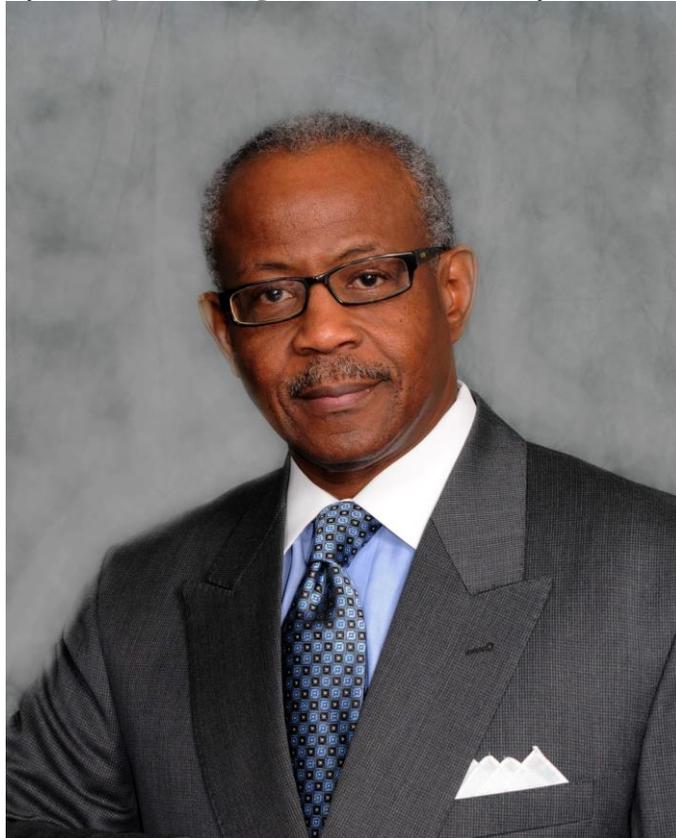


Pastor, keynote speaker wants to get Martin Luther King's legacy right

By Douglas Imbrogno, Assistant Lifestyles Editor



Courtesy photo

The Rev. Nelson Rivers III will deliver the keynote address at Monday's Martin Luther King Day events, speaking of the actual legacy of Martin Luther King Jr.



AP file photo Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., head of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, addresses marchers during his "I Have a Dream" speech at the Lincoln Memorial in Washington on Aug. 28, 1963.



The Confederate battle flag is finally lowered on the Columbia, South Carolina, state capitol grounds on July 10, 2015, after years of protests and the killing of nine people at Emanuel Baptist Church in Charleston, South Carolina, the month before.



Rivers takes a photo of the empty flagpole after the Confederate battle flag was lowered for good in July 2015. He had fought for many years for its removal.

As Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s life is celebrated in Charleston and across America tomorrow on Martin Luther King Day, the Rev. Nelson B. Rivers III fears a crime has been committed against the man's legacy.

"Look at where we are in the context of who Dr. King was and how he's been revised to the point where he's almost a victim of identity theft," Rivers said.

Rivers, pastor of Charity Missionary Baptist Church in North Charleston, South Carolina, will be the keynote speaker at an event commemorating King's legacy, starting 9:30 a.m. Monday at Asbury Methodist Church, 501 Elizabeth St. A march follows to the State Capitol Complex where a Bell Ringing for Peace Service will be led by Gov. Earl Ray Tomblin.

The event's theme speaks to River's eye-opening remarks about identity theft: "There's Still Work To Be Done; If Not Now, When? If Not You, Who?"

King delivered a powerful and timely message when he got back from Oslo, Norway, in 1964, said Rivers. He had just been awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for his leadership of the Civil Rights movement and his commitment to achieving change through non-violent action.

"He said he'd had a mountaintop experience and that he had to go back to the valley. I think he was making the point that even when we have been to the mountain of transfiguration, the work in the valley continues," said Rivers.

"I think that annually people head to the mountaintop to celebrate Dr. King and the impact of his work, when I think his most most fervent prayer and hope would have been that we would continue to work in the valley," Rivers said.

Nowadays, too often King is cast as "a nice, peaceful guy who loved everybody, when in fact his message was radical in the context of his time," Rivers said.

"He challenges even now the church to not be as complacent and placid as it is. The fact of the matter is, there is great work yet to be done. One of Dr. King's great quotes was that the church had become the taillight of the movement, when it should in fact be the headlight. I think too many churches have resigned themselves to being the light you see after the thing goes by as opposed to the light that points the way."

Rivers said one of the points he'll make in his keynote address is that on Monday we'll officially enter "the season of blackness," as the holiday honoring King is followed by Black History Month in February.

“The season of blackness lasts about 40-something days — from Jan. 15 roughly to the end of February. And after that we’re going back to wanting to be anything except black.

In fact, it ought to be the kickoff every year of the work of justice. I guess my real concern is so many people talk about King, but there are so few who continue the work.

