Inspired by Gandhi and the Power of Nonviolence:

African American Gandhians
Sue Bailey and Howard Thurman

Howard Thurman (1899–1981) was a prominent theologian and civil rights leader who served as a spiritual mentor to Martin Luther King, Jr. Sue Bailey Thurman, (1903–1996) was an American author, lecturer, historian and civil rights activist. In 1934, Howard and Sue Thurman, were invited to join the Christian Pilgrimage of Friendship to India, where they met with Mahatma Gandhi. When Thurman asked Gandhi what message he should take back to the United States, Gandhi said he regretted not having made nonviolence more visible worldwide and famously remarked, "It may be through the Negroes that the unadulterated message of nonviolence will be delivered to the world." In 1944, Thurman left his tenured position at Howard to help the Fellowship of Reconciliation establish the Church for the Fellowship of All Peoples in San Francisco. He initially served as co-pasteor with a white minister, Dr. Alfred Fisk. Many of those in congregation were African Americans who had migrated to San Francisco for jobs in the defense industry. This was the first major interracial, interdenominational church in the United States.
“It is to love people when they are your enemy, to forgive people when they seek to destroy your life…”

This gives **Mahatma Gandhi** a place along side all of the great redeemers of the human race.

**There is a striking similarity between him and Jesus….**

Howard Thurman

Source:
Howard Thurman; *Thurman Papers, Volume 3*; “Eulogy for Mahatma Gandhi:” February 1, 1948; pp. 260
Benjamin Mays (1894–1984)

was a Baptist minister, civil rights leader, and a distinguished Atlanta educator, who served as president of Morehouse College from 1940 to 1967. When Martin Luther King, Jr., attended Morehouse during the 1940s, he listened intently to Mays’s weekly talks to students and would later describe him as a “spiritual mentor.” Mays also told students about Mahatma Gandhi, who once met with Mays. During the early 1960s, Mays once hired King to teach a course at Morehouse, although King soon decided to give up his teaching post in order to focus on his expanding role as a civil rights leader. Mays’s wide-ranging leadership would include becoming the first black president of the Atlanta Board of Education as well as serving on the Advisory Council of the Peace Corps, the board of directors of the United Negro College Fund, and the board of the National Commission for UNESCO.
“Negro ministers must be ‘prophetic and fearless’ in technique in making applicable the implications of the religion of Jesus in relation to our social order....every Negro church must discover and develop a style of leadership that could do for America and the Negro race what Gandhi has done for India and what Jesus has done for the world.”

--Benjamin E. Mays

Source:
Roper, John Herbert. *The Magnificent Mays: A Biography of Benjamin Elijah Mays*; Chapter 8
Mordecai Johnson (1890–1976)

“Mordecai Wyatt Johnson, the president of Howard University, had for more than twenty years provided a crucial link between African Americans and the Gandhi campaigns. Other leaders of the black community, including Mays and Howard Thurman, considered themselves to have been influenced by the words of Johnson. Having been invited to visit India by the new government in 1949, Johnson spent forty days meeting with a number of Gandhians. He brought back with him a comprehension of satyagraha, as well as the passion to express his understanding. His position as a renowned orator offered him platforms from which he could reach large numbers of African-Americans. Martin Luther King Jr, while still a seminarian, was so inspired by Johnson’s 1950 sermon at Fellowship House, in Philadelphia, that he rushed to buy six books on Gandhi. This was four or five years before the Montgomery protest began.” -- excerpt from pp. 183 of the Mary King book
“‘Why was Gandhi a great man?’ asked Johnson. On five counts. He had liberated India. He did it without firing a shot. He embraced the ‘Untouchables’ as the children of God and made a place for them in a society that had excluded them, segregated them. For his exemplary and saintly personal life alone, he was a great man. But the capstone of it all, said Johnson, was this: he had shown how to harness the redemptive power of love to social issues, and through it, change had come.”

