writing about the Bernard LaFayette I came to know, the mentor, teacher, strategist and friend whose understanding of

nonviolence, leadership, young people, democracy and moral courage profoundly shaped my own thinking," Thompson said. "After two decades of conversations with him, I wanted to ask a different question: What does LaFayette's witness require of us now?"

That question places LaFayette within the larger intellectual architecture of "Bankole Thompson's 12 Moral Questions: Frederick Douglass and the Soul of America at 250," which uses Frederick Douglass as a central moral witness to interrogate the condition and future of the American experiment at 250.

Thompson's chapter on LaFayette creates an intriguing historical continuum: Douglass confronted the contradiction between America's democratic creed and slavery in the 19th century. King and LaFayette confronted the contradiction between that creed and Jim Crow in the 20th century. America at 250 must determine what it will do with the unfinished questions those generations left behind.

The chapter does not disclose all of Thompson's private conversations with LaFayette. Instead, Thompson examines LaFayette through the lens of a mentee who spent years listening to him, questioning him and observing how one of the architects of the movement understood leadership and social change.

Their relationship eventually entered the institutional history of the movement itself.

In 2023, LaFayette, serving as Chairman of the National Board of Directors of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, the organization founded and led by King, nominated Thompson to serve on SCLC's National Board. Thompson accepted the invitation and became the first journalist in American history to serve on SCLC's highest decision-making body.

For Thompson, the appointment carried particular meaning because it came from the man who had been his mentor for two decades.

LaFayette's credentials place him among the consequential figures of the American freedom struggle. A participant in the Nashville sit-in movement and a Freedom Rider, he became a leader in the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, helped lay the groundwork for the voting rights campaign in Selma, Alabama, served in King's inner circle and was National Coordinator of the 1968 Poor People's Campaign. He later became one of the world's foremost teachers of Kingian nonviolence.

His relationship with King was not merely ceremonial or historical. LaFayette worked directly with the civil rights leader and was with King in Memphis during the final period of King's life. For decades afterward, he carried King's philosophy of nonviolent social transformation into classrooms, institutions and communities around the world.

A Final Public Celebration in Detroit

The chapter also carries the emotional weight of what became one of LaFayette's final major public celebrations.

On July 22, 2025, Thompson's Detroit-based national anti-poverty and economic justice think tank, The PuLSE Institute, brought LaFayette to the Detroit Athletic Club for its National Civil Rights Leadership Dinner and presented him with the Global Civil Rights Leadership Award.

The Institute also surprised LaFayette with an early celebration of his 85th birthday, which fell on July 29. As a birthday cake was brought into the room, guests celebrated the civil rights icon while LaFayette reflected on his experiences with King. The gathering would become especially poignant after his death less than eight months later.

During his visit to Detroit, LaFayette also reflected on Thompson's work and future role in the struggle for social change, declaring: "Bankole Thompson. You are the next level of global leadership for social change."

For Thompson, the forthcoming chapter is therefore about more than remembrance. It is about inheritance.

"History becomes meaningless when we simply celebrate the people who made it without confronting what they were asking us to become," Thompson said. "Dr. LaFayette belonged to a generation of young people who did not wait for permission to challenge the moral failures of their nation. My concern at America's 250th anniversary is whether we are preparing another generation with that same courage, discipline and sense of obligation."

Douglass, LaFayette and America at 250

Bankole Thompson's 12 Moral Questions is conceived as an interrogation of the American experiment rather than a conventional anniversary volume. Through 12 defining questions, Thompson examines democracy, truth, racial justice, economic inequality, human dignity, leadership, hope and the obligations one generation owes the next. Frederick Douglass serves as a central moral presence in the work not as a figure confined to the 19th century, but as a voice through which the promises and contradictions of the republic can still be examined.

The LaFayette chapter brings that inquiry into the living memory of the modern Civil Rights Movement.

What Douglass demanded of America in one century, King and LaFayette confronted in another. The question Thompson places before America at 250 is what the present generation will do with the inheritance they left behind.

Thompson is a twice-weekly opinion columnist for The Detroit News, author of six previous

books, host of Bankole's Nation, founder and chairman of The PuLSE Institute and founder of the Bankole Thompson Center, a youth leadership initiative.

His body of work has focused extensively on democracy, racial and economic justice, poverty, leadership and the moral responsibilities of American institutions. The University of Michigan's Bentley Historical Library established The Bankole Thompson Papers in 2015 to preserve his work and writings for scholarly research, a rare honor for a living journalist.

His 2023 book, *Fiery Conscience*, further established the moral-conscience framework that has increasingly defined his public writing and was reviewed by *Forbes*. His sixth book, *HOPE: On The Mountain Of Fear*, was released in May 2026 with a foreword written by Presidential Medal of Freedom Recipient Sister Simone Campbell.

"Bankole Thompson's 12 Moral Questions: Frederick Douglass and the Soul of America at 250" will be Thompson's seventh book.

The chapter devoted to LaFayette, Thompson said, represents one of its most personal examinations.

"Frederick Douglass belongs to the inheritance of the nation. Bernard LaFayette belongs to the inheritance of the movement. But for me, LaFayette was also personal," Thompson said. "I had the extraordinary privilege of knowing the man behind the history. This chapter is my attempt to consider what I heard, what I witnessed, what I learned and what his life now asks of America."

At 250 years, the republic is old enough to celebrate its history. Thompson's forthcoming book asks whether it is courageous enough to answer it.

ABOUT BANKOLE THOMPSON

Bankole Thompson is a nationally acclaimed journalist, author, columnist and public intellectual whose work examines democracy, racial and economic justice, poverty, leadership and the American conscience. He is a twice-weekly opinion columnist for *The Detroit News*, host of *Bankole's Nation*, founder and chairman of The PuLSE Institute and founder of the Bankole Thompson Center.

Thompson's work occupies a distinctive intersection between journalism, public scholarship and the living history of the modern Civil Rights Movement. In 2023, Rev. Dr. Bernard LaFayette Jr., then chairman of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference National Board and a close associate of Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., nominated Thompson to serve on the SCLC National Board, making him the first journalist in the organization's history to serve on its highest governing body.

In August 2026, Thompson was invited by the family of Dr. William G. Anderson, the pioneering

physician, civil rights leader and president of the historic Albany Movement who worked alongside King, to deliver the eulogy at Anderson's homegoing service following his death at age 98. The invitation further reflected Thompson's unusual role as a contemporary interpreter of the generation that transformed the nation's struggle for democracy and civil rights.

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His forthcoming seventh book, "Bankole Thompson's 12 Moral Questions: Frederick Douglass and the Soul of America at 250," extends that body of work into an examination of the American experiment at its 250th anniversary, bringing history, personal witness and contemporary moral inquiry into conversation about what the nation has been and what it must yet become.

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