I think he’d be much more impressed if his work continued as opposed to annual recitations of ‘I Have a Dream.’”

King and the organizers, preachers and supporters who stood behind and with him posed a direct and brave challenge to the culture of his day, said Rivers. Of course, not everyone was with him, including many black churches of the time.

“There was never a time when the majority of black churches were involved in the movement,” said Rivers, noting that in Atlanta, King’s home base, there were 10, maybe 20, churches at the most who stood with him.

“And there were hundreds of churches.”

But King stood his ground, he said.

“Because of his standing he did not have to sacrifice his integrity on the altar of capitalism, where he would have to get paid and he would shut up. All that is missed in my mind, because the other narrative is so harmless and so easy to accept because it does not challenge or threaten — when in fact, J. Edgar Hoover viewed King as a threat to the American way of life and went after him.

“And I guess in his mind he was right because the way of life was racism, discrimination, lack of commitment to equity and justice. If that’s the way of life, it should be threatened.

“And that’s what Dr. King did. But his courage as a preacher and his theological understanding of who Jesus Christ was and why there is no divide between justice and Jesus was what most impressed me.”

In other words, Rivers asserts that King’s activism, his fierce unrelenting commitment to justice, should not be lost in the praise heaped upon his name on the day that honors his legacy.

“For Dr. King, my understanding has to be that activism should be the coin of the realm for the church. And this notion of sitting around just singing songs and doing nothing might be attractive, but it’s not who Dr. King was.”

Rivers' own life as a reverend has been marked by action and activism. For almost 40 years, he has worked at all levels of the NAACP in South Carolina and is current vice president of Religious and External Relations of the National Action Network, under the leadership of the Rev. Al Sharpton.

His civil rights work led to the election of more than 300 new black elected officials in South Carolina between 1986 and 1994. Rivers was a leading organizer of the largest civil rights demonstration in the history of South Carolina, when more than 50,000 marched on the state capitol in January 2000 to demand removal of the Confederate battle flag.

The flag did eventually come down on July 10, 2015, but only after tragedy struck. At a prayer service a month before, on June 17, 2015, at Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, South Carolina, nine people including the senior pastor, state senator Clementa C. Pinckney, were killed by a suspect identified as 21-year-old Dylan Roof. Roof later confessed he committed the shooting in hopes of igniting a race war. The killings and Roof's photos posing with the Confederate battle flag led to the flag finally being lowered and placed in a museum.

For Rivers, everything that happened was deeply personal.

"Clementa Pinckney was a personal friend," said Rivers. "It took the lives of nine people, five of which I knew pretty well, three of which I knew very well. And I'd say it was a bad bargain for us. I would rather be fighting this year for the 16th year to take it down — but that was not to be. So when it finally happened, the weight of it was so enormous that I could think of how King must have felt in '65 when [President Lyndon] Johnson signed the Voting Rights Act, because so much had been paid for that law. So many had died, so many had been abused."

Rivers wept when the Confederate flag finally came down.

"When it came down, the weight being removed was so profound and so incredible it brought tears."

It is the full acknowledgment, Rivers said, of "the struggle against the odds and finally prevailing is what I think is missing when we ignore who Dr. King was. Because I think we cheapen the sacrifice and the struggle — that it was not simple. It was not simply white leaders saying 'Kumbaya, we love everybody, let's stop mistreating black people.' That's not how it happened. And when we make it seem like a speech or a song could do it we minimize the movement and transform it into a fairy tale."

The struggle against racism is a struggle against people with views disconnected from reality and those who would exploit them, said Rivers.

“Because if they believe — as Dylan Roof said he did — that African American men are your biggest threat in the country, when 99 percent of the wealth is held by one percent of the people, where in West Virginia, one of the poorest states in the union for white citizens, if you can believe that the people who have the least power, the least impact and enjoy the least amount of regard, if you think they’re your threat, then you’re living in a fantasy that people can exploit for their own greed.”

To the extent that the current crop of Republican candidates pander to such notions, even if they eventually deny it, “they’re creating an environment where it grows and flourishes,” said Rivers.

“Think of it: who is the Bob Dole, Howard Baker candidate among the leading candidates for the nomination?” Rivers said, speaking of past mainstream Republican presidential candidates, known for their ability to collaborate with Democratic colleagues. “There are none.”

Even the late Sen. Robert C. Byrd, West Virginia’s Democratic senator who had many across-the-aisle friendships with Republican colleagues, “I don’t know if he could have gotten along with this crowd,” Rivers said.

The danger of racism is an ever-present threat still, more than a half-century after King delivered his “I Have a Dream Speech” in the nation’s capital, Rivers said.

“It makes no sense. And yet it is out of an illogical phenomenon called racism that a lot of evil, hurt and killing is done,” he said.

“The point I simply want to make is to remind people there’s daily work yet to be done in the valley of life.”

The Martin Luther King Day events will be live streamed on the governor’s website at www.governor.wv.gov.

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