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Speaker at service to honor Martin Luther King says there is still work to be done for equality

By Elaina Sauber



CHRIS DORST | Gazette-Mail

People attending the Martin Luther King Jr. Commemoration service at Asbury United Methodist Church Monday in Charleston clasp hands and sing “We Shall Overcome” at the end of the service. The event featured speakers including The Rev. Nelson Rivers III and music from the Martin Luther King Jr. Male Chorus and the Appalachian Children’s Chorus. See a video at wvgazettemail.com

“Any preacher worth preaching is supposed to make you feel some discomfort.”

The Rev. Nelson Rivers’ voice thundered from the pulpit at Asbury United Methodist Church on Monday as he sought to shed light on Martin Luther King Jr.’s legacy — one that is often watered down or simply forgotten for the rest of the year.

Rivers was the guest speaker at the West Virginia Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. 2016 Commemoration, an ecumenical service hosted by the Martin Luther King Jr. State Holiday Commission. Rivers is pastor at Charity Missionary Baptist Church in North Charleston, South Carolina.

The commemoration kicked off with speakers representing the Muslim and Jewish communities who spoke of King’s vision for social change in the context of their respective religions.

“God wants us all to be good, equal, loving and just, and Dr. King told us we should all live by these simple rules,” said Ibtesam Sue Barazi, from the West Virginia Islamic Association. “Now it’s our responsibility to follow Dr. King’s footsteps and carry the torch for justice.”

This year's event theme, titled "There's Still Work To Be Done; If Not Now, When? If Not You, Who?" was reinforced by Rivers' message that the fight for equality and justice lies not on the mountaintops, or the high points people experience at church or joyful events, but in the valleys.

"At these annual celebrations, we say wonderful things about each other and come together, but it'll be another year before this many whites and blacks, Jews and Muslims, come together in the same place," Rivers said.

King is often mischaracterized as peaceful and mild by those who recall his work half a century later, he said.

"They didn't lock him up 30 times because he was a happy, go-along fellow; they did not try to kill him over and over again because he was such a sweet guy," Rivers said. For that time period, "Dr. King was a radical replica of Jesus Christ."

U.S. Sens. Joe Manchin, D-W.Va., and Shelley Moore Capito, R-W.Va., listened as Rivers explained that Martin Luther King Jr. Day, preceding Black History Month in February, sets off a 45-day period that he dubs "the season of blackness."

"Black is gonna be in, black is gonna be stylish and popular; black people are going to be asked to speak all over America," he said. "And all the work you do in 365 days is going to be crammed into 45 days."

But it's the challenges people face in day-to-day life — in the valleys — where the effort toward racial equality must continue, he said.

He named Black Lives Matter as one movement working toward that goal. Despite some public criticism of Black Lives Matter, its vision is exactly what King's own movement pursued, Rivers said.

After the Birmingham, Alabama, church bombing in 1963, "not one white church held a prayer vigil or said a word about the [Ku Klux] Klan members who lived and worshiped with them — because the black lives did not matter," he said.

He also noted the way Dylann Roof was treated while in police custody after he allegedly killed nine people, including South Carolina state senator The Rev. Clementa Pinckney, last June in a mass shooting at the historic Emmanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, South Carolina.

"They took [Roof] to Burger King to be fed before bringing him back, yet Tamir Rice was standing by with a [toy] gun in a place where you can carry a gun, and was shot dead in under two seconds," Rivers said, comparing Roof's treatment to that of 12-year-old Tamir Rice, who was shot and killed by Cleveland police in November 2014. A grand jury in December declined to indict the officers involved in the shooting.

“All lives matter is clear,” he said. “Dr. King’s movement was about making sure black lives matter.”

By the end of his nearly 40-minute sermon, the church was filled with clapping, cheers and “Amen.”

Monday’s service also included a presentation of seven Living the Dream Awards, which honor West Virginians who exemplify principles characterized by King in his pursuit of social change.

Among the recipients was Michelle Mickle Foster, who was presented the Governor’s Living the Dream award for her work with the Kanawha Institute for Social Research and Action, which serves more than 2,500 West Virginians annually. Foster recently was appointed as the executive director of the Greater Kanawha Valley Foundation.

Due to frigid temperatures, the symbolic march following the service to the state Capitol grounds was canceled and attendees instead gathered in the lower rotunda to hear Capito, Manchin, Gov. Earl Ray Tomblin and others speak briefly.

“There’s a particular pride for me as part of my legacy, that in the 1980s, my father, [Gov.] Arch Moore, created the Martin Luther King, Jr. State Holiday Commission, which lives and breathes today,” Capito said. “I’m hoping West Virginians will be inspired by Dr. King’s words not just today, but every day.”

The Appalachian Children’s Chorus and the Martin Luther King Jr. Male Chorus sang during the ceremony before a moment of silence was held to honor King.

Reach Elaina Sauber at elaina.sauber@wvgazette.com, 304-348-3051 or follow @ElainaSauber on Twitter.