-Benjamin E. Mays on Mordecai Johnson’s 1950 Sermon on Gandhi

Source:
King, Mary; *Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King Jr: The Power of Nonviolent Action*; pp. 183
Bayard Rustin (1912—1987)

Served as a close advisor to Martin Luther King, Jr., and was one of the most influential and effective organizers of the civil rights movement. In 1948, Rustin went to India for seven weeks to study the Gandhi philosophy of nonviolence. Rustin provided King with a deep understanding of nonviolent ideas and tactics at a time when King only had an academic familiarity with Gandhi. As King’s special assistant, Rustin assumed a variety of roles, including philosophy teacher, nonviolent strategist, ghostwriter, and proofreader. In 1963, Rustin was appointed deputy director of the March on Washington. In less than two months Rustin guided the organization of an event that would bring over 200,000 participants to the nation’s capital. From 1965 until 1979, Rustin served as president, and later as co-chair, of the A. Phillip Randolph Institute, an origination of black trade unionists dedicated to racial equality and economic justice. From this position, Rustin promised his view that future progress for African Americans rested on alliances between blacks, liberals, labor and religious groups.
"My basic convictions are neither secret nor obscure. Thousands of people are acquainted with them. You know them well. As a pacifist and Quaker exponent of Gandhian nonviolence, I am in principle convinced that violence is self-defeating under any and all conditions."

Source:
Bayard Rustin, Julian Bond, Michael G. Long, I Must Resist: Bayard Rustin's Life in Letters; “Rustin to A.J. Muste”; May 20th, 1957 (Chapter 10)
Anna Pauline "Pauli" Murray (1910–1985)

was a civil and women’s rights activist, a lawyer, an Episcopal priest, and an author. In 1944 Murray graduated as the only woman and first in her class from Howard University Law School. While at Howard, Murray participated in sit-ins to desegregate several local restaurants. After being denied admission to Harvard University Law School because of her sex, she earned a Master of Law degree at the University of California, Berkeley, and in 1965 became the first African American to graduate with a doctorate from Yale Law School. While at Howard, Murray coined the term ‘Jane Crow’ to refer to discrimination based not only on race, as was the case with ‘Jim Crow’ laws, but also on gender. Inspired by Gandhian principles of nonviolence and the strategy of civil disobedience, Murray challenged segregation and was active alongside civil rights leaders such as King and Rosa Parks. In 1977, at the age of sixty-seven, Murray became the first black woman ordained an Episcopal priest.
“Although Mr. [A. Philip] Randolph stood virtually alone among established Negro leaders in advocating this form of protest...several young Negroes were eager to adapt Gandhian techniques to our own struggle, and I was among them.”

--Pauli Murray

Source:
Pauli Murray; Song in a Weary Throat; pp. 261
James Lawson (1928–) was a minister who trained many activists in nonviolent resistance, making a profound contribution to the African American freedom struggle. Lawson earned his AB from Baldwin-Wallace College in 1951, and his Bachelor of Sacred Theology from Boston University in 1960. A draft resister, Lawson was imprisoned in 1951 for refusing to register with the armed forces. Following his parole from prison in 1952, he traveled to India and performed missionary work with the Methodist Church. While in India, he deepened his study of Gandhi’s use of nonviolence to achieve social and political change. In 1956, Lawson returned to the United States and resumed his studies. When Lawson and King met in 1957, King urged Lawson to move to the South and teach nonviolence on a large scale. During the following years, Lawson organized workshops on nonviolence for community members and students, planning nonviolent demonstrations, protests, and lunch counter sit-ins. He was involved with the Fellowship of Reconciliation from 1957 to 1969, Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) from 1960 to 1964, and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) from 1960 to 1967. For each organization, he led workshops on nonviolent methods of protest, often in preparation for major campaigns.
“Nonviolence in many ways was an effort to help people see that they were of infinite worth and dignity. That their very life in fact was a center of the life of the universe, that the full power of what life is all about is located in every single human being. And no matter how tortuous that person's life is, they still have certain power if they're willing to exercise it and cultivate it and use it.”

Interview with Rev. James Lawson, conducted by Blackside, Inc. on December 2, 1985, for Eyes on the Prize: America's Civil Rights Years (1954-1965). Washington University Libraries, Film and Media Archive, Henry Hampton Collection.
Diana Nash (1938–)

