Rite for Ray Attracts Supporters Of King

THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

Nashville, Tenn. — Friends of James Earl Ray and of the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. gathered in a predominantly black church yesterday for a memorial service for the civil rights leader's confessed killer.

Speakers said they believe King's killing was the result of a conspiracy in which Ray played a small part, if any, and that their quest for the truth did not end with his death.

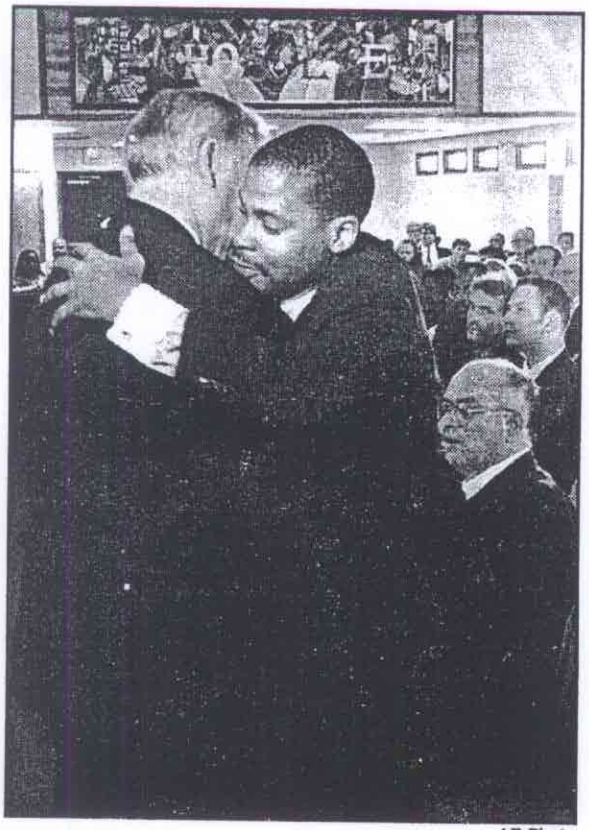
"In spite of the various ways he misled his life, James Earl Ray was not the assassin of Martin Luther King," said the Rev. James Lawson, a civil rights leader who was with King when he was killed and later became Ray's minister. He asked those in attendance to pray for the King family "as they pursue this matter."

About 100 people were at the Metropolitan Interdenominational Church, which agreed to hold the service after two other mostly black churches in Nashville declined.

Ray confessed to killing King in Memphis on April 4, 1968, and was sentenced to 99 years in prison. But he quickly recanted and spent the rest of his life trying to gain a trial. He died April 23 of liver failure at the age of 70.

The King family supported Ray's quest for a trial. King's widow, Coretta Scott King, and their son Dexter have said they believe Ray was innocent and a scapegoat for conspirators.

At the service, King's nephew, Isaac Farris Jr., read a statement from Coretta King to Ray's family: "We share with your family regret at the tragic failure of the justice system to give him his day in court."



AP Photo

King nephew Isaac Farris Jr. embraces James Earl Ray's attorney, William Pepper, who spoke at the service.

Farris said Coretta and Dexter King did not attend the service because they were trying to meet with President Bill Clinton about their request for a new federal investigation into the assassination, but a White House spokesman said there had been no meeting with Clinton yesterday.

"We are saddened by the passing of James Earl Ray, but this by no means closes this issue," Farris said. "We will fight until we have no more breath in our bodies for the truth to come out."

Ray's ashes will be scattered in Ireland, where his ancestors were from, said his brother, Jerry Ray.

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