

**Proposal: that Gamaliel Affiliate Organizations Support as a National Issue
The Reauthorization of the Voting Rights Act (VRA)
March 14, 2006**

March 14 Vote by the Council of Presidents

The Steering Committee of Gamaliel Foundation's National Council of Presidents (Rev. Kevin Turman, Chair) will carry a motion to the Gamaliel Council of Presidents on March 14, 2006, that this proposal be taken to affiliate leadership tables (i.e., boards of directors) for discussion and a vote. A favorable vote on the proposal by 2/3 of local boards will make Reauthorization of The Voting Rights Act a Gamaliel National Issue. The presidents will report their local boards' decisions on May 23 at the Council of Presidents face-to-face meeting in Chicago. On March 2, 2006, the Council of Presidents Steering Committee received a briefing on the proposal by Rev. Michael Harrison (Union Baptist Church) of ACTION-Youngstown, Chair of Gamaliel's African American Leadership Commission.

Executive Summary of the Issue

The objective of this national issue will be to achieve "temporary renewal" by the Federal government of the "special provisions" of the 1964 Voting Rights Act which are set to expire in 2007. This work will be accomplished in partnership with strategic allies through our joint efforts to influence our elected federal representatives. We will further seek to educate our elected state representatives of the essential importance of vigorous enforcement of the provisions of the Voting Rights Act.

Description of "The Problem"

On August 6, 1965, after years of the struggle for Civil Rights, President Johnson signed into law the Voting Rights Act (VRA), hailed by many as the most effective civil rights law ever. VRA assures that minority groups have the opportunity for equal voting protection and equal voting power. VRA removed legalized barriers to voting for African Americans, Latino Americans, Asian Americans and Native Americans. The Voting Rights Act provides broad political equality and political empowerment norms, which define equality as participation and inclusion of all groups in determining public policy.

Section 5, the federal monitor and observer provisions (Sections 6-9) and the bilingual voting material provision (Section 203) are known as the *special provisions of the VRA*. These special provisions have a remedial purpose and limited duration. While the permanent provisions of the VRA do not require legislative reauthorization, the *special provisions* will expire at the end of the period of years specified by Congress when enacted or renewed.

The *special provisions* allow for significant federal oversight of state and local voting functions for jurisdictions deemed to have the worst and most persistent histories of voting discrimination against their minority populations. This heightened oversight is intended to identify and prevent proposed voting changes that worsen the position of minority voters, or just as significantly, to deter covered jurisdictions from seeking to propose such voting changes from the outset.

2005 marked the 40th anniversary of the Voting Rights Act and the beginning of debate (anticipated for 109th Congress) concerning the *special provisions* that expire in 2007. Congress is mandated to vote on the *special provisions*. They have 3 choices: to abolish them, to make them permanent, or to make them NOT PERMANENT but temporary for re-visitation in future years.

The Solution

The special provisions in the Voting

Rights Act need to be temporarily renewed. Temporary renewal will demand re-visitation in future years, thus giving the public an opportunity to ensure states remove any prejudicial redistricting that affects Voters Rights. Through the Federal Government we have the power to mandate equality if states practice discriminatory redistricting. Permanency, though sounding good, may have the disadvantage of locking out minority voting rights by removing recourse for justice in the case of any discriminatory redistricting by states.

The Targets, Demands and Timetable

At our 2006 Public Meetings, Governors

would be asked, “Will you support our campaign to achieve temporary renewal by the Federal government of the special provisions of the 1964 Voting Rights Act which are set to expire in 2007? And will you write a public letter next week to our state’s federal congressional delegation asking them to join you in support of our campaign?” If the Governor is not present, local state representatives will be asked the same first question, and then, “And will you join us at the Governor’s office next week to ask that he/she also join the campaign?” In 2007, the local organization will seek meetings with federal representatives (Congresspersons and Senators), asking them to support the campaign and to attend our Public Meeting to declare their support publicly.

Organizing Process for Gamaliel Affiliates

In 2006, the local organization will

create a VRA Taskforce whose members will study the issue, educate all member congregations, seek local sponsors for the campaign, conduct a local press conference and work to get the governor (and state representatives) to attend the fall Public Meeting. The Taskforce will continue in 2007 to set up meetings of leadership with federal representatives, inviting them to attend the banquet to declare their support for the campaign and their agreement to attend the Fall 2007 public meetings. Note: on May 23, 2006, the Council of Presidents will announce to Gamaliel Foundation that the issue has been accepted as a National Issue. The Council of Presidents, in consultation with the Executive Director, will name a National Task Force. The Executive Director will assign staff to the Taskforce.

Benefits for Gamaliel Affiliate Organizations

Local organizations will have a moral

high ground issue. The campaign could attract new members and allies (particularly among African American and Latino organizations and congregations). The campaign can involve alienated, low-income residents of our neighborhoods, benefiting both the organization and local congregations. The campaign takes the organization immediately to state-wide (Governor) and federal levels. Leaders will be challenged to grow into these new levels, to build new local alliances and to develop the organizing skills necessary in this state/federal campaign.

Benefits to Gamaliel

Declaring as a Gamaliel national issue the

renewal of the Voting Rights Act will place Gamaliel on moral high ground and at the heart of the 21st Century Civil Rights Movement. The campaign will allow Gamaliel to have a clear stance addressing minority voter interest, and would give Gamaliel a place in The Voting Rights Act Collaborative. The VRA Collaborative represents communities affected by the Act, has a unique capacity to provide accurate information, brings together groups with strong litigation experience protecting minority voting rights and developing policy. Gamaliel would join in this collaborative at a national level with groups such as NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund, Mexican American Legal Defense and Educational Fund, National Council of La Raza, Native American Rights Fund, The Leadership Conference on Civil Rights Education Fund, People For the American Way, The Interfaith Alliance, ACLU, Service Employees International Union, AFL-CIO, Common Cause, Lawyers' Committee for Civil Rights Under Law, National Asian Pacific American Legal Consortium, National Congress of American Indians.