-worked closely with Martin Luther King, Jr., through her involvement with the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC). Born in 1938 in Chicago, Nash majored in English at Fisk University in Nashville. There, Nash experienced the full effect of the Jim Crow system for the first time. In 1959 she began attending nonviolence workshops given by James Lawson. In 1960, Nash had the opportunity to practice nonviolent direct action during sit-ins in local department stores. She also played a crucial role in sustaining the 1961 Freedom Rides initiated by the Congress of Racial Equality. From her base in Nashville, Nash coordinated student efforts to continue the rides into Mississippi and served as a liaison between the press and the United States Department of Justice. In 1962 she joined James Bevel at SCLC as a field staff organizer. She and Bevel made important contributions to the 1963 Birmingham Campaign, March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom, and the 1965 Selma Voting Rights Campaign. From the late 1960s onward, Nash taught in Chicago public schools and continued her activism organizing tenants, welfare support, and housing advocates.
“I remember asking them what they wanted to do, and they decided to go back to Birmingham. Part of the nonviolent strategy of the movement is determination to complete a project. And so if the movement is stopped at a certain point, it's important to go to that point and keep it going.”

--Diane Nash

Source:

“And we were very committed group. We had an excellent education in the philosophy and strategy of nonviolence. And when the Freedom Ride occurred we agreed with their objectives and stood ready to be supportive.”

--Diane Nash

Source:
John Lewis (1940– )

-has dedicated over sixty years to public service, making nonviolence his guiding principle. As a teenager, Lewis was inspired by Martin Luther King, Jr.’s sermons, which he heard on the radio. Upon graduating from high school, Lewis enrolled in the American Baptist Theological Seminary in Nashville. While in Nashville, Lewis attended direct action workshops led by James Lawson and came to embrace the Gandhian philosophy of nonviolence. During the 1960s Lewis became heavily involved in the Nashville movement and participated in a series of student sit-ins. In April 1960, he helped form the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and later participated in the Freedom Rides of 1961. As chairman of SNCC, Lewis played a crucial role in some of the civil rights movement’s most significant events, such as the 1963 March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom, 1964 Freedom Summer in Mississippi, protest marches across the Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma, Alabama, and many others. During the 1970s Lewis continued his public service and in 1986 was elected to the U.S. House of Representatives, where he is serving in his 17th term.
“We studied what Gandhi did in India, what he attempted to do in South Africa. We studied the Thoreau and civil disobedience. We studied Martin Luther King Jr. and the Montgomery movement. But more than anything else we studied Gandhi. We studied Gandhi principles of non-violence.”

--John Lewis

Source:

“Had it not been for the struggles and sacrifices of the 1950s and ‘60s, Barack Obama would never have been elected president of the United States. In turn, were we not inspired by the advancements of Mohandas Gandhi in South Africa and India...the American history we participated in creating would have been entirely different, and maybe less influential.”

--John Lewis

Source:
John Lewis; Across That Bridge; pp .85
Coretta Scott King (1927–2006)

-was a civil rights activist and a prominent social justice and human rights advocate. During her studies at Antioch College in Yellow Springs, Ohio, Scott joined the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), as well as the Race Relations and Civil Liberties Committees. In 1952 Scott met Martin Luther King, Jr., who at that time was pursuing his doctoral degree at Boston University. The couple married a year later. While Scott King was devoted to raising their four children, she was also instrumental in many of the civil rights campaigns alongside her husband. In 1952, Coretta and Martin traveled to India to deepen their understanding of Gandhi’s philosophy of nonviolence. After King’s assassination on April 4, 1968, Coretta Scott King devoted much of her life to preserving the legacy of her husband. She continued her commitment to civil and human rights and carried the message of nonviolence and social justice to almost every corner of the globe.
“Only as we learn the bold heroism of non-violence and practice it as much as we preach it, can we hope to continue the work of Mohandas Gandhi and Martin Luther King.”

--Coretta Scott King

James Farmer, Jr. (1920–1999)

-one of the major leaders of the African American freedom struggle, co-founded the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) during the 1940s. After graduating from Wiley College in 1938, he enrolled in the Howard University School of Divinity, where he first encountered the teachings of Mahatma Gandhi. Farmer was granted conscientious objector status during World War II and became race relations secretary for the Fellowship of Reconciliation, a pacifist organization. During the period from the 1940s through the 1960s, CORE pioneered the strategies of nonviolent direct action, including the tactics of sit-ins, jail-ins, and Freedom Rides, later used in the civil rights movement during the 1960s. Farmer credited Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Montgomery bus boycott with educating the public on nonviolent tactics.
“Segregation will go on as long as we permit it to. Words are not enough: there must be action... Like Gandhi’s army, it must be nonviolent... AS Gandhi put it: the means are not justified by the end; they determine it.”

—James Farmer