

# Rich Roots of Civil Activism, Evangelism Run Deep in 'Pray on MLK' Founder's Life

The founder of Pray on MLK, Jonathan Tremaine Thomas, is a fifth-generation Black pastor who descended from a long line of evangelists, preachers and missionaries dating back to the time of slavery in America. The celebration of Black History Month in February features Christian leaders and civil-rights activists like Thomas whose lifetime works served to advance the gospel in the U.S. and abroad.

Thomas, the founder of Civil Righteousness and the global Pray on MLK movement, is related to the worldwide music legend and civil-rights activist Dr. Nina Simone. Born Feb. 21, 1933, Eunice Kathleen Waymon—known professionally as Dr. Simone during her lifetime—was the sixth of eight children born to Methodist preachers and church planters across the South.

"I come from a rich legacy of clergy and missionaries—not just pastors and evangelists—but the whole fivefold ministry dating back to slavery," says Thomas.

His great-grandparents, John Devane Waymon and Mary Kate Waymon, were born on a slave plantation and traveled as ministers throughout the Deep South to sharecropper fields, preaching the gospel and planting churches.

Their daughter Eunice played piano from an early age in her parents' tent-revival meetings before her worldwide fame in adulthood.

"So my family line is a rich mixture of clergy as well as a few famous civil-rights activists and voices," says Thomas, whose home and ministry are in St. Louis, Missouri. "It's been quite an interesting ride to see and to stand on their

shoulders, to really feel that I've entered into the legacy and the inheritance that was passed down to me."

Thomas says his father also "was a lover of God."

"Believe it or not, my great-grandmother was half Native American and African," says Thomas, who considers himself fortunate to have known her, unlike his grandfather. "He passed away before I knew him, but I did know my great-grandmother, who was a tent revivalist in her early days."

All of the Waymon children became incredible artists, musicians, intellectuals, pastors and preachers as adults, including Dr. Simone who, Thomas says, "was really anointed from the Lord from birth, musically."

Eunice Waymon was trained at the Julliard School of Music and the Curtis Institute of Music, among the foremost musical institutions in the world.

"Her story is really profound," Thomas says. "She became a jazz and blues singer—a global music legend—and a civil-rights activist. She was a really angry activist who left America because of the racial problems here and became famous pretty much across the globe."

Dr. Simone, who died in 2003, made a resurgence in America and was inducted into the 2019 GRAMMY Hall of Fame posthumously for her accomplishments as a singer, songwriter and musician across multiple genres including Gospel music.

Thomas says her life is just one in a rich legacy of leaders in ministry and activism in his family tree.

"Her mother and my great-grandmother Mary Kate Waymon—the matriarch of our family—was so deeply influential in my life, even though she passed away when I was really young," Thomas says.

"I really examined and studied her life more through journals

and family stories. She deeply impacted and formed my mother and my grandmother, my father, our whole family," he says.

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**Steve Rees** *is a former general assignment reporter who, with one other journalist, first wrote about the national men's movement Promise Keepers from his home in Colorado. Rees and Promise Keepers Founder Bill McCartney attended the Boulder Vineyard. Today Rees writes in his free time.*

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